

Who Is Muhammad: Dead Man or Living Light?

by Colin Bearup

Many Christians are unaware of the *Nur Muhammadi* doctrine, the teaching that Muhammad was and is a being of light present since before creation. Those Christians who are aware of it tend to dismiss it as “not Islam,” as some marginal or sectarian development. It is in fact widespread and ancient. If we are to engage with Muslims, we should understand what many of them really believe.

It is unlikely that someone reading the Qur’an for the first time without previous knowledge of Islam would conclude from the text that Muhammad was a pre-existent light appearing in human form. On the other hand, if one’s first contact with Islam comes through reading devotional literature, one might easily come across sentiments such as these:

Muhammad is the fountain-head of lights and darkneses and the source of their emergence from the presence of pre-endless-time. So, his light was the first of lights... From him all things were clothed in their origination in existence, and their continuity is uninterruptedly from him. The prophets and messengers have come from him one by one, and all the kings and all the creatures.

This text is from a *qasida*, a devotional poem, written by a Moroccan Sufi master, Sidi Muhammad Ibn al-Habiib (1876–1972 CE). The idea that Muhammad is the first of all creation appears un-Qur’anic, unorthodox and we may assume it is a late and marginal deviation from true Islam. It is probably not something we have come across in Christian literature about Islam. But this English translation of al-Habiib’s *qasida* can be found on the website of a high-profile Western convert to Islam, Ahmad Thompson, who writes on matters of law and politics, Christianity and Islam.¹ Such an exalted view of Muhammad is not the sentiment of an eccentric twentieth century Sufi cleric, rather it is a widely-held view which reaches back into the earlier centuries of Islam. Though rarely encountered in formal presentations of Islam, it is celebrated and propagated within the Islamic world through poetry and song. Al-Habiib may have been writing in the twentieth century, but his thoughts are by no means a recent phenomenon. In the twelfth century, the great

Colin Bearup has served with WEC in Chad since 1986. He led the translation of the first New Testament in the Chadian dialect of Arabic and is author of Keys, Unlocking the Gospel for Muslims. He is currently ministering in the UK among Muslims of Pakistani background.

Sufi teacher Abdal Qadir al-Jilani (1077–1166 CE) penned similar words about Muhammad:

Allah Most High first created, from the divine light of His own beauty, the light of Muhammad (s)... This is declared by our master the messenger of Allah in his words, "Allah first created my soul. He first created it as a divine light;"^{2,3}

Jilani lived in Baghdad and is regarded as the founder of the Qadiriya Sufi order, one of the most widespread Sufi orders in the world. He is still venerated in many different Sufi traditions. His contemporary, Qadi Iyad (1083–1149 CE), lived in Andalusia (Muslim Spain) and wrote a much-celebrated work known as the *Shifa*. It includes these words:

Ibn Abbas said that the spirit of the Prophet, praise and peace be upon him, was a light in the hands of Allah two thousand years before He created Adam. That light exalted Him and by this light the angels exalted Allah, and when Allah created Adam, He cast that light into his loins. He also tells us that the Prophet, praise and peace be upon him, said, "Allah brought me down to earth in the loins of Adam, then He placed me in the loins of Noah and thereafter cast me into the loins of Abraham. Allah proceeded to move me from one noble loin and pure womb to another until He brought me out of my parents."⁴

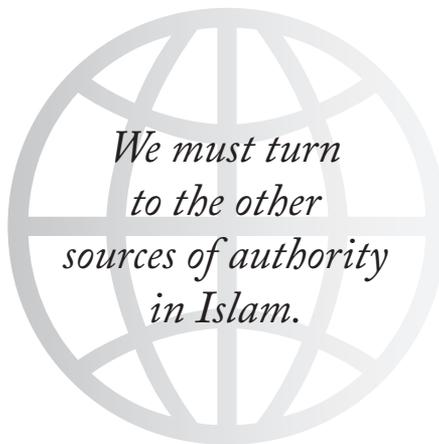
Both these eminent scholars were writing in the twelfth century but at a still earlier date, Mansur al-Hallaj (858–929 CE) wrote of Muhammad:

He is and was and was known before created things and existences and beings. He was and still is remembered before "before" and after "after," and before substances and qualities. His substance is completely light, his speech is prophetic, his knowledge is celestial, his mode of expression is Arabic, his tribe is "neither of the East nor the West," his genealogy is patriarchal, his mission is conciliation, and he has the title of the "unlettered."⁵

Many writers through the centuries have expressed such sentiments. The writers of poetry and devotional songs, often using local languages, have put them into the mouths of many untutored Muslims across the world. If such ideas are likely to go undetected by the uninitiated reader of the Qur'an, just where do they come from? We must turn to the other sources of authority in Islam.

