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The Poet and the Prophet

ABDOU FILALI-ANSARY

Maaruf Rusafi (1873–1945), an Iraqi poet of the early twentieth century, is well known to anyone who attended an Arabic public school. He celebrated the pride of being an Arab at a moment when the domination of the Ottoman Turks was receding in the region, just before the colonial expansion of Europe. His poetry, in form and content, deals with Arabism, freedom, equality, and positive political values and is an example of the forceful mobilisation of classical canons for a “modern” cause. Cultural identity could not be better served, as Arabism was linked to freedom, equality, and all sorts of positive values.

Only very recently, another face of the poet emerged. Late in his life, Rusafi had turned his attention to the early, or “foundational” moments of Arab history and the figure which had forged Arabs as a force to be reckoned with in the region and in the world. He dedicated eight years of his life to the study of the biography of Prophet Muhammad with the intention of “elucidating a sacred myth,” i.e. extracting the “true facts” of history from the mythological narratives in which they had been staged. The book, completed in Falluja in 1933, has hitherto remained hidden from the general public. Only recently, in 2002, has it found a publisher.¹

Rusafi studied the traditional sources on the biography of the Prophet with the idea of going beyond the religious allegories and narratives by which the myth of Muhammad has been constructed. It is remarkable that although his agenda was modern, his sources, methods, and style remained strictly traditional. Besides Arabic, he seems to have had some knowledge of Turkish (he served for short periods in a few journals published in Istanbul) and, to some degree, of Farsi, but no knowledge of European languages. His limited knowledge of some modern theories (such as Newtonian physics or Darwinism) came from his reading of mainly Egyptian journals published in Arabic in the early twentieth century.

However, he clearly adopts the attitudes of a free mind, submitting historical sources to a strictly rational scrutiny, discarding all preconceptions, including the most sacred for his fellow Muslims. As such, he seems to belong to the line of rationalist rebels who have persevered in attempting to cross the red line erected around “orthodox” views quite early on in the history of Muslims, resisting fierce repression and censorship that were exerted at all levels. The book opens with a strange declaration (which includes excerpts from his poems) whereby he proclaims Truth (*Haqq*) as the only divinity worth worshipping and asserts his intention of adhering to it whatever the cost may be.

Elucidation of a sacred myth

His reconstruction of the life of the Prophet brings back a wealth of anecdotes forgotten because later biographers discarded them. The effect, indeed, is to shed light on a historically real figure. He expunges the supra-natural from the historical accounts and shows that it is mainly the outcome of imagination of later narrators, and not fully endorsed by what we know about the understanding of the contemporaries of the Prophet. He quotes extensively the most recognised sources about the life of the Prophet, but uses them in new ways. Through this secularised narration of the Prophet’s life and deeds, a novel picture emerges. Its most striking feature is the use of violence which permeates the customs of the time. The Prophet stands out amongst his contemporaries not by being totally different in that respect, but by a personality that has the power to dominate others and

In 2002, nearly 70 years after its completion, a long essay by the celebrated Iraqi poet Maaruf Rusafi on the nature of prophecy in Islam was published in Germany. His reading of early Islamic history, in particular of the accomplishments of the Prophet Muhammad, roughly coincided with another new reading; that by the Egyptian Ali Abd al-Raziq. Rusafi’s admiration for Muhammad is enormous and he credits him with inspiring the Arabs to initiate a new order, taking humanity from the reign of tribal customs to the vision of communities built on shared ethics and beliefs.

a vision which transcends the prevailing conceptions and customs. Rusafi stresses the Prophet’s main strength as the capacity to free himself from the categories of culture in which he was immersed. He was able to perceive events beyond the limitations of his personal self and beyond the dominant views and values of pre-Islamic society. The revelations he received were the consequence of an intellectual reasoning through which he broke with the worldview of his contemporaries. Thus, he questions the notion of prophecy as a message literally delivered from God. Most individuals, com-

ments Rusafi, think and respond within the world of meanings built by the language and culture transmitted by their environment. They are thus neither able to distance themselves from their “world,” nor to place in perspective the conceptions and values they have inherited. Only a few have the capacity of distancing themselves from the mould of their own value system. Consequently, they are able to contemplate events and things comprehensively and reach a kind of knowledge which is not accessible to their fellow men. Such are, as Rusafi explains, the prophets of the Quranic tradition.

