

Islam 101
Transcript of Part 2
What Muslims believe about the Prophet Muhammad

presented on March 5, 2015
by Dr. Natana DeLong-Bas

Who is Prophet Muhammad? Before anybody worries that anybody's going to be offended by the picture that's there, this is from a Persian miniature. And this is one of the ways in which the prophet has been depicted in artwork, historically. You'll notice that his face is not shown. He's shown wearing a veil so that we don't have to worry about anybody potentially worshipping Muhammad rather than God.

Muslims will always tell you that Muhammad was strictly a human being. He was not a divine figure. Nevertheless, they believe that he is the most perfect human being who has ever lived, because he best represents what it means to live out the teachings of the Qur'an. As one of my Muslim friends has said, "Muslim reference is to Muhammad, Muslim reverence is to God."

Muslims spend a lot of time studying the prophet's example called the *sunna*, which are recorded in literature called the *hadith*. And these are records of sayings and doings of the prophet. Sometimes, you only have one hadith that will talk about in issue, but oftentimes, you'll have hundreds, if not thousands, about the same incident. And the reason for that is that Muhammad didn't spend a lot of time by himself. He always had an entourage of people with him. He had friends and companions, kind of like Jesus and his disciples, who would follow him around. You get all of those different people who are present to hear him speak or respond to a particular issue. Everybody has their own version of the story.

Oftentimes, those versions may vary in the details, because each one of us when we hear something may have different interests or different things that jump out at us or grab our attention in a way that they don't. Some of us are focused on the words, some of us might be focused on who else was present, whether the prophet was speaking to an individual, whether this was something that was supposed to be a broader matter. And so my point is that having a multiplicity of records does not necessarily indicate falsehood per se, but rather that you had many people in the audience and everybody is remembering according to their own experiences.

Muhammad is believed to be the last in a very long line of prophets and messengers that began with Adam and continued up through Jesus and John the Baptist. If you're wondering what the difference between a prophet and a messenger is, prophets were generally not

Boston College

very popular people. Prophets were given a message from God, but oftentimes, people did not respond very positively to those messages. They chased them out of town or throw rocks at them or what have you. Only messengers were guaranteed the success of that message.

And there have only been five messengers according to Islamic teachings. First one was Noah. In Christianity, Noah isn't a prophet because he never really says anything, he just does whatever God tells him. But he does speak in the Qur'an. The other four are Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and, of course, Muhammad himself. Some of the other prophets who are shared in common between the Bible and the Qur'an include Aaron, Adam, David, Elijah, Elisha, Ezekiel, Job, John the Baptist, Jonah, Joseph, Lot, and Solomon. So many characters from the Old Testament and a few from the New Testament.

Muhammad was born in the year 570, according to tradition, and he lived until the year 632. He only began receiving prophecies in the year 610, when he was 40 years old. Now we know in American culture that forty's a bad number, right? We don't want to turn 40. Some of us turned 40 a long time ago. Forty's not something we really look forward to. So I'd like to share with you, that in the Islamic tradition, 40 is the number of perfection. It is the age when you receive wisdom, so 40 is something to look forward to, and so there's a symbolic importance to his having received that message at the age of 40.

During the early years of his ministry, Muhammad was in a city called Mecca. There are some scholars who have noted that the more universal message was revealed during that time. There's a lot of talk about the coming Day of Judgment. The idea of there being an afterlife; the idea that the actions that you undertake in this lifetime matter in a very eternal way.

It's also very interesting that during that time period, violence was absolutely forbidden to the Muslim community, even in cases of self-defense. And that was an important prohibition because this early Muslim community was under physical attack very frequently, including the prophet himself. Sometimes, it was the lady next door who liked to come and throw rotten tomatoes at him on a daily basis. There was another not terribly nice neighbor, who would come and dump garbage over his head on a daily basis. There were some early Muslims who were persecuted, and even killed, because of this new faith tradition. So the idea that for these first 12 years of his ministry, violence was forbidden and nonviolence was the norm. People were encouraged to engage in conversation and dialogue, is a very important part of the tradition that needs to be recaptured today when it seems like Muslims are always associated with violence, terrorism, and extremism on the TV set.

In the year 622, Muhammad was invited to come to another town called Medina. And he was invited there because this town had been caught up in tribal warfare of the worst variety. This was a culture in which a harm that was caused to one tribe had to be avenged by the tribe that had experienced the harm. And so you had these cycles of violence and retribution that would begin, and more and more people would become involved. And by that point, Medina was in a situation where the tribal warfare was so bad, nobody knew how to stop it.

