THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD AS AN EDUCATOR

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Introduction

Muslims believe that the Prophets are the best educators. These messengers embrace sincerity and vision. According to Muslim tradition, the Prophet Muhammad was guided by Allah, and his (the Prophet Muhammad’s) words and deeds were supported and confirmed or corrected as needed through wahy (revelations).

The Prophet Muhammad lived 63 years. He was orphaned as a child and raised by his uncle in Mecca. His family’s religious practices included idol worship, which the Prophet was not comfortable with. He worked as a shepherd and trader.

When he was 40 years old, the angel, Gabriel, appeared to him to deliver a message from God, an event which was to recur many times throughout the rest of the Prophet Muhammad’s life. This began the process by which God directed the Prophet to establish the Islamic preaching.

In addition to the instructions in the Holy Qur’an, over 100,000 hadith¹ (sayings and explanations of the revealed information) are attributed to him. All of his teachings

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¹ To clarify the meanings of these words, the contents of the Holy Qur’an are those words which were transmitted to the Prophet Muhammad by Allah via the Angel Gabriel. The hadith are those concepts which were conveyed by the Prophet Muhammad based on his interpretations of the Qur’an.
offer guidance in the fundamentals of Islamic education for every Muslim. His teachings address the entire life cycle (i.e., from birth to the afterlife).

It would be difficult to assemble all of the Prophet's teachings into a single book. A comprehensive review of Islamic literature reveals that many scholars (Al-ghazali, 1997; Al'asqalani, 1978; Swayyid, 1988) have investigated prophetic education. Initially, the scholars discussed the entire context of the Prophet Muhammad's teachings. As time passed, however, they were able to focus on more specific content areas, such as how these teachings can be applied to specific areas and phases in one's life.

**The Foundations of Prophetic Education**

The Prophet strove to convey the key principles of Islam to his companions. One book of the Prophet's hadith (see Al-Bukhari, 2000, and others) contains over 90 chapters dealing with such areas as knowledge, health, prayer, the environment, good manners and form, support for one's family, politics and government, and finance. These hadith are the guidelines for how to conduct one's life as a member of a cohesive society. The following hadith explain these principles.

The first concept concerns the five pillars of Islam: 1) to testify that none has the right to be worshipped but Allah and that Muhammad is Allah's Apostle, 2) to perform the prayers, 3) to pay Zakat (i.e., obligatory charity), 4) to fast during the month of
Ramadan, 5) to perform a *Hajj* (i.e., a pilgrimage to Mecca) (see Al-Bukari, 2000, Volume 1, Book 2, Number 7). Muslims are required to participate in all five areas.

In Islam, humans have no original sin. Prophet Muhammad said, *Every child is born with a disposition towards the natural religion (i.e., Islam: submission to the Divine will).* Your parents make you a Jew, a Christian, or a Magian (Al-Bukhari, 2000, Volume 2, Book 23, Number 449). Thus, every child is born free from sin.

Change and personal growth come from within; behavior does not improve spontaneously. Muslims are required to persist in modifying unacceptable behaviors, and to follow up bad deeds with good deeds in order to atone for transgressions. Allah says, *Verily never will Allah change the condition of a people until they change it themselves (with their own souls)* (13:11).

### Responsibility for One’s Self and One’s Environment

The Prophet Muhammad taught his companions to take care of their environment and lead healthy lives. He encouraged Muslims to seek medical treatment. In one example concerning physical well-being, the Prophet said, *there is no disease that Allah has created, except that He also has created its treatment* (Al-Bukhari, Vol. 7, Book 71, No. 582). He also directed that you *seek medical treatment for your illnesses* (Nasaî, Ibn Majah, and Al-Hakim, in Sabiq, 1996).
Regarding one’s relationship to the environment, the Prophet said, “There is none amongst the Muslims who plants a tree or sows seeds, and then a bird, or a person or an animal eats from it, but is regarded as a charitable gift for him.” (Al-Bukhari, 2000, Vol. 3, Book 39, No. 513). In other words, it is unwise to waste natural resources. If one needs to kill an animal for food, that is appropriate. But is it excessive to continue hunting (i.e., killing animals) once you have met your needs.
Social Conduct

The Prophet said, “He who is not merciful to others, will not be treated mercifully” (Al-Bukhari, 2000, Vol. 8, Book 73, No. 42). The Prophet said, “Make things easy for the people, and do not make it difficult for them, and make them calm (with glad tidings) and do not repulse (them)” (Al-Bukhari, Vol. 8, Book 73, Number 146). The Prophet Muhammad said, “The person follows the religion [or habits] of his friends; so each one should consider whom he makes his friend (see Abu-Dawood, 1996, Hadith 4815).