The Hadith

The second textual authority in Islam is the Hadith literature, which is the written record of the oral accounts of what Muhammad and his companions did and said. The Hadith collections which are most widely accepted as



authentic were compiled in the ninth century. The Sunnis recognise six collections and the Shi'a four, but all Muslim authorities acknowledge that the collectors rejected many more Hadith than they accepted. Even so, each collection consists of thousands of oral records and contains massively more material than the Qur'an itself. For example, *Sahih Bukhari*, perhaps the most widely accepted Sunni collection, contains 2,762 Hadith drawn from a pool of more than 600,000.⁶ Although the earliest written Hadith can be dated to the ninth century, Islamic belief is that the things they record were done or spoken during Muhammad's lifetime. If it were otherwise, they would be considered of no value.

The Qur'an is interpreted, religious practice is systematized, Islamic law is formulated, and the details of Muhammad's life are all known. Although these early collections of Hadith are recognised by most Muslim scholars, collections continued to be made throughout the medieval period and indeed up to the present day.⁷

Recitations found in documents dated in, say, the twelfth century, were recorded precisely because they were believed to be faithful oral transmissions from the time of Muhammad. Therefore, a Muslim who trusts a specific text is unlikely to be swayed by a critic who argues that the late date of the *collection* reflects a late date of *origin*. This means that if we attempt to uncover a chronology for the development of beliefs about Muhammad's nature and status, in the very act of so doing we are repudiating the whole system. This naturally renders any constructive dialogue about historical sources with devout Muslims problematic.

This does not mean that any and every recorded Hadith is universally accepted—far from it. What it means is that the determination of a particular Hadith's validity is not based on the date of the written record. Much of Islam hangs on the Hadith literature rather than the Qur'an, and the internet abounds with those who declare this or that Hadith valid or invalid. These in-house debates within Islam can be fierce and increasingly take place in the public arena afforded by the web, in either English or in traditional Muslim languages.

The Sira

It was during the same period the Hadith literature was first collated that the Sira literature began to emerge. In this context, the word *Sira* means "biography." The first Sira of Muhammad that we know of is that of Ibn Ishaq (d. 767 CE). No complete copies of the original exist today but Ibn Hisham's (d. 833 CE) edited version is available. The last of the four earliest Siras was composed

by Tabari (d. 923 CE).⁸ These early Siras resembled the Hadith collections in that they collated oral materials and were not authored writings. They are unlike the Hadith collections in the way they organised the material chronologically to form a biographical narrative. Like the early Hadith collections, they sometimes record conflicting accounts without explanation. Tarif Khalidi, a Muslim intellectual who has made a respectful yet candid study of Sira literature, writes:

...the Sira cannot be described solely as an "objective" historical account of what actually happened. True, these founding fathers clearly aimed at accuracy and often expressed doubt about the truth of the stories they relate. But that did not prevent them from including such stories all the same.⁹

The purpose of Sira writing was to edify rather than to simply merely inform. Khalidi remarks:

History for the founding fathers had a moral and educational purpose. If a story was factually doubtful, it would still be included for its moral or ethical value—even for its entertainment value.¹⁰

The first generation of Sira writings did include supernatural manifestations that were not explicitly attested in the Qur'an; but, as an apologist might say, the Qur'an was never meant to be biographical. The Sira of Ibn Sa'd (784–845 CE) refers to a mysterious appearance of light at Muhammad's birth,¹¹ but even though Sa'd has plenty to say about the creation of Adam, he says nothing about Muhammad pre-dating creation. Likewise, the compendious Sira-cum-history of Al-Tabari (839–923 CE) records several accounts of creation and discusses whether "the Pen of Destiny" was created first or whether light and darkness were. He raises the question about whether God's throne was created or not, but he does not talk about Muhammad as the first creation.¹²

An outsider might draw the conclusion that the absence of any reference to Nur Muhammadi in these early

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works proves that the concept is a later invention. However, as we have noted, the majority of Hadith that had been in circulation were not included in these collections. Al-Hallaj, cited above, was a contemporary of the Hadith collectors and Sira writers, yet he expressed beliefs not found in them.

