Theme: The Nubuwwah (Prophethood) Conference

Topic: A Christian understanding of Prophethood as basis of Dialogue between Christians and Muslims

Held at Jaffery Islamic Centre, Lavington, 7th June 2015, sponsored by Shia Asna Ashri Jamaat

By: Dr. Kahumbi Maina (Ph.D)
Kenyatta University
Department of Philosophy & Religious Studies
Email: kahumbimaina@yahoo.com
Introduction
This paper examines the Christian understanding of prophethood and draws parallel with the Islamic understanding of the same. It is evident that the Christian conception of prophethood and the Islamic one are similar though different. Indeed a majority of the Biblical prophets are found in the Qur’an¹ and this forms a basis of dialogue between Christians and Muslims. Jesus is a central figure in both Christianity and Islam though there are similarities and differences between the Biblical Jesus and the Qur’anic Jesus. The centrality of Jesus in Christianity and Islam is both a point of convergence as it is a point of divergence. Is Muhammad mentioned in the Bible, and is there a possibility of a Christian’s acceptance of Muhammad as prophet? This is a polemical question, as the paper shows.

Christian Understanding of Prophethood
The Christian understanding of prophethood is based on both the Old Testament and the New Testament but it is mostly in the former that we find the prophetic literature which gives a basis for the Christian view of prophet and prophethood. From the Christian perspective, a prophet is a person who carries and proclaims a revealed (divine) message to some audience. Divine inspiration was what makes a person a prophet and what causes the prophet to speak out and what makes others to listen to the prophet as legitimate spokesperson for the divine.² The prophets were spokespersons for God and their mission was to deliver God’s message to humanity.

Some of the terms that are used to denote a prophet in the OT are Nabi used in respect to Moses and Jeremiah among others (Exodus 7:1; Numbers 12:2-8; Jeremiah 1:4-5); Seer, used in regard to Prophet Amos (Amos 7:12-13); Diviner used in reference to Prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 9:9). Prophets also performed miracles, e.g. Moses, Elijah and Elisha.³ Christians like Muslims recognize and believe that God chooses for Himself certain messengers that He has purified and sanctified to be his preferred servants and faithful transmitters of His word. These messengers are the prophets that God sends at various stages of history for the proper guidance of humankind. All prophets were human beings. They were the best examples of moral trust.

The Role of the Prophets in Christianity and Islam
Christians and Muslims stress the importance of the mission of prophets in religious history of humanity. They are chosen to guide their communities and mankind onto the straight path of God. In both Christianity and Islam, the prophet is a witness who finally, after carrying out his

---
¹ Some prophets who are in both the Bible and Qur’an are: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Noah, David, Solomon, Job, Joseph, Moses, Harun (Aaron), Zachariah, John the Baptist, Jesus, Elias, Ishmael, Elisha (Al-Ya’sa), Jonah, Lot. Others are Adam and Dhu Kifl (Ezekiel or Joshua?), Idris (Enoch?), Ilyas (Elijah), Hud, Salih and Shu’ayb.
³ Ibid, pp. 10-12
mission in spite of dangers and trials, stands humbly aside before the person of the One who sent him like John the Baptist [Mark 1:3].

For Muslims, the fundamental message proclaimed by all the prophets was the same: the unity of God, reward for leading a good, pious and peaceful life, the Day of Judgment and the punishment for believers’ life. According to Islam, all the prophets brought essentially the same message – Islam.

Some prophets who are found in both the Bible and Qur’an are: Noah, Abraham, Lot, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron (Harun) David, Solomon, Jonah, Job, Zachariah, John the Baptist and Jesus. The three religious traditions: Christianity, Islam and Judaism present Abraham as the founder of the true worship of one God. In the model of Abraham as offered by Islam, Christians and Jews find traits which the book of Genesis mentions concerning “their father in the faith,” and they can rejoice that the “Islamic faith is pleased to associate itself” with the example of Abraham in order to “submit wholeheartedly” to the “inscrutable decrees” of God (Nostra Aetate, No. 3). But the Qur’anic perspective does not say anything about the promises made to Abraham that he would have a land and especially a posterity by which “shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves (Genesis 22:18). Further there is the preference given to Ishmael as opposed to Isaac as the son of the promise.