One of the Prophet's companions reported that he visited the Prophet one day and entered his room without permission. The Prophet said, “Go back and say, ‘Peace be on you. May I enter?’” (Al-Nawawi, 1985, vol. 1, p. 535). Thus, Muslims are required to respect the rights and privacy of others.

Personal Interaction

In Prophetic teachings one will find such statements as, “Women and men are equal halves” (Ahmad & Abu-Dawood, in Al-Albani, 1986, Vol. 1, p. 399). That is, social and moral responsibilities are borne by all, regardless of gender. Karen Armstrong (1992, p. 191) asserts that the emancipation of women was dear to the Prophet's heart.
Armstrong reports his engagement in the day-to-day management of his household and advocacy of women's rights. The Prophet's wife, Aishah, reported that the Prophet would be involved in the service of his family, and when the time for prayers was due, he would wash up and go out for prayers (see Elkadi, in Al-Ittihad 1982, p. 56). This suggests that the Prophet's intent was to inspire Muslims to respect women as he did.

Throughout history, however, some scholars (Al-ghazali, 1997; Al-qurtubi, 1966) have misinterpreted some of the weaker, less specific hadith, alleging that women were not entitled to the same educational and social opportunities as men. The foundations of the faith, however, note that it is incorrect to restrict a woman's education or social life. Aishah narrated that the Messenger has never beaten a wife nor a servant, and he has never hit anything with his hand except when fighting in the cause of God (Elkadi, in Al-Ittihad, 1982, p. 56).

Despite the fact that the Prophet was confident enough to act on his own, he did not disregard the advice of others, males or females. There are several occasions, especially during some of the battles for religious freedom, where he sought input from his most trusted companions.

It is worth noting that the Prophet did not discriminate between genders in the learning environment, and it was not only men in whom he placed his trust. Ahmed (1992) suggested that the Prophet's commitment to listening to and acknowledgment of women's opinions demonstrated his perception that women's inputs were valid, even
concerning matters of spiritual and social importance, which continued to be a feature of the Muslim community in the years immediately following the Prophet's death. One demonstration of this is the acceptance of women's contributions to the hadith (Ahmed, p. 72).

Ibn 'Umar (in Al-Bukhari, 2000) reported that the Prophet said, “All of you are shepherds, and all of you are responsible for your flocks. A trustee is a shepherd, and he is responsible. A man is a shepherd for his family, and he is responsible. A woman is a shepherd over the home, and she is responsible. Verily, all of you are shepherds” (Hadith 212).
**Education and Knowledge**

During his life as a prophet, Muhammad lived 13 years in Mecca and 10 years in Madinah, conducting his life according to the *sharia* (Islamic laws), which were revealed to him gradually over a period of time, and which he then taught to others. The *Holy Qurān* is one of the primary sources for information about the Prophet’s personal history and his teachings (Rippin, 2000, p. 298), and refers to the Prophet’s status as an educator in such verses as

[Abraham said,] *O our Lord! Raise up in their midst a Messenger from among them who shall recite unto them Your revelations and shall instruct them in the scripture and in the Hikmah (wisdom) and shall make them grow in purity* (2:151 see also 33:21 and 3:164).

This verse and others are examples of the Prophet’s role in implementing the dictates in the *Holy Qurān*, both upon himself and his companions, in order to purify their morals, habits, and lives (Rahman, 1982). The *Holy Qurān* reports that the Prophet recommended reciting the *Qurān* as a good example for all believers.

There are several *ahadith* regarding the learning process. Above all, Muslims value the learning process the most, whether as a teacher or as a pupil. The Prophet said that seeking knowledge is obligatory for every Muslim (see Al-ghazali, 1991, p. 18). Al-ghazali (1997) referred to engagement in the learning process as the most sincere form of worship. Knowledge and its pursuit were of utmost importance to the Prophet.
very beginning of the revelations from Allah through Gabriel, the messages stressed the importance of learning, particularly reading and writing.

In addition to guidance in the Islamic sciences and the Qur’an, the Prophet also gave instruction in the practical phonetics necessary to read the Holy Qur’an and in the recreational sciences needed to develop a healthy personality (Hamidullah, 1939. See also Bilgrami & Ashraf, 1985). Muslims are encouraged to remember and implement all of their spiritual and intellectual knowledge and skills. The Prophet Muhammad also advocated that both males and females learn to read and write. Some of his lectures were addressed specifically to women. Because he hoped to eliminate illiteracy, he sent Abd Allah ibn Said ibn Al-Asi of Mecca to Madinah to teach the people there to read and write (Bilgrami & Ashraf, 1985). The Prophet Muhammad said,

*How can some people not educate, teach, advise and admonish their [neighbors], and how can some people not learn, not be enlightened or advised by their [neighbors]? By Allah, people should teach, enlighten, advise, enjoin and admonish their [neighbors], and others should learn, be enlightened and be advised by their [neighbors], otherwise I will speed up punishment to them* (Al-Qaradawi, 2000).