Muhammad was such a prophet, probably the one who has gone as far as any one could go. He had, in addition, the will to apply that knowledge to transform the moral and political conditions of the time. Rusafi stresses the numerous sayings of the Prophet in which he promises his Arab tribesmen, if they were to follow his teaching, a great destiny and an empire that would crush and dominate the existing powers of the time, the Sassanid and Byzantine empires. Here Rusafi shows the limits of his critical reading. While he is critical of later narrators, his criticism of these early narratives does not lead him to question these traditions, which could very well have been retro projections from subsequent history. Instead, Rusafi sees them as the expression of a “grand design” which he supposes to have overtaken the imagination and driven the actions of Prophet Muhammad. He draws the image of the Prophet as the one who envisions and initiates a new community, which is not built on tribal bonds or on the domination of powerful monarchies, as were the big empires of the time, but rather on religious and ethical beliefs. Muhammad’s grand design was thus to implement an alternative to tribe and empire, which were the only available socio-political forms his area had known until then. Monotheism and the ethics related to it (solidarity, social justice, and equality) were to provide the foundations a new community. The Arabs, as the ones to champion its building and implementation, would enjoy a privileged role in its subsequent development.

In Rusafi’s portrayal the Prophet is not a man who passively receives messages from a transcendent God, as he is depicted in orthodox traditions. He is rather one who accesses the inner processes of nature and history, beyond the cultural framework which determines the thought and action of his time, and brings forth a project which leads to great transformations in the history of mankind: the creation of a social order which enacts the ethical principles brought about by monotheism.

Rusafi’s admiration for the Prophet is immense, but not for the same reasons that traditional accounts present. The Arabs are credited, in passing, of being the initiators of a new order, which is supposed to have taken humanity from the reign of tribal customs and brute domination, to the vision of communities built on shared beliefs and ethically grounded regulations.

An alternate portrait

In his reconstruction of the life of the Prophet, it remains unclear if Rusafi was aware of another “secular” reading of the same period of Islamic history, which had been proposed a few years earlier. The resemblance between the two contemporary endeavours is striking. Ali Abd al-Raziq (1888–1966) had published his most controversial essay *Islam and the Foundations of Political Power* in 1925. He also had ventured beyond the traditional narratives of the early phases of the Muslim community in order to find answers to modern questions. His quest, following immediately the abrogation of the Ottoman caliphate by Mustafa Kamal Atatürk in 1924, was to question the prevalent thesis that Islam encompasses both religion and politics. His conclusions, which seem to contradict Rusafi’s, are also strikingly original. Abd al-Raziq found that the community created and led by the Prophet in Medina was by no means a state, in the modern sense. Although it shared some external features with those of a polity (collecting taxes, building an “army,” administering justice, appointing “ambassadors” to neighbouring states), it was by all means just a religious community, intended to create a space where individuals could follow their new religious beliefs and practices at a distance from the hostility of their tribal leaders, who had remained hostile to the new religion. The Prophet did not attempt, nor promote, anything beyond this kind of community. The absence of political concerns could be indicated by the fact that he did not appoint any successor or provide rules for the continuity of his community, as any political leader with a political agenda would have done. It was Muslims who, after the death of the Prophet, decided to transform this religious community into a polity, and who made of it, in time, an empire.

In order to defend his thesis, Abd al-Raziq also felt the need to propose a theory of prophecy. He did not question the idea of a message literally delivered from God, as did Rusafi, but stressed its exceptionalism. He describes prophecy as a phenomenon which gives an elected man total, comprehensive powers over his fellows. These powers include and exceed those of kings and temporal leaders. The “inclusion of politics within the realm of religion” is thus an exceptional turn, a break into the ordinary course of social and political history, whereby a man endowed with a message and a mission, transforms the prevailing order by providing new moral foundations. The exception is, by definition, not a lasting state and is not intended to outlive its founder.

Although having two different agendas, one rather “liberal” and the other nationalist, both Abd al-Raziq and Maaruf Rusafi wrote at a time where Muslim intellectuals were exposed to deep and rapid changes and enjoyed an unprecedented opening in the intellectual sphere. New explanations had to be sought and could—to some degree—be proposed. They understood, and stressed, that the historical emergence of Islam had deep and lasting political consequences, as it provided new models, aspirations, and values. Both also understood and stressed that the understanding which prevailed in Muslim histories did not depict the depth of such a revolution. The latter raised the accounts of Muslim history, i. e. the building of new empires and sultanates, to the status of an Islamic norm, and distorted the meaning of the “political” message of the Prophet, i.e. that political systems had to be grounded on shared beliefs and ethical principles, not that religion had to provide, or did provide, the blue print for designing these political systems.

However, Abd al-Raziq acted cautiously, perhaps too cautiously, by not publishing anything following the controversy around his book. Rusafi, on the other hand, entrusted his thoughts to an essay that could not be published during his life-time, or even a few decades later. *The Elucidation of a Secret Enigma* is likely to remain the work of a poet who had not fully mastered scholarly methods and discipline, or his impatience with the beliefs and attitudes of his fellow Muslims.

Note

1. Maaruf Rusafi, *The Personality of Muhammad, or the Elucidation of a Sacred Enigma, al-Shakhsiya al-muhammadiya aw hall al-lughz al-muqaddas* (Cologne: al-Jamal Publications, 2002).

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