The early Siras mentioned so far are those within the Sunni camp and were financed by Sunni rulers. Another early Sira-cum-history, "Meadows of God," was compiled by the Shi'ite al-Mas'udi (896–956 CE). From the earliest days of Islam, Shi'ites had a particular interest in the person of Muhammad and his family. They contend that the leadership of the Islamic empire should have stayed with Muhammad's family. The question of how and why Muhammad and his family came to have such a special place in the world was of great interest to them. We should bear in mind that during these early centuries of Islam, Shi'ite beliefs and teachings were not confined to one territory or a particular ethnicity; it was a perspective held by many throughout the Muslim world. It was an important strand of ideological and pious opposition to the Sunni authorities. It may well be that whole swathes of belief were excluded from the officially approved collections for political reasons. Anything that makes Muhammad supernatural must raise questions about his biological family, which the Sunnis had destroyed. Mas'udi's history does refer to Muhammad at creation.

God, when he intended to establish the laws of the universe, to lay the seed of generation, and to produce the creation, gave to it first the form of fine dust before he formed the earth, and raised the heavens. He dwelt in his unapproachable glory, and in the unity of his power. Then

he put down a particle of his light and made lighten a sparkle of his splendour. The dust rose, and the light was concentrated in the centre of this floating dust. This represented the figure of our prophet MOHAMMED, on whom may rest the blessing of God! and God said, "Thou art the chosen and the elected."¹³

This document gives a solid basis for saying that the belief in Muhammad as a supernatural being was already in circulation when the standard historical texts were first written down.

The writing of biographies of Muhammad has continued to the present day, the styles changing in response to the requirements of the age. Through the medieval period, Khalidi detects a progression in which the contradictions caused by multiple narrations were stripped away and the hagiographic elements matured. From the eleventh century onwards, Sufi devotional material multiplied, which included writers such as Jilani cited above, whose poetry expresses loving devotion to the person of Muhammad.¹⁴ One might wonder to what extent one generation's poetic hyperbole was the next generation's doctrinal statement, but such an enquiry is inevitably speculative and does not help us interpret how today's Muslims understand their faith. Despite the distance of these later writers from the original witnesses the conviction of those who believe them is that these narrations are true and date back to the earliest times. Moreover, such confidence is reinforced by Sufi practitioners invoking *ma'arifa*, a secret knowledge (or gnosis in the Greek) that has been passed down from Muhammad through either Ali or Abu Bakr or even received directly via contact with the invisible world by Sufi masters.¹⁵

Qur'anic Support for Nur Muhammadi

To be credible within Islam, all accounts of Muhammad have to be in some way traced back to Muhammad himself and his immediate companions. A number of Qur'anic texts are frequently cited (and then elaborated) to support the belief in Muhammad's pre-existence as light.

O People of the Book! Our Messenger has come to you, clarifying for you much of what you kept hidden of the Book, and overlooking much. A light from God has come to you, and a clear Book. (Sura 5:15)

The word "light" is taken to refer to Muhammad and the word "book" to the Qur'an, even though at the alleged time of this utterance the Qur'an did not exist in book form. Another text is Sura 24:35 which reads

God is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The allegory of His light is that of a pillar [most translations "niche"] on which is a lamp. The lamp is within a glass. The glass is like a brilliant planet, fuelled by a blessed tree, an olive tree, neither eastern nor western. Its oil would almost illuminate, even if no fire has touched it. Light upon Light. God guides to His light whomever He wills. God thus cites the parables for the people. God is cognizant of everything.

We met the phrase "neither eastern nor western" in the ninth century quotation from Mansur al-Hallaj suggesting that he understood this passage to be about the person of Muhammad. The website of The Sunnah Foundation of America quotes thirteenth century scholar al-Qurtubi as explaining the elements of this verse as follows:

The Messenger of Allah (s) is the niche, the lamp is prophethood, the glass is his heart, the blessed tree is the revelation and the angels who brought it, the oil are the proofs and evidence which contain the revelation.¹⁶

A host of other commentators could have been cited giving similar explanations in which Muhammad is the

light, though each one would vary as to the details of the various elements.

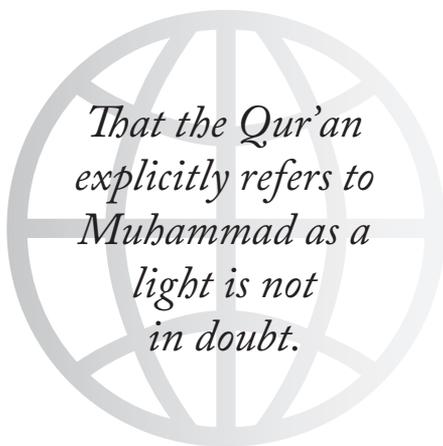
That the Qur'an sometimes explicitly refers to Muhammad as a light or lamp is not in doubt. For example, Sura 33:45–46 reads

O prophet! We have sent you as a witness, and a bearer of good news, and a warner. And a caller towards God by His leave, and an illuminating beacon.

