

# The Origin of Islam as a Social Movement

*Ahmed Afzaal*

Islamic Research Institute  
International Islamic University  
Islamabad (Pakistan)  
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This paper attempts to demonstrate that the initial rise of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula during the life of Prophet Muḥammad<sup>1</sup> (570-632 CE) can be

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<sup>1</sup> The word "prophet" can have confessional as well as sociological meanings. In the Islamic context, a prophet (or *rasūl*) is a person assigned by God Almighty to fulfil the mission of proclaiming the unity of the Ultimate Reality and the concomitant ethical requirements; once a prophet appears on the scene, the salvation of the audience becomes linked to their attitude towards the prophetic call. Sociologically speaking, on the other hand, a prophet is "the prototype of the change-oriented religious leader", who typically "...confronts the powers that be and the established ways of doing things, claiming to be taken seriously on religious authority". See, Meredith McGuire, *Religion: The Social Context* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1997), 244. In other words, the role of the prophet is diametrically opposed to that of the priest, who typically is part of the religious and political *status quo* and exercises religious authority to maintain that *status quo*. Depending on the religious beliefs of the reader, the use of the word "prophet" for Muḥammad can be taken in either of these meanings. While it is customary for Muslims to add "peace and blessings be upon him" each time the name of Prophet Muḥammad is mentioned in speech or writing, I have deliberately refrained from using these words in this paper in order to remain consistent with a social scientific, rather than

fruitfully analyzed and interpreted in terms of a social movement. In addition, it seeks to show that systematic study of the career of Prophet Muḥammad when approached holistically from a social movement perspective and interpreted in dialogue with modern social theories, can lead to the development of general principles with potential relevance for any social movement; the details of how these principles are to be applied will vary in accordance with the particular context of each movement. Finally, this paper attempts to use sociological insights to shed light on some dynamics of the rise of Islam in its historical context.<sup>2</sup>

### What Lies Beneath

The use of only a single case study to draw general conclusions about social movements may appear

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a confessional, approach.

<sup>2</sup> Due to the elements of doubt and uncertainty regarding the reliability of even the best possible historical reports, the findings of this paper can only be presented as tentative and provisional, rather than definitive. It is also granted that the present attempt in some ways imposes one set of theoretical biases over selected historical and textual data, and that, *ipso facto*, the same or other—equally important—data can be legitimately and meaningfully interpreted in numerous other ways as well, perhaps with substantial gains in quality and sophistication. Finally, the limitations of scope and space do not allow the analysis of the life and career of Prophet Muḥammad in terms of all the possible variables that affect the fortunes of a social movement; instead, only some of the most salient ones will be discussed in the following pages. The purpose behind this paper is not to say the last word, but to start a scholarly conversation.

methodologically flawed; however, this approach is based on my desire to develop a sociological framework of inquiry into the policies and strategies of Prophet Muḥammad that can be used to evaluate and critique contemporary Islamic movements. While the latter project will not be attempted here, it does provide the background that motivates the present study.

The life and career of Prophet Muḥammad is used by contemporary Muslim leaders and ideologues not only to learn how to proceed in their own variegated campaigns, but also — and perhaps more importantly — to legitimize their preferred policies, strategies, and goals. These movements span the full spectrum of political positions, all the way from the conservative Tablighī Jamā'at to the ultra-violent al-Qā'idah. Despite this diversity of political positions, all arguments supporting particular methodologies must somehow be shown to receive their authority and authenticity from what Prophet Muḥammad did or did not do, and from what he commanded or prohibited. This is because the experience of the earliest community of believers under Prophet Muḥammad has been taken by virtually all subsequent generations of Muslims as the ultimate paradigm of legitimacy. It is no surprise, therefore, that the interpretation of the historical and textual data on Prophet Muḥammad's life and career has become one of the central areas of contention and dispute among Islamic

activists today.<sup>3</sup>

### The Nature of Prophetic Vocation

What lends support to the viability of the present endeavour is the fact that, based on the available sources, the struggle of Prophet Muḥammad appears to be more or less consciously aimed at bringing about certain key changes in the religio-ethical and socio-political spheres of the Arabian society. Contemporary sociological research often distinguishes between religious movements and social movements, but it is not possible to adequately capture the life and career of Prophet Muḥammad in terms of only one of these frameworks. The question may be asked, however, as to whether the religious or the social aspects took priority and precedence in his case. It

