

Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad is his Messenger:*

The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety

(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985)

In this interesting work, Annemarie Schimmel addresses the oft-ignored importance of Mohammad as a symbolic focus of Islamic religion and popular piety, rather than as a historical figure. She explores various aspects of veneration of Mohammad, from his place as an example to all Muslims, as an intermediary between God and man and as the source of legends, and examines his role at the heart of Islamic mysticism. Using a variety of sources, and writing in an easy style, Schimmel has created a work suitable for anyone interested in further examination of the intricacies of Muslim thought.

With this work, Schimmel considers the importance of Muhammad not merely as a historical figure, but as an integral part of the daily worship of ordinary Muslims. She maintains that only through understanding his importance and the devotion that Muslims have for him can Islam itself be fully understood. In the book, she examines the attitude of Muslims to the Prophet's life and person, legends surrounding him and the role devotion to him and his memory plays in daily religion, all through the assessment of texts and poetry created by pious Muslims from across the Islamic world.

Schimmel is clearly not writing a historical biography of Muhammad. She notes that many authors, from both the western and muslim traditions have done so, and points the interested reader to those she considers most worthwhile. She confines purely biographical notes to the first chapter, which places the man within a historical context and discusses his life and his most significant followers from the viewpoint of the Koran and Muslim texts as well as through modern western scholarship.

With the preliminaries over, Schimmel moves into the meat of her text: Muhammad as cornerstone of Islam. She first examines Muslim portrayals of his physical image

and personality and discusses the role of Muhammad as an exemplar to all Muslims. Due to the ban on all images of humans – especially the Prophet – in Islam, words have traditionally created the picture of Muhammad, and Schimmel mines the Muslim poetry and texts for vibrant imagery. What is clear is that Muslims from across the Islamic world have imagined, re-imagined and exaggerated every small facet of the Prophet's life from the shape of his nose to the type of sandal he wore. No detail is missing and Schimmel notes that this in itself is important, as not only the Prophet's spiritual words and actions have meaning to Muslims, but that every aspect of his life is important. He is not only a spiritual example to Muslims, but also a practical, day-to-day example. Schimmel continues this theme by discussing the moral impeccability of the Prophet, and his unique nature in Islam.

As the final Prophet, Muslims accept Muhammad as greater than all those that went before him, and most Muslim authors took care to avoid defaming his name. Schimmel notes that this special reverence for the Prophet means that Muslims are extremely sensitive to followers of other religions disparaging the Prophet, a point that has relevance even today. Despite Muhammad denying his production of miracles, signs and legends surrounding him have further confirmed his unique place in Islamic lore. Schimmel continues by considering these legends in a large body of Islamic poetry and stories, and reflects upon their significance, noting their importance in the mystical tradition: Muslims who reflect on these legends hope to receive prophetic dreams of Muhammad himself. Yet Muhammad is not merely an example to Muslims, not even a perfect example and source of dreams, Muslims also consider him a source of mercy, a conduit through which pious Muslims could seek solace for themselves.

Despite the worries of some theologians, Muslims have traditionally used prayers and popular poetry praising Muhammad to bring themselves closer to Muhammad and thus to God, to ask Mohammad to intercede on their behalf and bring his blessings upon them.

Schimmel next considers the nature of the names of the Prophet in Muslim thought. In Islam, names have power and Muslims' veneration of these names forms an important part of the mystical tradition. Another even more important element, Schimmel argues, is the 'Light of Muhammad', a symbolic light to the world; she also notes that later poetry portrays Muhammad as a source of creation and as an intermediary between man and God. He is both a prophet and a servant of God, a real person and a symbol, a focus for mysticism through his different aspects.

Schimmel examines the position of Mohammad in popular piety by considering in further depth two specific aspects of practice: celebrations of his birthday and stories concerning his "Night Journey." The former – once formal, pious affairs – have developed into a broad range of festival and commemoration across the Muslim world. The latter, the legend of a mystical journey Muhammad took across the heavens, forms a deep strand of belief in Muslim thought and especially in Muslim poetry. Schimmel even argues that the importance of the story extends beyond Islam, affecting popular belief in surrounding cultures. She then continues by further examining specific Islamic poetry relating to Muhammad: although she has already extensively included poetry in the thematic chapters, this considers the poetry in its temporal and geographic context.

Finally, Schimmel summarizes the previous chapters by considering Muhammad's role in the overall devotion of Islam, through the following of the Mohammedan Path, which sees in Muhammad's life a political and social role beyond other men. She considers how interpretations of his life have altered over the centuries and the relevance they both had and still have to pious Muslims, especially in the realm of popular religion

and ways of living. She then concludes the work with an in-depth examination of the poetry of Muhammad Iqbal, a poet in whose work she asserts the scholar can see the culmination of the Mohammedan path and the devotion to the Prophet.

The first thing that strikes the reader about this work is the enormous amount of detail that Schimmel uses to make her case. She uses poetry and prose from a wide variety of primary sources across the Islamic world as well as secondary sources from both western and Islamic scholarship to persuade the reader of Mohammad's central importance in the Islamic religious and social life and illustrate the ongoing devotion of Muslims to his life and memory. She makes no claim to writing a historical biography, but rather presents Muhammad as others have seen him. This is more a study of Islamic thought than the man himself, and as such it works well and is a valuable addition to scholarship surrounding the faith. However, it might have been informative to better delve into those non-mystical traditions that do not venerate the Prophet as much as she has portrayed: she mentions concerned theologians and groups fleetingly in the text, but usually only fleetingly, and gives the impression that there is little argument in Islam about the importance of the Prophet. In addition, at times, the text seems to lose the narrative flow, jumping around to follow a particular theme, and the regional and temporal differences in thought become somewhat confused. It is thus sometimes difficult to see clearly how beliefs have changed over time and place. In general, however the text is clear, well written and argued convincingly.

Schimmel uses an extensive and impressive variety of sources and recognizes the importance and validity of poetry as an important source for the topic. This runs contrary to usual norms of western scholarship, but given the subject it would seem entirely applicable. Without such sources, a great deal would be lost from the book. Her grasp of other sources is also impressive: she frequently refers to secondary sources, and a useful introduction and extensive bibliography provide many routes to further

study for those interested. This makes it a very useful work for scholars of Islamic faith and history, and is suitable primarily for senior undergraduates and graduates in the field. However, it is also accessible to a more general reader with an interest in Muslim thought. It appears to be one of very few books to address this particular aspect of Islam. Most books concerning Mohammad focus upon a biographical approach, while other books on Islam focus less on the mystical and popular aspects of the religion but upon its theological base and its socio-political and historical ramifications. It is thus an important addition to the field.

Schimmel has produced an significant work that uses vivid imagery and analysis to better illuminate the devotion towards Muhammad at the heart of Islam. This is an important subject, often ignored by Western scholarship in the past, and the author has done a sterling job of clarifying its complexities. Although the work could have been somewhat clearer with regard to historical and geographical context, its style and depth, together with its strong use of sources, mean it is a useful work for anyone who is interested in the thoughts and feelings of ordinary Muslims throughout the ages.