The characteristics of the Qur’anic Moses are similar to those in the Bible. Moses spoke to God face-to-face. He confronted Pharaoh and the Egyptian power, liberated his people and transmitted the law to them in the desert. He also tried to root in the people’s minds every desire to return to the worship of idols and to the comforts of an easier life. The Qur’anic narrative does not mention the tenth plague and the Passover which is derived from it and which is the decisive event in the Jewish history. Nevertheless the substance of the Decalogue is found in the Qur’an.

The Qur’an has assigned a prominent place to Jesus among the Prophets of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Jesus is esteemed both as a prophet and messenger to whom Allah “gave pre-eminence over others” (2:253-254). The Qur’an attests that Jesus was given both the Gospel (Injil) and the power to perform miracles, therefore the coming of Jesus was announced as “glad tidings” (3:45). But in Islam, Jesus was a mere human being like the prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures (3:59). He was taught and received the Torah, the Wisdom and the Gospel (3:43-48) from heaven by divine revelation, in the same manner as prophets Moses and David received the Torah (Taurat) and Psalms (Zabur) respectively (3:46-60). Thus Jesus of Islam is a prophet sent by God with a definite message to the people of Israel (3:49-50).

From the Islamic perspective, the succession of the prophets culminated in the prophethood and mission of Muhammad (Pbuh). He is the last of the prophetic models presented in the Qur’an. He was the last and final prophet. He is the perfect one, the most definitive one to Muslims for he is the “Seal of the Prophets” (khatam al-anbiya’). This is a cardinal teaching of Islam whose confession of its truth constitutes part of the Islamic creed: “I witness that Muhammad (Pbuh) is the Messenger of Allah.” Ideally, the mission of Muhammad (Pbuh) sums up those of the previous prophets and presents itself as their fulfillment. The truth that all the previous prophets
had proclaimed to humanity was perfected by Muhammad (Pbuh). The Qur’an which is Allah’s final guidance to humankind revealed to Muhammad (Pbuh) – the “Seal of the Prophets - 600 years after Prophet Isa, is the “Seal of the Revelations.” Through Muhammad (Pbuh), Allah’s last messenger the original religion of humankind, Islam, was completed and made perfect and a community of Muslims was established.

The Islamic position of Muhammad (Pbuh) as the seal of the prophets is however contested by Christians who claim that Jesus is the seal of the prophets. This claim, according to the Catholic faithful, is well documented in the Vatican II’s Constitution on Divine revelation, Dei Verbum. Generally, according to Christians, the Word Incarnate is “more than a prophet” since Jesus came to fulfill the hope of the prophets and the expectation of Israel. There was not to be another revelation for all the truth in its entirety was made with the incarnate word, Jesus Christ. The only thing remaining was to announce the same truth to all the generations. If something new was to come, it was to be based on the revelations which were fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. This is the mandate we find in the Gospels when the resurrected Christ commanded his disciples to go to all nations and make disciples of all nations in what is referred to as the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20).

Does the Bible say anything about Muhammad (Pbuh)?

This is a polemical question which many Muslims would answer in the affirmative probably to the chagrin of many Christians. According to Ahmed Deedat (1918-2005), the late South African scholar, author and preacher of Indian descent, Mohammed is mentioned in Deuteronomy 18:18 and in the Song of Songs 5:16. To prove his point, Deedat argues that the Hebrew word used in Song of Songs 5:16 is “mahammudim. The end letters “im” is a plural of respect, majesty and grandeur. Minus “im” the name would be “mahammud” translated as “altogether lovely” in the authorized version of the bible or “the Praised One” – ‘the only worthy of praise’ i.e. Muhammad (Pbuh).