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<sup>3</sup> The diversity of methodologies, policies, and strategies that are supposedly derived from, and justified by, the same historical and textual sources indicates that a verity of very different hermeneutical frameworks are being employed by Muslim leaders and ideologues. For the most part, however, there is very little awareness of the existence of these frameworks; often, the historical and textual reports relating to Prophet Muḥammad are seen as if they are applicable to all times and cultures in a simple and unmediated way. In writing this paper, I do not claim an infallible epistemological status for my own hermeneutical framework, nor do I suggest that it is possible to be completely neutral in pursuing a subject that is as controversial and contested as the life of Prophet Muḥammad. I do believe, however, that the life and career of Prophet Muḥammad can be used as a model for social movements, particularly by contemporary Islamic movements, but also that this endeavour calls for a self-conscious and self-critical stance on the part of the interpreters.

seems to me that the socio-political aims of Prophet Muḥammad's struggle were the necessary and inevitable—yet mostly implicit and tacit—consequences of his religio-ethical vision. Even though the primary focus of his call seems to be on religious and ethical issues, its natural consequences and implications for the social and political structures of his milieu were far-reaching and, generally speaking, quite obvious to his audience. In other words, the kind of religio-ethical reforms that Prophet Muḥammad wished to implement in his society were of such a nature and scope that they would not have been possible without active engagement with socio-political structures and processes. Alternatively, of course, it can be argued that his mission was primarily a manifestation of the socio-political unrest prevalent in the Arabian society in early seventh century, but that this unrest was not consciously recognized as such, and that it expressed itself primarily in a religio-ethical form and language because this was the only effective route for socio-political transformation within that context.

These two ways of characterizing Prophet Muḥammad's struggle may not be mutually exclusive. It can be argued that the division of Prophet Muḥammad's mission into religio-ethical and socio-political spheres is an artificial and heuristic one. Describing the relationship between these spheres, Fazlur Rahman — a self-identified modernist Muslim — contends that the social aspects of Islam are the natural and logical outcome of its religious

vision, as epitomized in the career of Prophet Muḥammad:

It is not the case that "religion" and "state" were sisters; nor can it be said that they "cooperated" with one another. The state is nothing at all by itself; it is a reflex of those moral and spiritual values and principles called Islam. The state is not an "extension" of religion; it is an instrument of Islam, a transparent instrument which vanishes when one tries to regard it per se. The Prophet never claimed to be Prophet *and ruler*; he never even claimed to be a ruler whose rule was under this Prophethood; he only claimed to be a Prophet. His rule was the way in which he performed his Prophetic office. The adage is fairly well known by now that "in Islam there is no separation between religion and state". The actual case is much stronger: ideally, the state per se cannot exist in Islam where it is only a reflex or a transparent instrument of "religion". Religion (Islam), therefore, is that which directly permeates and directs all spheres of human life.<sup>4</sup>

This intimate intertwining in the career of Prophet Muḥammad of what is today recognized as more or less separate social domains of "religion" and "state" is of immense significance for grasping his mission as an organic and meaningful whole, and for avoiding a dichotomous or fragmentary reading of his career. It

<sup>4</sup> Fazlur Rahman, "Islam and Political Action: Politics in the Service of Religion" in Nigel Biggar, Jamie S. Scott, and William Schweiker, eds., *Cities of Gods: Faith, Politics, and Pluralism in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986), 154.

would be a mistake, therefore, to interpret his mission solely in terms of a religio-ethical calling or solely in terms of a socio-political agenda. It may also be noted that this intertwining between the two reflects the dual nature of the task that all social movements must face, for moral and intellectual transformations remain seriously limited or even impossible without simultaneous and comparable socio-political transformations; the reverse, of course, is also true.

German sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920) has written extensively about the phenomenon of "prophecy". In social scientific discourse, the term is often used to suggest "a special form of organizational leadership that arises at the margins of society in times of crisis as a politically revolutionary force".<sup>5</sup> It has been argued that this definition emphasizes the political aspect of the phenomenon at the cost of its religious aspect, whereas Weber himself emphasized the religious and charismatic aspects and saw political involvement as incidental. This means that a prophet's authority is primarily of a religious nature; whether or not that authority actually comes into conflict with political *status quo* cannot be assumed from the beginning. Interpreting

<sup>5</sup> Theodore E. Long, "A Theory of Prophetic Religion and Politics" in Anson Shupe and Jeffrey K. Hadden, eds., *The Politics of Religion and Social Change* (New York: Paragon House, 1988), 4. See also, Max Weber, "The Prophet" in his *The Sociology of Religion* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1993), 46-59; Idem, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (New York: The Free Press, 1947), 358-363.

Weber, a contemporary sociologist notes:

The focal task of the prophet is to proclaim or demonstrate a divine message in the hope of submitting all of human life to a transcendent system of meaning. If the prophet gains authority, it is most often religious, not political. If the message leaves an impact on society, it is most often in its culture, not its political institutions.<sup>6</sup>

Whether this represents a tenable interpretation of Weber's notion of prophecy is open to debate, for he himself had underscored the importance of culture for historical change.<sup>7</sup> A key variable may be the degree and nature of novelty in the prophetic message and its relevance to the historical context. Indeed, a new and different worldview — one that contains a fresh understanding of the nature of reality (ontology), of the human being's nature and position in that reality (anthropology), of how human beings ought to be organized (sociology), and of what is required of them in practice (ethics) — cannot but have political implications. Whether or not these political implications materialize in a given context, i.e., whether or not they actually lead to a situation of conflict and change, will depend on numerous variables, both within the nature of the prophetic charisma in question and in the historical context in

<sup>6</sup> Theodore Long, "A Theory of Prophetic Religion and Politics", 4.

<sup>7</sup> The clearest statement of which is found in Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Los Angeles, CA: Roxbury Publishing Company, 1998), *passim*.

which it appears.

I would take a clue from Karl Marx (1818–1883) to attempt to further elucidate the nature of the prophetic vocation. In his *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx argued: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it".<sup>8</sup> Paraphrasing this well-known Marxian maxim, Maduro — a contemporary sociologist of religion — says that "...there is no true theoretical problem which is not also a practical problem and... consequently a solution will only be true if it becomes practical...."<sup>9</sup> In other words, many philosophical contradictions cannot be fully resolved through intellectual debates, but they call for addressing the concrete social, political, and economic conditions that have given rise to — or are reflected in — such contradictions. Yet, changing the world in a concrete sense is hardly possible without reinterpreting it in fresh ways, and therefore the difference between "interpreting the world" and "changing the world" can be seen as only a matter of emphasis.

In light of this, the involvement of Prophet Muhammad in socio-political activism can be seen not as incidental but as a natural consequence of the internal logic of his religio-ethical vision; in other words, it can be

<sup>8</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed., Robert C. Tucker (New York/London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 145.

<sup>9</sup> Otto Maduro, "Marxist Analysis and the Sociology of Religion: An Introduction" in *Social Compass*, Vol. XXII, No. 2-3 (1975), 310.

seen as the inevitable impact over his social and material milieu of the powerful spiritual forces that were generated within him as a result of his encounter with the Sacred. In this sense, the prophetic vocation cannot limit itself merely to interpreting the world in a fresh way; in order to remain true to itself, it must also attempt to transform its milieu in accordance with that interpretation in order to concretely resolve the contradictions that it encounters therein.