Boston College

But they had heard about this guy, Muhammad, in Mecca, and his abilities as an arbitrator, that he was somebody who could find solutions that would help to stop the killing and stop the warfare. And so he was invited to Medina to come and arbitrate this situation and ultimately, to take over as head of state.

And so it's during these last 10 years of his ministry, that his job description changed. He wasn't just a prophet anymore, but now he had taken on some of the roles of a head of state. That meant that he had to issue legal rulings. That meant that he was responsible for the security of all of the people who lived in Medina. And it was during this time period that God permitted the Muslim community to engage in the use of violence, but only for the purposes of self-defense. The Qur'an is very clear that violence is never to be used offensively. It can only be used when the community is under attack or under the threat of imminent attack.

It's also very important to note that during this time, not everybody who lived in Medina decided to convert to Islam. The pagan tribes remained pagan; there were certain Jewish tribes that lived there who remained Jewish, but what they did was they all signed a pact together. And this was a security agreement, that if any one of those tribes was attacked by the outside, everybody who had signed onto that pact agreed to act in defense of that community. Muslims refer to this as the Pact of Medina, or the Constitution of Medina, and will often say that this is really the world's first written constitution. So it's a point of pride for many of them.

Some of the controversies we hear, with respect to Muhammad, have to do with his use of violence. Yes, he was a military leader. Yes, he did fight in battles. As I said, part of that was because of his position as a head of state. Once an alliance had been, a treaty relationship had been established with the tribes in Mecca that had been persecuting the early Muslims, though he was willing to engage in a treaty relationship with them and lay down arms. So the purpose of his fighting was not to annihilate the enemy and wipe him off the face of the earth, but rather to bring the enemy to a point where they could start to negotiate what kind of relationship they could have so that peaceful relations and certainly commercial relations could be restored.

Second point, with respect to Muhammad, is that most of the time we think about Muslims, we probably think about the Middle East. And we think about some governments that maybe aren't the nicest; authoritarian dictatorships might come to mind. And so it's very interesting that the prophet himself was known for ruling through *shura*, or consultation, and working to achieve *ijma*, or consensus.

He didn't just issue decisions on his own. This entourage of people he was always surrounded by—he was always looking for advice from his friends. He took a lot of advice from his wives. Sometimes it was very good advice and sometimes perhaps the advice wasn't as good.

But he was somebody who really talked to people and listened to different ideas, and believed in the importance of building a sense of consensus within the community. And so some Muslims would say that's evidence of early democracy. Others, who are of the more extremist variety, might argue that he, at some level, gave up part of his authority.

Boston College

But Muhammad always said he did not always speak as a prophet. There were times when he simply spoke as a human being. So he tried to be clear about when he was receiving a revelation versus when he was offering his own opinion. And his companions learned to ask him, "Are you speaking as a prophet or are you speaking as a person? If you're speaking as a person, I think I have a better idea. Why don't we try something else?" And he was willing to listen to that kind of advice.

One final point that often comes up as a criticism of Muhammad is that he had multiple wives, and was clearly a sensual person. And that's often placed in contrast to Jesus who did not marry, did not have children, and was understood to be of a higher calling. Muslims point to Muhammad's role as a family man, somebody who was married and had children, as one of the things that helps to make him very relatable to them; that he was somebody who experienced the joys and the challenges of marriage and children. I have two teenagers; they can be very challenging at times. And so he understood this at a very practical level.

One thing that's often not mentioned is that his first wife, Khadijah—he was married only to her during her lifetime. And he only began to marry other women after she died. The first wife he married after her death, he married because the community had decided that he needed a new wife to keep house for him and to keep him company so that he wouldn't get lonely.

He only had one wife, Aisha, whom he married as a virgin. The other wives were either widows or divorcees. And many of those marriages were undertaken to engage in alliances, tribal relationships, to build stronger relationships with tribes. If you need a parallel, think about European monarchies of the past where you'd have the French monarch marrying the Austro-Hungarian princess or that sort of thing. So Muslims explain it as building political relationships.

And his wives were really kind of a mixed bag. Sometimes, they got along well and sometimes, they bickered a lot with each other about who was the favorite and who got to spend more time with him. And at one point he got so fed up with all of them, that he told them, everybody was going to take a 30-day break, and they needed to make up their minds: either they could stay married or they could choose to get divorced, but the bickering within the household needed to stop.