

Response to the Negative Portrayal of The Holy Prophet^{saw} in the Western literature

A speech delivered by Atif Munawar Mir on March 31 2007 identifying five main reasons for the attacks on the Life and Teachings of the Holy Prophet (saw). The speech also prescribes a course of action

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Introduction

Throughout the centuries, the Holy Prophet (saw) has been falsely accused by his opponents for waging aggressive wars. To deal with this accusation, in my speech, I will discuss the following points:

- ❖ What do the Holy Quran and Holy Prophet (saw) say about War?
- ❖ Why the Holy Prophet (saw) is often portrayed as a violent prophet in the western literature? What are the real reasons behind this negative portrayal?
- ❖ Finally, why should we strive hard to remove the misconceptions held about the Holy Prophet (saw) in the western world?

What do Holy Quran and the Holy Prophet (saw) say about War

It is true that the Holy Prophet (saw) fought wars. But the important question is why he fought those wars. The answer is to be found in the following verses of the Holy Quran:

“Permission to take up arms is given to those against whom war is made, because they have been wronged and Allah, indeed, has power to help them...” (22:40)

Those who have been driven out from their homes unjustly, only because they said, 'Our Lord is Allah.' And if Allah had not repelled some people by means of others, cloisters and churches and synagogues and mosques, wherein the name of Allah is oft remembered, would surely have been destroyed. And Allah will, surely, help him who helps Him. Allah is, indeed, Powerful, Mighty – (22:42)

This verse clearly lays out that only defensive wars are allowed in Islam. However, in case, the need for a defensive war arises, the Holy Prophet Muhammad (saw) gave a list of things to his followers that they shouldn't do during the times of war. For instance, he said:

- ❖ The old and decrepit and women and children are not to be killed. The possibility of peace should always be kept in view (Abu Dawud).
- ❖ When Muslims enter enemy territory, they should not strike terror into the general population. They should permit no ill-treatment of common folk (Muslim).
- ❖ The least possible losses should be inflicted upon the enemy (Abu Dawud).

- ❖ When a Muslim takes charge of a prisoner of war, the latter is to be fed and clothed in the same way as the Muslim himself (Bukhari).

It is clear from the Holy Quran and the teachings of the Holy Prophet (saw) that even when Muslims are a target of an offensive war, they are to show respect to the life, liberty and property of the enemies, particularly civilians.

Western Portrayal

There are many western historians and scholars who have given an objective and true picture of the Holy Prophet (saw) as a peaceful prophet. However, the attacks on the Holy Prophet (saw) have been going on for centuries as well. However, lately, due to 9/11, we have seen a rising wave of attack on the Holy Prophet (saw).

Some of the recent books by Robert Spencer, Richard Dawkins¹ and Sam Harris² portray, directly or indirectly, the Holy Prophet (saw) as a violent person. My speech will focus on these three authors. For instance, Robert Spencer in his latest book, “Truth about Muhammad” blames the teachings of the Holy Prophet (saw) for the violent acts of terrorism in the contemporary times. He argues that the war and conflict and bloodshed will continue as long as the Muslims keep on using the Holy Prophet (saw) as an inspiration.³

The accusations that Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and Robert Spencer, and other writers, have made against the Holy Prophet (saw) are not new. They repeat the same criticisms offered by the opponents of the Holy Prophet (saw) throughout the millennium. Why Holy Prophet (saw) is portrayed in such a negative manner by some western scholars? There are five reasons. They are:

1. Misrepresentation of the Holy Prophet (saw) by the So-Called Muslim Scholars
2. Generalizations made by scholars based on selective readings of the verses of the Holy Quran or the teachings of the Holy Prophet (saw).
3. Prejudice of scholars
4. Atheism
5. Misuse of Freedom of Speech

These five reasons are very basic but they are crucial to understand the nature of attack that has been launched on the Holy Prophet (saw) through out the history.

1. So-Called Muslim Scholars

Even some so-called Muslim Scholars argue that the Holy Prophet (saw) spread Islam through sword. One such example of an Islamic scholar is Maulana Maddudi, who for his political objectives, has argued in his books that the Holy Prophet (saw) spread Islam with the sword. People like Maulana Maddudi have damaged the reputation of the Holy Prophet (saw) by portraying him as a man of sword; and even worse he has led naïve Muslims to believe that violence and terrorism is the solution to the challenges faced by the Islamic world. These

¹ Dawkins, Richard, “God Delusion”, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 2006, p.37

² Harris, Sam, “End of Faith”, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 2004, p. 30-34

³ Spencer, Robert, “Truth about Muhammad”, Regenery Publishing, 2006 p. 177

so-called Muslim scholars provide intellectual ammunition to the western critic of the Holy Prophet (saw). Hence, some of the responsibility of the negative portrayal of the Holy Prophet (saw) lies with extremist Muslims.