### Reliability of Historical Sources

One of the fundamental questions to be addressed at the outset concerns the reliability of sources. There are two distinct sets of images of Prophet Muḥammad available to scholars — images found in the traditional Islamic sources (primarily the Qur'ān, but also in the *Maghāzī*, *Sīrah*, *Ḥadīth*, and *Ta'rikh* literature) through which the complex and multiple understandings of Prophet Muḥammad are woven in Muslim religious imagination; and the images found in the works of modern academics and historians of Islam, who have often approached the traditional sources with some degree of objective distanciation, but sometimes also with great skepticism. If there is faithful credulity and blind veneration on one extreme of the spectrum, there is distrust or even dismissal of all Islamic sources on the other, with all shades of opinion in between these extremes, making it virtually impossible to construct an account that would

be acceptable to everyone.<sup>10</sup>

While even Muslim scholars since classical times have been critical and suspicious of some aspects of the received oral tradition, which prompted them to develop the science of *ḥadīth* criticism in the first place, Western scholars in the Orientalist tradition have shown much more caution and even skepticism. Orientalists Ignaz Goldziher<sup>11</sup> (1850–1921) and Joseph Schacht<sup>12</sup> (1902–1969) are recognized as the pioneers of the skeptical approach; their influence subsequently sparked a number of counter-arguments from both Muslim and non-Muslim

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<sup>10</sup> It is important to point out that, for methodological reasons, this paper takes a historian's perspective rather than a theologian's. Consequently, it brackets the issue of the veracity and ultimate source of Prophet Muḥammad's revelatory experience, and ignores all references to supernatural events as may be found in Islamic sources. It brings to the fore only those aspects of Prophet Muḥammad's life that allow themselves to be studied through the tools of social sciences. This is as much out of an appreciation for the analytical advantages of social sciences as out of a recognition of their inherent epistemological limitations. This approach is necessary in order to make the life of prophet Muḥammad relevant for those who may not share with Muslims a conviction in the Divine origin of his message and mission, and also to make it an authentic topic of serious study within the secular academia.

<sup>11</sup> Ignaz Goldziher, *Muhammedanische Studien*, 2 vols. (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1889–90), particularly volume 2.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Schacht, *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950). For a summary of his views, cf., Joseph Schacht, "A Revaluation of Islamic Traditions" in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1949), 143–154.

Islamicists.<sup>13</sup> More recently, scholars of the so-called revisionist school have taken this skepticism to its logical extreme; pioneers of this school — John Wansbrough, Patricia Crone, and Michael Cook<sup>14</sup> — have tended towards rejecting the totality of Islamic sources as having very little value in terms of historical fact. Wansbrough views the Islamic narratives about Prophet Muḥammad to be part of Muslim “salvation history” that evolved during the first two centuries, and which, while valuable in itself, has no connection to what really happened; Crone and Cook have tried to provide a historical account of the origin of Islam based solely on non-Muslim sources. Whatever the merits of their critical methodology,<sup>15</sup> the

<sup>13</sup> For an overview of this debate, cf. Herbert Berg, *The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam: Authenticity of Muslim Literature from the Formative Period* (London: Curzon Press, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> Major works of the revisionist school are: John Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1977); Idem, *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Michael Cook, *Muhammad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); Michael Cook, and Patricia Crone, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Patricia Crone, *Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of the Islamic Polity* (New York & London: Cambridge University Press, 1980); and Idem, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987).

<sup>15</sup> For a defence of the revisionist methodology, cf. Andrew Rippin, “Literary Analysis of Qur’ān, Tafsir, and Sira: The Methodologies of John Wansbrough” in Richard C. Martin, ed., *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies* (Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 1985), 151-163. J. Koren and Y. D. Nevo, “Methodological Approaches to

reconstructions of early Islamic history, including a new interpretation of the history of the Qur’ān, as carried out by some of these scholars is based on tentative, highly speculative, and provisional — even fragile — foundations, and has come under serious and sometimes fatal criticisms, not to mention suggestions of Orientalist biases.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, most historians of Islam have argued that the problems in traditional Islamic sources are not insurmountable, and that a fairly good picture of historical fact can be distilled after a thorough source

Islamic Studies” in *Der Islam*, Vol. 68 (1991), 87-107. The use of the label “critical” for the revisionist school is sometimes misleading, for it implies that all other scholars approach Islamic history or tradition uncritically, and therefore naively.