The Prophet emphasized that the context of worship includes more than just praying or attending the mosque regularly. He offered several examples, such as how following God’s instructions is a form of worship. One hadith in particular reports that caring for one’s parents’ needs is an act of worship. Likewise, interacting properly (i.e., in harmony with God’s requirements) with one’s environment whether socially, ecologically, financially, or otherwise is also a form of worship.
Other *ahadith* state that, ‘*Verily, knowledge comes by learning,*’ and, ‘*One learns more by experiencing than by merely hearing*’ (Ahmad, 2000). As an example, in both Judeo-Christian and Islamic tradition, after Moses went up on the mountain and received the 10 commandments, God then told him that the Israelites waiting for him at the base of the mountain were worshiping a golden calf (Exodus 32:7). Although Moses was troubled by this news, he was so shocked when he witnessed it with his own eyes that he threw down the tablets upon which the commandments were written and they broke (Exodus 32:19). From another perspective, this could be interpreted as meaning that one should not believe everything one hears until the source has been validated.

Once he became a prophet, much of what the Prophet Muhammad said and did was recorded. Historians have noted that he took every opportunity to use whatever situation he was in to teach a lesson, and his every minute was devoted to the propagation of the Islamic faith and its practices through word and deed. Even in his interactions with non-believers, his approach was always that of an educator: ‘*a benevolent teacher, very tolerant, and sympathetic*’ (Hamidullah, 1939, p. 58. See also Al-ghazali, in *Ihya*, translated by Winter, 1995; Bilgrami & Ashraf, 1985; Semaan, 1966).

For the learners, the Prophet said, ‘*A believer is never satisfied the acquisition of knowledge till he reaches Paradise*’ (Al-Nawawi, 1988, Vol. 2, p. 235). With respect to teachers, he said ‘*Allah, His angels, the dwellers of the heaven and the earth, even the ant in its hole and the fish (in water) invoke blessings on him who imparts good knowledge*’
to the people (Al-Nawawi, 1988, Vol. 2, pp. 235-236). Some researchers note that the Prophet mobilized the missionary zeal of the Muslims. They were filled with the desire to discover and impart new learning (Allen & Muessig, 1962, p. 139).

The Prophet Muhammad also encouraged his companions to determine the Muslim community’s needs by taking a periodic census of the Muslim population. He also suggested that his companions learn another language in order to read others’ languages (Al-Qaradawi, 2000).
The Aims of Prophetic Education

The ultimate intention and goal for Muslims is to live their lives in accordance with God's requirements such that they can see God in the next life. This mandates learning what God's requirements are in order to know in which direction to go. Several of the *ahadith* illustrate these aims, which are generally reached by acquiring knowledge (education) and implementing what one has learned.

The Prophet said, "Fear Allah wherever you are, and follow up a bad deed with a good deed and it will wipe it out. And behave towards people with a good behavior." (see Al-nawwi, 2000, Hadith 18). This *hadith* addresses several of the Prophet Muhammad's aims. The first statement is an acknowledgment between the human and Allah that one should maintain the purity of one's soul for Allah at all times because Allah is always watching what we do. The second statement recommends that one atone for one's misdeeds by executing a good deed, thus encouraging Muslims to make every effort to correct their mistakes.

The last aim of this *hadith* has to do with the circumstances at the time the aim was stated. The Prophet wanted people to know that they do not exist on this planet alone, rather that we live in a society. Therefore, it is imperative that we interact with each other politely, with consideration for the needs and feeling of others. A key point here is that this does not apply only to human relationships, but to the relationship one
has with all of God’s creations. Being good to all people and dealing with them justly is one of the ultimate aims of all religions. Allah says, “Indeed, we have sent Our Messengers with clear proofs and revealed with them the Scripture and the Balance (justice) that mankind may keep up justice” (57:25). The Prophet summarized his educational vision and mission by saying “I have been sent only for the purpose of perfecting good morals” (Al-Hakim, 2000).

Another time, The Prophet saw that a young man was very ill and asked him how he was feeling. The young man replied that he feared Allah and that he hoped that Allah would forgive his sins. The Prophet said that Allah will give you security (Ahmad). Thus, fear and hope are two sides of the same coin. Allah says:

Is one who is obedient to Allah, prostrating himself or standing (in prayer) during the hours of the night, fearing the Hereafter and hoping for the Mercy of his Lord (like one who disbelieves)? Say: “Are those who know equal to those who know not? It is only [persons] of understanding who will remember (get a lesson from Allah’s Signs and Verses)” (39:9).

It is clear that the prophet want to inculcate the meaning and purpose of fear and hope in his companions. For Muslims, fear and hope are like two wings by which the human can fly to every place and can cross the way to the next life and reach the truth (Al-ghazali, 1997).