Other Qur'anic texts mentioning light are also interpreted by those so-minded as references to Muhammad.

A text used in relation to Muhammad's pre-existence is Sura 7:172 which reads:

And when Your Lord summoned the descendants of Adam and made



them testify about themselves. "Am I not your Lord?" They said, "Yes, we testify." Thus you cannot say on the Day of Resurrection, "We were unaware of this."

Although there is no explicit chronological reference in the text, Islamic commentators infer that it happened at or before the beginning. As with other opaque references in the Qur'an, commentators drawing on the Hadith have elaborated extensively on the text in a variety of ways. The common themes are that, in some way, the souls of all humanity (including Muhammad) were present at creation. Where Muhammad's uniqueness and primacy are being expounded, further elaborations of Muhammad's participation

in the event are also to be found. For example, Sahl al-Tustari (818–896 CE), a very early commentary writer, wrote the following on this verse:

The progeny (*dhurriyya*) comprise three [parts], a first, second and third: the first is Muhammad, for when God, Exalted is He, wanted to create Muhammad He made appear (*aẓhara*) a light from His light, and when it reached the veil of divine majesty it prostrated before God, and from that prostration God created an immense crystal-like column of light, that was inwardly and outwardly translucent, and within it was the essence of Muhammad. Then it stood in service before the Lord of the Worlds for a million years with the essential characteristics of faith (*ṭabā'i' al-īmān*), which are the visual beholding of faith (*mu'āyanat al-īmān*), the unveiling of certainty (*mukāshafat al-yaqīn*) and the witnessing of the Lord (*mushāhadat al-Rabb*). Thus He honoured him with this witnessing, a million years before beginning the creation.¹⁷

Similarly, in Sura 2:30 we find:

When your Lord said to the angels, "I am placing a successor [Arabic *khalifa*, often translated vice-regent] on earth." They said . . .

Tustari's commentary explains:

God, Exalted is He, before he created Adam said to the angels I am appointing on earth a vicegerent, and He created Adam from the clay of might consisting of the light of Muhammad.¹⁸

Many other examples might be given. From an early date, the text of the Qur'an was expounded with the aid of narrations allegedly originating in the earliest days of Islam. The Qur'an is and was read through the lens of the Hadith and some (but not all) commentators teach that Qur'anic texts provide the basis of the Nur Muhammadi narrative.

One of the Hadith most frequently quoted with reference to Muhammad's pre-existence is Hadith Jabir. It is

recorded by a variety of compilers. The Sunni way website lists eleven sources.¹⁹ According to al-Qastalani (1448–1517 CE), in answer to a question, Muhammad himself uttered these words:

Oh, Jabir, Allah created, before anything else, the light of your Prophet (saw) from His Light. That light started to move about by Allah's Divine Power to wherever Allah wished. At that time there was neither Tablet nor Pen; neither Paradise nor Fire, no angels; neither Heaven, nor Earth; neither Sun nor Moon; neither Jinn nor humankind. When Allah (swt) wanted to create His Creation, He divided that light into four parts. From the first part he created the Pen, from the second, the Tablet, and from the third, the Throne.^{20, 21}

The examples cited so far should suffice to demonstrate that scholars who hold beliefs in Muhammad as a cosmic personage can defend them from an abundance of explicit source material. It is no easy matter to determine what proportion of Muslims today understand Muhammad in this way. We can say that the twentieth century *qasida* mentioned above provides evidence from Moroccan Sufism. Similarly, the writings of Sheikh Nuh Keller (who we will meet below) provide evidence of its presence in Egypt and the Levant where he received his Islamic training. Also, the Bareilwi movement of the Indian subcontinent holds it as standard.²² Clearly this belief is not simply a local anomaly in some obscure peripheral region. It is to be found in many different parts of the Muslim world.