<sup>16</sup> For some critiques of the revisionist school, cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur’ān* (Minneapolis and Chicago: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980); Idem, “Some Recent Books on the Qur’ān by Western Authors” in *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 64, No. 1 (January 1984), 73-95; Idem, “Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies: Review Essay” in Richard C. Martin, ed., *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, 189-202; Neal Robinson, *Discovering the Qur’ān: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1996), chapter 3; Harald Motzki, “The Collection of the Qur’ān: A Reconsideration of Western Views in Light of Recent Methodological Development” in *Der Islam*, Vol. 78. (2001), 1-34. For a critique of Orientalist biases, see Pervez Manzoor, “Method against Truth: Orientalism and Qur’anic Studies” in Andrew Rippin, ed., *Qur’ān: Style and Content* (Aldeshot, UK and Brookfield, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2001), 381-397. The last mentioned was originally published in *Muslim World Book Review* vol. 7, no. 4 (1987), 33-49. See also “A Note on Wansbrough” in Farid Esack, *The Qur’an: A Short Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Oneworld Publications, 2002), 140-142.

criticism. This, for instance, is the position of W. Montgomery Watt, who believes that Schacht's criticism of *hadith* may apply to juridical traditions but is not applicable to historical accounts; he notes that "...there is a solid core of fact" in the "...undisputed or purely historical section of the traditional historical material".<sup>17</sup> While Watt is now viewed as too gullible, there is growing evidence that Islamic sources originated much earlier than what was believed in Western scholarship until recently.<sup>18</sup> Richard Martin's introduction to *Islamic Studies*, while extremely sophisticated in style and contents, pays no attention to the revisionist scholarship.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, Herbert Berg has recently shown that the apparently irresolvable differences between skeptics and

<sup>17</sup> William Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press, 1956), 336-338; Also, idem, *Muhammad at Mecca* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), xiii-xvi.

<sup>18</sup> Harald Motzki, "The Collection of the Qur'an: A Reconsideration of Western Views in Light of Recent Methodological Development", 1-34.

<sup>19</sup> See Richard Martin, *Islamic Studies: A History of Religions Approach*, 2nd edn. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996). For a brief state-of-the-art discussion of current debates and methodologies regarding the scholarly study of the life of Prophet Muhammad, see Harald Motzki, "Introduction" in Harald Motzki, ed., *The Biography of Muhammad: The Issue of the Sources* (Leiden: Brill, 2000). See also, for a review of the main issues involved in constructing a historical biography of the Prophet Muhammad, F. E. Peters, "The Quest of the Historical Muhammad" in *The International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 23 (1991), 291-315.

non-skeptics concerning the reliability of Islamic sources stem from different sets of assumptions on which the two groups of scholars base their research, neither of which can be definitively proven in an objective fashion.<sup>20</sup> Harald Motzki too has noted that the scholarly examination of the Islamic tradition can be done in one of two ways, depending on the scholar's philosophical presuppositions. He himself believes that "it is possible to reconstruct historical reality...." According to Motzki:

From the viewpoint of historical source criticism, our sources for a biography of the Prophet Muhammad must be classified as traditions. They contain information that has been consciously produced in order to inform later generations on what happened. This is a truism for scholars of Islam. This feature of the sources, however, permits different approaches when using them. On the one hand, this kind of sources can serve to write a history of ideas which are reflected in the description of the past; on the other hand, they may be considered as pieces of a broken mirror which reflect what really happened and therefore can be used to reconstruct historical reality. *Both approaches have a validity of their own which can only be assessed on philosophical grounds.*<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Herbert Berg, *The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam: Authenticity of Muslim Literature from the Formative Period*.

<sup>21</sup> Harald Motzki, "The Murder of Ibn Abi'l-Huqayq: On the Origin and Reliability of Some Maghazi-Reports" in his *The Biography of Muhammad: The Issue of the Sources*, 170. Emphasis added.

Consequently, it seems that starting from certain subjective and ultimately "faith-based" assumptions is inevitable in approaching the historicity of the life of Prophet Muḥammad. The present paper, for instance, could not have been written without assuming a conditional reliability of classical Islamic sources, or at least of the general framework provided by them. Even though later embellishments, legend formation, political reshaping of received tradition and other forms of distortions can never be completely ruled out, particularly with reference to details of a given incident, the present paper is based on the subjective, though not uncritical, assumption that it is still possible to extract sociologically significant data from the classical Islamic sources, particularly when they are read in dialogue with the Qur'ān.