2. Generalization and Selective Reading by the Western Scholars

The opponents of Islam do not use all of the earliest sources of Islam such as the Holy Quran, earlier biographies of the Holy Prophet (saw), hadiths, sunnah etc.... when writing about the life of the Holy Prophet (saw). But when they do, they end up selecting those portions of the earliest sources that confirm their prejudice against the Holy Prophet (saw). For instance, they may pick one verse or one aspect of the life and teaching of the Holy Prophet (saw) and based on that make generalizations about the whole life and teachings of the Holy Prophet (saw) while ignoring other verses which would give an accurate picture. Let me illustrate this point by an example.

Listen to this quotation carefully “You ask what our policy is. I will say, it is to wage war with all our might, with all the strength that God can give us”⁴. Listening to this quotation without knowing the background of this quotation, you might interpret this as the words of Osama bin Laden. But this quotation is taken out from the speech of Winston Churchill during WWII when the German army was bent on destroying England. So these are words of a Prime Minister who is making a strong statement that his policy is to defend his country against the tyranny.

Some of the critics of the Holy Prophet (saw) also choose selective portions of the Holy Quran and hadiths. For instance, they take verse of the Holy Quran totally out of context in order to prove that the Holy Prophet (saw) preached killing of non-believers. One of the verses often quoted is:

“Therefore, when ye meet the unbelievers (in fight), smite at their necks. At length, when ye have thoroughly subdued them, bind a bond firmly (on them): thereafter, (is time for) either generosity or ransom, until the war lays down its burdens...” (47:5)

Robert Spencer uses the first part of this verse in his book, proclaiming that the Holy Prophet (saw) has given permission to Muslims to smite the neck of the unbelievers even in contemporary times. In his book, he explains how Zarqawi, an Iraqi terrorist, who died last year, was inspired by this verse to kidnap and behead an American citizen⁵. What Zarqawi did deserves condemnation. But was Zarqawi inspired by this verse or misused this verse for his political objective is not the topic of my speech?

But what we do know is Robert Spencer ignores to analyze the verse on its own merits. He does not offer the complete context and background of this verse. He also conveniently forgets to discuss the second part of this verse in his analysis.⁶ This verse was revealed when Muslims were facing Meccans in the Battle of Badr. The numbers of Muslims were 313 while the Meccans were more than 1000. The Quraysh had more weapons than the Muslims. The

⁴ <http://www.skylighters.org/quotations/quotes2.html>

⁵ Spencer, 108-109

⁶ Spencer, 104

Quraysh were ready to wipe out Muslims completely. The verse was revealed in this context. If you rationally think about this verse it is saying that in war Muslims are allowed to kill just like American army or any other army of the world teaches its soldiers to kill during the time of war. The second part of the verse says that “when you have thoroughly subdued them, bind a bond firmly on them”. This part clearly points out that the killing is allowed during the time of a war but once you have subdued the soldier of an enemy, tie him strongly so that he doesn’t escape and join the enemies again. Once the war is over you may free them out of generosity or for ransom.

As you see, Robert Spencer failed to give the complete context and failed to mention the other verses of the Holy Quran and hadiths of the Holy Prophet (saw) about the topic discussed in the war and made an extremely wrong conclusion about the teachings of the Holy Prophet (saw). He painted the Holy Prophet (saw) not as a person who introduced the rights for the prisoners of war 1400 years ago. Instead, he painted him as a person who inspired the beheading of an innocent American civilian.

3. *Prejudice*

The second explanation for the negative portrayal is prejudice often displayed by Christian extremists. They don’t represent the mainstream views of Christianity. But they have regularly received coverage in some popular channels so it is important to unmask their true intentions. Both of them see the Holy Prophet (saw) as a person who has stolen stories from Bible and after modifying them, has included them in the Holy Quran. They can’t grasp how a person who was a false prophet was able to convert millions of people into his faith. How do you explain such a great success of a person who was a false prophet? The only explanation they can muster is that he used the sword to spread the religion of Islam. These extremist Christians, if I may use the phrase, are not trying to represent Holy Prophet (saw) as he is but they are representing him in a way that helps them to convince Christians of their own faith. Unfortunately, in the process they are misguiding Christians about the true teachings and life of the Holy Prophet (saw).