However, this view of Muhammad, although widespread, is far from universal among Muslims, and is in fact highly contested in many areas. The debate is all the more emotive because every stream of Islam calls on Muslims to love Muhammad. A well-known Hadith accepted by Bukhari, the foremost Hadith collector, states:

Prophet Muhammad said, "None of you will have faith till he loves me

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more than his father, his children and all mankind."²³

For those who highly venerate Muhammad, any attempt to downgrade his status is a failure to love him. On all sides, to be dispassionate about Muhammad would be a failing. As secular academic Ron Geaves attests:

I have observed that one is far more likely to offend sensibilities by making negative criticisms of Muhammad than by challenging the truths of the Qur'an. The latter is likely to lead to an earnest debate...the former is seen as a deep insult and provokes an impassioned response.²⁴

Similarities and Differences with the Biblical View of Christ

A Bible-reading Christian cannot help but be struck by the similarities between these claims made about Muhammad and the claims the New Testament makes about Christ. First, I shall look at some of the similarities and then the key differences. I will cite some representative texts rather than attempting an exhaustive collection of biblical references.

The New Testament teaches that Christ existed before his birth. We read in John's Gospel

In the beginning was the Word, . . . He was with God in the beginning . . . The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. (John 1:1, 2, 14)²⁵

This passage speaks of the incarnate word and the Nur Muhammadi teaching also speaks of an incarnation of light. John goes on to speak of Christ as the light.

In him was life, and that life was the light of men . . . The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. (John 1:4 & 9).

The similarities between the Nur Muhammadi teaching and the thought expressed in John 1 are obvious.

Muhammad is described as being intimately involved in the process of creation resembling things stated about Christ in the New Testament. For example, in Hebrews 1:2–3 we find

...in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.

Similar sentiments are expressed elsewhere such as 1 Corinthians 8:6 and John 1:3. The New Testament also speaks of the world being created *for* Christ: "All things were created *by* him and *for* him" (Col. 1:16, italics added). An oft-cited Hadith, with several variants and referred to as the *Law Laka*, has God addressing Muhammad in these terms: "Were it not for you, I would not have created the world."²⁶ Even Ibn Taymiyya, the great thirteenth century iconoclast, declared that the content of this Hadith, while not an authentic narration, was nonetheless true.²⁷

Central to the message of the New Testament is the claim that Christ is alive, never to die again (1 Cor. 15:20–23, 42–49; Heb. 7:16–24; Rev. 1:17–18). Furthermore, it is asserted that he is present with his people (Matt. 18:20 and 28:20; Acts 18:9). In a similar way, many mosques have the words "Ya Allah" and "Ya Rasool" ("Oh God" and "Oh Messenger") inscribed at the front of the prayer hall addressing both God and Muhammad as present.²⁸ As Geaves has documented, many Sufi groups hold that Muhammad is *hazir o nazir*, present and watching.²⁹

The New Testament ascribes an intercessory role to Christ. For example, 1 Timothy 2:5 states, "For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." Other examples may be found in Hebrews 7:25 and 1 John 2:1. For many Muslims, Muhammad is

wasila, an intermediary or go between.³⁰ They find support in Sura 4:64:

Had they . . . come to you, and prayed for God's forgiveness, and the Messenger had prayed for their forgiveness, they would have found God Relenting and Merciful.

This idea of Muhammad as supreme intercessor is found elaborated in many devotional works, such as the *Shifa* of Qadi Iyad, to quote but one example. It says:

Abdullah, Amr's son reports the saying of the Prophet, . . . Whosoever asks for blessings upon me once, Allah blesses him ten times. Thereafter ask for the rank of go-between [wasila] for me . . . My intercession is granted to whosoever asks for the rank of "wasila" for me.³¹

The Nur Muhammadi teaching and the New Testament's teaching about Christ may have strong similarities but their claims are mutually exclusive. The notions may be similar but the attributions are in stark opposition to each other.

The supreme difference between the Nur Muhammadi-type teaching and the biblical Christ is of course the matter of Christ's deity. Muslims always insist that Muhammad is a created being, intentionally contrasting him with God. The Hadiths we saw earlier all spoke of an ancient but created light. As Keller puts it:

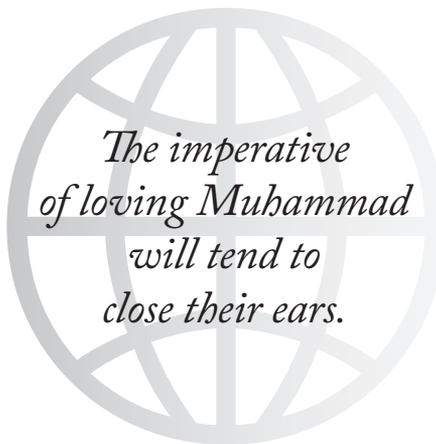
Though the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) is the Light of Allah, he is of course a created light. Someone who believes otherwise has made the mistake of the Christians with Jesus (upon whom be peace).³²

It would be a contradiction of the most basic tenets of Islam to say that Muhammad is divine. Indeed, many Muslim movements view the practice of even offering praises and prayers to Muhammad as a violation of the prohibition on associating anyone with God. In Sura 18:110, God addresses Muhammad:

Say, "I am only a human being [Arabic *bashar*] like you, being inspired that

your god is One God. Whoever hopes to meet his Lord, let him work righteousness, and never associate anyone with the service [Arabic *ibaada*, often translated 'worship'] of his Lord."