### The Inevitability of Story Construction

Some epistemological caution, however, is in order. The question can be raised as to whether it is even possible to know, with even relative certainty, as to "what really happened" in the life and times of Prophet Muḥammad? It has to be acknowledged in any study of this kind that human beings have no access to pure and unmediated historical truth, and that all "facts" are presented as already packaged and arranged according to a given perspective. It is possible to challenge that perspective, but only to impose a new one. If it were possible to remove the integrating glue of human perspectives from what

goes by the name of history, only chaotic and unrelated events would remain, utterly devoid of any human significance.<sup>22</sup>

French philosopher Paul Ricoeur has pointed out that both history and fiction use "emplotment" to aesthetically relate apparently isolated happenings in a narrative whole that appears meaningful from a certain perspective.<sup>23</sup> Paraphrasing Ricoeur, Mark Wallace explains the inevitability of story construction in historical writings:

Insofar as history is a form of writing that seeks coherence in the chaos of real events, and not simply a disconnected recounting of these events, history, like fiction, is governed by a wide variety of different aesthetic strategies for organizing past events into a narrative whole.... Historical events are recounted in many different forms — from relatively objective annals and chronicles to full-fledged narratives and highly embellished stories — all of which, by definition, emplot what is recounted according to a certain viewpoint as to the proper configuration, or "meaning", of the events in question.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> See the introduction to the important study on Islamic origins, Mohammed A. Bamyeh, *The Social Origins of Islam: Mind, Economy, Discourse* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

<sup>23</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action, and Interpretation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 274-96.

<sup>24</sup> Mark Wallace, "Introduction" in Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 11-12.

This implies that the narrative whole of the life of Prophet Muḥammad, whether recounted from the theologian's perspective or the historian's — including the revisionist historian's — is incapable of providing an account of the objective, absolute, and unmediated "truth" of the matter regarding what *really* happened. Irrespective of the merits of the historical methodology employed, there will always be an element of emplotment which will impose its own structure on to the data in order to make them coherent and credible from a certain perspective and for a certain audience. Even those who reject classical Islamic sources are not immune from proposing their own plot; only they strive to bring up a different set of data through which to establish the reliability of their plot and the validity of their perspective.

This does not mean that we surrender ourselves to epistemological despair, but it does mean that the standpoints, biases, and interests of the narrators and interpreters — both historical and contemporary — need to be taken into serious consideration. The recognition of the inevitability of emplotment demands that one should maintain a sense of tentativeness in drawing sociological lessons from historical narratives, keeping one's conclusions open to correction and adjustment in view of new evidence or the experience provided by encounters with concrete reality, while keeping a watchful eye on the distorting effects of one's own subjectivities. With these precautions in mind, the present paper seeks to work

within the classically established outline of the biography of Prophet Muḥammad.<sup>25</sup>

### The Central Importance of the Qur'ān

It is important to recognize the extraordinary importance of the Qur'ān as a guide to the life and career of Prophet Muḥammad. While Western scholars differ even here, there is some degree of agreement that the Qur'ān is not only better preserved than other historical and textual sources but it also belongs to a much earlier period than other sources, most probably going to the time of Prophet Muḥammad himself.<sup>26</sup> However, it is very

<sup>25</sup> One important reason that may be cited in defence of working within the classically established framework of the life of Prophet Muḥammad, particularly with reference to Islamic movements, concerns the *psychological* aspects of that framework. Irrespective of the issue of historical truth, at a phenomenological level it is undeniable that the narratives of the life of Prophet Muḥammad have permeated deep within Muslim cultures. Consequently, important events such as the revelation on Mount Ḥirā', the migration to Medinah, the Battle of Badr, the shattering of the idols, etc., have acquired archetypal and symbolic power. Archetypes manifest themselves not just in mental images but also in patterns of behaviour, usually in a wide array of forms. The life of Prophet Muḥammad has, therefore, a paradigmatic significance for Muslims that goes much beyond the debates about *what really happened*. Because of this, it makes sense to engage creatively with the various dynamics and implications of that paradigm, rather than to reject it because of a perceived lack of unassailable and objective evidence.