4. *Atheism*

The third reason for the negative portrayal of the Holy Prophet (saw) is the rise of atheist movement in the west. These atheists are not against any one particular religion. They are against all religions. They have a very narrow interpretation of history. They believe in one theory that most of the wars have been fought in the name of religion. They also fit the life of the Holy Prophet (saw) into their theory. If he was able to convert so many people in such a short time, then he must have used force. Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins belong in this group. They (Sam Harris⁷ and Richard Dawkins⁸ try to justify their theories by implicitly blaming religion even for World War II (WWII). First of all, this conclusion is almost rubbish. WWII was not fought because of religion. You may argue that religion was a factor in that war but it was clearly not the primary factor. Wars are the part of human conditions. Unfortunately, wars have been waged since the beginning of civilization. That is one reason as to why the Holy Prophet (saw) introduced the code of conduct for war. True that he used to find all the means possible to prevent the war but if war had been totally outlawed than Nazis

⁷ Harris, 101

⁸ Dawkins, 276-277

would still be ruling Europe and possibly all mosques, synagogues and may be churches would had been destroyed.

5. *Misuse of Freedom of Speech*

The ideology of the freedom of speech has created unjustified attacks on the life of the Holy Prophet (saw). The supporters of freedom of speech who started the cartoon controversy attack the Holy Prophet (saw) not because they are necessarily atheist or extremist Christians but because their religion is freedom of speech. They published their cartoons of the Holy Prophet (saw) to “contribute to the debate regarding criticism of Islam and self censorship”⁹. They drew the offensive cartoons to make one point only that the Muslims should get used to the insulting of their prophet just like other religions have gotten used to the insults of their prophets. They might be promoting freedom of speech but at the expense of peace. The world is already divided due to religion, nationalism, ideology and ethnicity, can hardly afford more divisions. Freedom of speech is important but when it becomes a license to spread hatred than it is no better than Christian or Islamic extremists who are dragging the world to the brink of global violence. The purpose of freedom of speech should be to seek truth not spread hatred.

WHY REMOVING MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT THE HOLY PROPHET (saw) ARE IMPORTANT?

Many of us live in western democracies, such as Canada and USA, which are increasingly becoming multicultural. People of all different cultural backgrounds interact on a daily basis. One of the aspects of the multiculturalism is to respect each other’s culture and religion. However, if the Prophet of Islam is portrayed as a violent person and is treated disrespectfully in media while we consider him to be the perfect human being, it will create an awkward relationship between us and the people around us in our work place and school. It is our responsibility as revivers of Islam to educate ourselves about the history and life of the Prophet and be prepared to rationally and accurately highlight his perfect life and answer the arguments of critics when the need arises. In simple words, if we teach non-Muslim members of western societies about the life of the Holy Prophet (saw), we will improve cultural relationships in western societies and at the same time we will be delivering the message of Islam. But the message must be delivered with effectiveness. What is the effective delivery of message? The message will only be effective when we act upon the teachings of the message, when we ourselves incorporate the teachings of the Holy Prophet (saw) into our daily lives. This is the best way to respond the negative portrayal of the Holy Prophet (saw) in the western world. The Holy Prophet (saw) absorbed the attributes of Allah into his heart and soul as much as a human can do. And by doing so, he became godly and demonstrated compassion, love and forgiveness. That is the true reason behind the expansion of Islam. He used to give charity to the extent that he lived in a small house without a proper bed and without proper food while he could have easily lived the life of a king. This is the best part of his life that some critics of the Holy Prophet (saw) conveniently forget to mention in their analysis.

⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jyllands-Posten_Muhammad_cartoons_controversy

The Promised Messiah (as) describes the life of the Holy Prophet (saw) in these powerful words. He says:

He was the champion who restored to the world the Unity of God which had disappeared from the world; he loved God in the extreme and his soul melted out of sympathy for mankind. Therefore God, who knows the secret of his heart, exalted him above all the prophets and all the first ones and all the last ones....¹⁰

We should pray that Allah may guide us and help us to do our part in telling the truth about the Holy Prophet (saw) to the rest of the world.

¹⁰ Essence of Islam: Extracts from the writings of the Promised Messiah; Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad of Qadian, Vol. 1, 1979. p. 136