Deedat considers Muhammad (Pbuh) the “natural successor of Jesus”. He further engages in polemics, an art he perfected in his work as an author and preacher to show that this verse (Deuteronomy 18:18) fits in more in Muhammad (Pbuh) than in Jesus. He demonstrates the many ways in which Jesus was not like Moses, for example, Jesus is a God whereas Moses was not; “Jesus died for the sins of the world” but Moses did not die for the sins of the world; Jesus went to hell for three days but did not have to go there”. In his arguments, Deedat delves into the

---

4 Ibid, p.46
5 The verse says: “I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him”. (Deuteronomy 18:18, NKJV – New King James Version).
6 The verse says: “His mouth is most sweet, yes, he is altogether lovely. This is my beloved, and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem!” (Song of Songs 5: 16 - NKJV).
7 cf., Deedat, A. The Choice, vol. 1, 1993, p.6
8 cf., Deedat, A. The Choice, vol. 1,1993, pp.7-14
characters and life of both Moses and Muhammad showing their similarities to demonstrate that
indeed, Moses was like Muhammad (Pbuh) and therefore this verse was in reference to him and
not Jesus as Christians believe.  

According to the Qur’an 7:157, Jesus prophesied the coming of Muhammad (Pbuh). According
to Deedat, the Helper or Counselor (Paraclete) Jesus talked about in the Gospel of John 14:16,
26; 15:26 and 16:7, is Muhammad (Pbuh) whose name in Greek is periklutos or paracletos
(comforter, counselor or advocate) that is the “praised one” which is the other name for
Muhammad (Pbuh).

Notwithstanding the polemics and arguments of Ahmed Deedat and others regarding the place of
Muhammad (Pbuh) in the Bible, Christians maintain that the Bible says nothing about
Muhammad (Pbuh).

**Should Christians Accept Muhammad (Pbuh) as a Prophet for a better and more
meaningful Dialogue with Muslims?**

It is not an overstatement to say that there cannot be any Islam without Muhammad, just like
there cannot be any Christianity without Jesus. Muhammad (Pbuh) is an important figure in
Islam and must be held with great sensitivity in order to enhance dialogue between Christians
and Muslims. What a Christian says about Muhammad (Pbuh) can build or break a dialogue
between Christians and Muslims. Muslims have been angered by the attitudes of some Christians
towards Muhammad. A Christian recognition of the Prophethood of Muhammad (Pbuh) has for a
long time been a concern, indeed a demand of Muslims in their exchanges with Christians. A
familiar question from Muslims to Christians is “why do you not acknowledge our Prophet”?
Therefore, due to the role that Muhammad plays in Islam and in view of Christian and Muslim
dialogue what should be the Christian attitude towards Muhammad (Pbuh)?

Christians should speak of Muhammad (Pbuh) without distinguishing between “Muhammad of
history” and “Muhammad of faith.” They should full respect the deep affection which Muslims
feel and manifest toward their prophet. Muslims are often saddened to see that their Christian
friends do not grant Muhammad (Pbuh) the status of prophet, whereas, for their part, they
recognize that quality in Jesus.

Christians should try to appreciate the authentic value of the life and work of the Prophet
Muhammad (Pbuh), taking into consideration the time and the environment in which he lived.
They must renounce firmly “all the occasions where lack of respect has been shown, where

---

9 For example, Moses had a father and Mother, just like Mohammad, but Jesus had only a mother and no human
father. Moses and Muhammad were born in the normal, natural course but Jesus was created by a special miracle.
Moses and Muhammad married and begot children but Jesus remained a bachelor all his life. Moses and
Muhammad brought new laws and new regulations but Jesus “did not come with a new religion – no new laws and

10 Chungu, p.53
11 Ibid, 59
incorrect statements in speech or in writing have been made, where unhelpful, even insulting, suggestions have been offered with reference to Muhammad (Pbuh). Instead of these negative judgments which came out of former concern for polemics and apologetics, Christians should assess in an objective way, and in consonance with their faith, exactly what was the inspiration, the sincerity and the faithfulness of the Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh) making their judgment within the framework, first, of his personal response to the commands of God, and then, on wider scale, that of the working of providence in world history.\footnote{Borrmans, M., \textit{Interreligious Documents 1}, p.57}

When a Christian looks at Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh) he/she needs to evaluate him in the light of total Biblical witness culminating in Jesus the Messiah. Christians should appreciate and affirm the Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh).\footnote{Kateregga, B.D. & D. Shenk, \textit{Islam and Christianity}, p.47}

\textbf{References}


\textit{__________}, \textit{The Choice}, Vol. 2, Delhi: Millat Book Centre 1997