This text gives those who teach Nur Muhammadi some real difficulties. It is a proof text for the reformers. Minhaj-ul-Quran International UK recently published a tract explaining how their customary practice can be reconciled with this verse. The tract is addressed to fellow Muslims, of course, not to Christians. Their recently printed English edition of the Qur'an finds it necessary to insert parenthetical notes into its rendering of 18:118.



Say: "I look like you only (by virtue of my visible creation) as a man. (Otherwise just think what congruity you have with me.) It is I to whom the Revelation is transmitted that your God is the One and Only God. (And just see to it whether you have any such divine potential that the Word of Allah may come down to you.) So, whoever hopes to meet his Lord should do good deeds and must not associate any partner in the worship of his Lord."³³

Those who venerate Muhammad affirm that Islam teaches that he is a created being and at the same time they revel in his uniqueness, his proximity to the deity, his power to inspire, and his ability to assist them.

Towards a Christian Response

In my experience, materials written by Muslims to engage Christians do not usually proclaim Muhammad as an incarnation of primordial light. This is probably because groups that are involved in proselytising us are from the reformist wings of Islam. One might also hypothesise that most Sufi-style movements encourage the faithful to humbly receive the teaching rather than to assertively articulate it. The lack of material addressed to Christians on this issue probably explains the lack of Christian material responding to it. I have not found a single Christian website that attempts to address it.

Once alerted to this teaching, a zealous Christian might be tempted to take a polemical route that deploys Qur'anic texts which seem to highlight Muhammad's limitations and fallibility (e.g., 18:110, 48:1–2, 48:9 and 53:19–20). Likewise, the Hadith literature provides plenty of embarrassing material often used by Christian polemicists to attack the character of Muhammad. Such an approach is unlikely to be productive with the devout. First, the supreme imperative of loving Muhammad before all else, which they so zealously nurture, will tend to close their ears. In addition, if Christians use arguments associated with the debate within Islam, they simply invite well-rehearsed rebuttals. Aligning oneself with those who "fail to love Muhammad" will not increase a Christian's credibility. The venerators already have strategies for dealing with potential "proof texts" in the Qur'an.

The most likely scenario for an intentional presentation of a Christian counter-narrative to Nur Muhammadi is that of a dialogue setting, whether informal among friends or in a more formal setting. Such a scenario requires mutual respect and impeccable manners. The dialogue has to take place on the understanding that the parties will not agree as to what is

true but are willing to listen with the intention of understanding. Christians can insist on the integrity of their own scriptures on a Qur'anic basis. Among other texts, Sura 5:46–47 addresses Christians in particular:

... We sent Jesus son of Mary, fulfilling the Torah that preceded him; and We gave him the Gospel, wherein is guidance and light, and confirming the Torah that preceded him, and guidance and counsel for the righteous. So let the people of the Gospel rule [most translations, "judge"] according to what God revealed in it. Those who do not rule according to what God revealed are the sinners.

Any exhortation to submit to the Qur'an can always be met with this injunction. The Muslim who takes the Qur'an seriously is obliged to take the gospel seriously. The Christian will need to be acquainted with the standard arguments demonstrating that the scriptures today are not different than those the Qur'an affirms. Christians will need to demonstrate a fervour for their Lord and a real sympathy for Muslim believers, putting into practice Paul's injunction: "And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful." (2 Tim. 2:24).

I would argue that Christians need to consider two dimensions inherent in this issue of Nur Muhammadi. One concerns truth. With two such contrasting views, they cannot both be equally true. The other concerns an underlying belief, namely, that human need has been met in a specific way. Which way most fully meets human need? Naturally, a false hope is no good to anyone, but if a hope is attractive, the ear will be more inclined to listen. For apologetic presentations to bear any fruit, there must be some common frame of reference. In this case, the frame of reference is the belief that God has demonstrated his mercy to humankind through the one he has sent. The matter at issue is the identity of the one who God has provided.

The strong attachment to Nur Muhammadi owes much to the way the doctrine addresses the need of the worshiper for a holy yet accessible saviour.