Thus, in order to understand how to attain the goal (the context), the Prophet offered many *ahadith* and statements (the content) so that Muslims can know what to do, when and how to do it, and why.
Some Prophetic Teaching Methods

The Prophet spoke in a very easy and understandable manner. Because of this, his companions were able to memorize many of his teachings. The Prophet’s wives, Aishah, said that he “used to speak so clearly that if somebody wanted to count the number of his words, he could do so.” This was repeated by many other scholars, whose comments include, “Allah’s Messenger never talked so quickly and vaguely as you do” (Al-Bukhari, 1994, p. 701) and he spoke distinctly so that all those who listened to him, understood him (Al-Nawawi, 1985, vol. 1, p. 435).

The Prophet used a variety of teaching methods to instruct his companions, such as telling stories and making gestures to illustrate his point. In one instance, the Prophet said, “And the person who looks after an orphan and provides for him, will be in Paradise like this, putting his index and middle fingers together” (Al-Bukhari, 2000, Vol. 8, Book 73, No. 34). Another approach was to draw simple graphic illustrations to convey some of his abstract ideas.

Besides the content of the lessons, the Prophet strove to create an appropriate atmosphere for learning. He would take into account location and timing. One of his companions reported that “The Prophet used to take care of us in preaching by selecting a suitable time, so that we might not get bored. He abstained from pestering us with
sermons and knowledge all the time" (Al-Bukhari, 2000, Vol. 1, Book 3, No. 68).

Another factor was the nature of the audience. It is clearly evident that the Prophet's teachings were clear enough to have meaning for the ignorant as well as for the learned and sophisticated (Allen & Muessig, 1962, p. 136).

The Prophet was also known for tailoring specific lessons to a particular pupil. For example, one day the Prophet heard someone mocking the man making the call to prayer (known as the Adhan.) Because the person laughed loudly, the Prophet disciplined him in front of his friend. The punishment was to repeat the Adhan (call to prayer), himself. At first, the man was very uncomfortable and nervous because he did not know the words. But, after being personally taught by the Prophet how to make the call to prayer, he realized that the Prophet had given him a gift. The man later acknowledged that being able to make the Adhan became one of his favorite activities (Ibn Juryj, 1992).

The Prophet's guidelines for determining an appropriate punishment or penalty for undesirable behavior were that the consequences should be related to the situation. The Prophet's companions commented that his method of correcting bad behavior by example helped them remember what they were taught. The Prophet also used logical reasoning to persuade his companions. One example in Islamic literature tells the story of a young man who came to the Prophet and requested permission to commit adultery. The Prophet asked the young man, \( \text{Would you like your own mother to be in such illicit} \)
sexual relation? The young man said, ﴿No, O Prophet of God.﴿ Thus the Prophet was able to demonstrate why his request was unacceptable. The Prophet replied, ﴿Others, too, do not like their mothers and sisters associated with fornication.﴿ (Nadvi, 1987, pp. 30-31).

These examples show how the Prophet, himself, was involved in teaching and inculcating his sunnah (the Prophetic teachings). These accounts also emphasize the value in making the punishment fit the crime, so to speak. Undesired behavior need not be merely suppressed (e.g., just telling someone to stop an improper behavior, with no other consequences for the behavior), but could be used instead as a lesson in appropriate conduct.

Summary

The Prophetic teachings are like an instruction manual for how to conduct one's life. Many are very specific, others leave some room for interpretation. Correct interpretation of these guidelines, however, is essential to knowing how to conduct one's life.

Everyone must be held accountable for their actions and how they interact with the environment. Each person must behave appropriately and treat fellow humans with respect, and these rules are the same for both men and women. Women are entitled to the
same education and opportunities as men, and are likewise, equally responsible for
conveying these principles to their children. In order to know what to do, one must take
every opportunity to learn. It is easier to follow the rules when you know what they are.

When considering how to worship Allah, any time one follows His instructions, it
is an act of worship. That is, when one shows respect for others’ feelings, when one acts
responsibly within one’s environment, when one seeks opportunities to learn, all are acts
of worship. The Prophet placed a high priority on seeking knowledge and its proper
application. He took the opportunity to teach the foundations of Islam, using methods
that were appropriate to the situation, and likewise encouraged his followers to do the
same, a process which continues to this day.

The Prophet used many tactics for transmitting information. He recognized that
standing in front of a group and talking was not necessarily the most effective way to
present information. He made drawings and used gestures. He asked questions and used
stories and parables to lead his students to the conclusion, rather than imparting
information without discussion. The Prophet was known for tailoring the lesson to the
needs of the audience, as in the above example of the man considering adultery. He
encouraged his pupils to think for themselves, directing them as needed to reach the
intended conclusion.
Bibliography