Matters of Truth

Discerning what is true involves relying on sources and, for Muslims especially, a source is trusted on the basis of piety and scholarship more than analytical objectivity. The most powerful arguments from the Muslim side come from the Hadith. The Christian can legitimately say that the Hadith are sayings remembered by men, repeated by men and collected by men. How accurate they are God alone knows and as Christians we are not qualified to discuss them. We keep the focus on our respective Holy Books. When comparing the Qur'an with the Bible, it soon becomes apparent that the New Testament makes much clearer statements about Christ as God incarnate than the Qur'an does about Muhammad as Light incarnate.

The passages that Christians habitually use for asserting claims of Christ's deity such as Thomas's confession in John 20:28 and Jesus' declaration "I and the Father are one" in John 10:30 are probably not particularly suitable texts to use. Narratives such as Luke 5:17–26, in which the Pharisees articulate the responsible Muslim view and Jesus performs two acts that only God can do, are much more useful. Matthew 14:22–37 is another passage that invites serious reflection, but one has to be prepared to explain why Jesus would need to pray. Philippians 2:5–11 addresses both the deity and the humanity of Christ and concludes with a call on the part of God for all to honour Christ.

The Christian needs to recognise the importance of the identity of the speaker within the sacred texts. When it is "a voice is heard from heaven" or an angel is quoted, or Jesus speaks of himself, as in the famous "I am" passages in John's Gospel, that is likely to carry more

weight than if the speaker is merely a follower or the writer. The authority is in the person not the paper.

Islam sets great store by chains of authority, whether it be the transmission of a Hadith, the pedigree of a scholar or the spiritual genealogy of a Sufi. Most of the Sira texts examine favourably the forebears of Muhammad. The genealogy of Jesus, so out of fashion with secular Westerners, is still of interest to Muslim readers.

The Meeting of Human Need

The Letter to the Hebrews addresses Christians of Jewish background and demonstrates in a variety of ways that Jesus is "a high priest [who] meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens" (7:26). It is not unreasonable to assume that the strong attachment to Nur Muhammadi and the unwillingness to yield to iconoclastic scholars owes much to the way the doctrine addresses the need of the worshiper for a holy yet accessible saviour. This is also the thrust of Hebrews, though that particular epistle is not helpful to Muslims, drawing as it does on so much that belongs to unfamiliar Jewish religious rites: but the method is sound. The writer contrasts Jesus favourably with angels in Chapter 1, with Moses in Chapter 3 and with the high priest in Chapters 7 and 8. Within a well-established, respectful relationship, a Christian should be able to revel in the attributes of Christ, indirectly contrasting them with the exalted but lesser claims about Muhammad. Which is better? The created or the Creator? The closest slave or the beloved Son? The recipient of the word or the Word himself? The one who is forgiven or the one who brings forgiveness? Which mediator

is the more desirable, the slave or the Son? The one alive in his grave or the one alive on his throne? The one who is loved by God or the one who is God in the flesh?

This line of approach neither denigrates Muhammad nor disrespects the worshiper. So long as the integrity of the testimony of the Bible has been established, Christians can acknowledge the way Muslims treasure the Muhammad they have been taught to love and trust and at the same time testify to higher and greater treasure that is the biblical teaching concerning Christ, Lord and Saviour. The biblical portrayal of Christ and Nur Muhammad contradict one another and are mutually exclusive, but that need not plunge Christian and Muslim believers into confrontation.

For too long, Christian workers have dismissed as irrelevant this major strand of Islam which is both a lived Islam and a genuine scholarly tradition. This failure to respect the people we seek to reach does not position us well as we seek to present Christ. The degree to which many Muslims venerate Muhammad and the scholarly basis for such practice may take us by surprise and offend us in what looks like a naked appropriation of the attributes of Christ, but I would suggest that simply attacking the falsehood is likely to be unproductive. What is needed is respect and understanding. Such Muslims acknowledge that mere flesh and human effort are insufficient for our salvation and that God's intention has always been to provide a supernatural saviour that meets our need. This should be something we can work with. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ Muhammad Ibn al-Habiib, "The Mawlid of the Prophet Muhammad" accessed on June 14, 2019, <http://www.wynchambers.co.uk/pdf/Mawlid.pdf>.

² When writing the name of the Prophet Muhammad, Muslims often follow it with the abbreviation "SAWS," "SAW," or a more

streamlined version, "s." These letters stand for the Arabic words "sallallahu alayhi wa salaam" (may God's prayers and peace be with him). See "The Meaning of Islamic Abbreviations SAWS," <https://www.learnreligions.com/islamic-abbreviation-saws-2004289>.

³ Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani, *Secret of Secrets*, trans. Tosun Bayrak al-Halvati, (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1992), 5.

⁴ Qadi Iyad, *Ash-Shifa*, trans. A. Bewley (1992), Chapter 2, Section 6, <https://archive.org/details/MuhammadMessengerOfAllahAshShifaOfQadiIyad>.

⁵ Mansur al-Hallaj, *The Tawasin*, trans. Aisha AbdarRahman At-Tarjumana, <http://www.hermetics.org/pdf/Tawasin.pdf>, 2.

⁶ Sadakat Kadri, *Heaven on Earth* (London: Vintage, 2013), 63.

⁷ Jonathan A. C. Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World*, (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009), 51.

⁸ Tarif Khalidi, *Images of Muhammad* (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 58.

⁹ Khalidi, *Images of Muhammad*, 62.

¹⁰ Khalidi, *Images of Muhammad*, 63.

¹¹ *KITAB AL-TABAQAT AL-KABIR* Volume 1, Parts 1.24.6-12, <http://www.soebratie.nl/religie/hadith/IbnSad.html>.

¹² Al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, trans. Franz Rosentahl (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 198ff.

¹³ Ali Ibn Husain al-Mas'udi, *Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems*, Volume 1, trans. Aloys Sprenger (London: Parbury, Allen, and Co., 1841) digital archive, 51.

¹⁴ Khalidi, *Images of Muhammad*, 151-174.

¹⁵ See Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 140.

¹⁶ For the explanation of "Allah (s)" see endnote 2. "The Creation of the Life of Muhammad (s)," accessed June 14, 2019, http://www.sunnah.org/history/Life-of-Prophet/Creation_light_Muhammad.htm#_ftnref5.

¹⁷ Sahl al-Tustari, *Tafsir al-Tustari*, trans. Annabel & Ali Keeler (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2011), 76.

¹⁸ Al-Tustari, *Tafsir al-Tustari*, 16.

¹⁹ "Hadith of Jabir" accessed June 11, 2019, <http://www.thesunniway.com/articles/item/30-hadith-of-jabir>.

²⁰ For the explanation of "Prophet (saw)" see endnote 2. Both "saw" and "swt" are honorifics. Muslims use the abbreviation "swt" when writing God's name to refer to the words "Subhanahu wa ta'Allah" (Glory

be to God). See "I keep seeing 'PBUH' or 'SAW' or 'SWT' when Muslims mention the Prophet or Allah," <https://isb.org/ufaqs/i-keep-seeing-pbuh-or-saw-or-swt-when-muslims-mention-the-prophet-or-allah/>.

²¹ Al-Qastalani, *Light of the Prophet*, trans. As-Sunna Foundation of America, <http://rasulallah.info/id36.html>, 2.

²² Ron Geaves, *Sectarian Influences within Islam in Britain* (Leeds University, 1996), 95.

²³ Abu Abdullah Muhammad al-Bukhari, *Sahih Bukhari* Volume 001, Book 002, Hadith Number 014, http://www.mailofislam.com/prophet_muhammad_sallallahu_alaihiwasallam.html.

²⁴ Ron Geaves, *Aspects of Islam*, (London: Dartman, Longman, Todd, 2005), 144.

²⁵ All Bible texts are from the New International Version, 1984.

²⁶ Recent example: Amir Sulaiman, "Make Yourself Sweet," accessed June 11, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R_4BeHEXhJg.

²⁷ Ibn Taymiyyah, "Ibn Taymiyyah's Elucidation of Law Laak," accessed June 11, 2019, http://www.sunnah.org/msaac/articles/ibn_taymiyya_law_laak.htm.

²⁸ Geaves, *Aspects of Islam*, 160.

²⁹ "Hazir o Nazir," accessed June 11, 2019, <https://www.alahazrat.net/hazir-o-nazir/>.

³⁰ Perry Pennington explores this theme in greater measure with reference to South Asian Muslims in From "Prophethood to the Gospel: Talking to Folk Muslims about Jesus" 31, no. 4 (Winter 2014): 195-203.

³¹ Iyad, *Ash-Shifa*, 265.

³² Nuh Ha Mim Keller, "Haqiqat al-Muhammadiyah," The Muhammadan Reality, 1995, last modified May 29, 2014, <http://masud.co.uk/the-muhammadan-reality/>.

³³ Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri, trans., *The Glorious Qur'an*, English Translation (London: Minhaj-ul-Quran Publications, 2012).

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