<sup>26</sup> John Burton, *The Collection of the Qur'ān* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Neal Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'ān: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text*, chapter 3. It is interesting to

difficult to read the Qur'ān historically without at least some help from classical extra-Qur'ānic sources. In this context, historian and Islamicist Marshal Hodgson notes:

In the case of Muhammad, though we must use a large amount of conjecture, we can base it on reasonably objective scholarly principles. We can rely on the text of the Qur'ān itself as direct evidence — though that text is habitually ambiguous in any concrete reference it makes. To interpret the Qur'ān, we are forced to resort to reports collected several generations later; but even among these, we are not entirely at a loss: we can probably rely on those reports which can be shown not to grind the axe of any particular later party, provided such reports fit reasonably well into a coherent picture that emerges from them all as a body. And most important, we can often rely on the background detail which the reports take for granted as known to all.<sup>27</sup>

Despite these difficulties, it is nevertheless possible to construct a general working model of the life of Prophet Muhammad that relies primarily on the Qur'ān and uses other sources with utmost caution. Consequently, if the Qur'ān is studied in careful dialogue with the most essential and reliable of the extra-Qur'ānic data on

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note that Burton, while rejecting Islamic narratives about the collection of the Qur'ān as spurious, reaches the conclusion that the Qur'ān was actually compiled during the life of the Prophet himself.

<sup>27</sup> Marshal G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 1: 160.

Prophet Muhammad and his milieu, it can be seen that the Qur'ān provides comments, criticisms, and step-by-step instructions that were directly related to the progress of Prophet Muhammad's movement.<sup>28</sup> Such a historical reading of the Qur'ān offers insights into the nature of events whose authenticity may otherwise be in question. In this background, the suggestion by Daniel Madigan that the Qur'ān should be read as a *commentary* on the events and situations that surrounded its revelation should be taken seriously. While sympathetic to the revisionist school, Madigan argues for the value of the Qur'ān as a historical document:

One could see it [the Qur'ān] as a kind of "running commentary" on the situation — social, religious, political and sometimes even domestic — in which Muhammad found himself. This is to regard the seventh century Hijāz as a "text"... which is being "read" and commented upon by Muhammad (or by God). We do not have that "text" before us and we would have to agree with [Andrew] Rippin that it is all but unrecoverable; reconstruction, whether traditional or modern, are at best speculative. However, we do have the "commentary" and it is a legitimate object of study.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Skeptics reject this position, arguing that extra-Qur'ānic narrations are either later exegetical expansions or developed without any relation to the Qur'ān and later projected onto it. Cf. Uri Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder: The Life of Muhammad as Viewed by the Early Muslims, A Textual Analysis* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1995), *passim*.

<sup>29</sup> Daniel Madigan, "Reflections on Some Current Directions in Qur'ānic Studies" in *Muslim World*, Vol. 85, Nos. 3-4 (July-October,

Alford T. Welch had earlier attempted to reconstruct the biography of Prophet Muḥammad and the history of the rise of Islam based solely on the Qur'ān. Introducing his reconstruction, Welch notes that the Qur'ān can be a highly reliable source for historical data:

On the extent of the reliability of the Sira and Hadith accounts as historical sources I am not yet prepared to render a final judgment. I can, however, speak with some confidence about the Koran as our primary historical source for the life of the Prophet and the origins of the Muslim community and Islamic faith and practice. I am confident that the contents, although not the final arrangement, of the Koran date from the time of Muhammad, and that the Koran is utterly reliable as a historical source, if it is properly interpreted.<sup>30</sup>

He further notes that even though the Qur'ān does not record historical data for the purpose of preserving information, it can nevertheless be used to grasp the *self-understanding* of Prophet Muḥammad and his earliest followers. Indeed, starting from the actor's viewpoint is a well-established Weberian approach in sociology; to the extent that the Qur'ān reflects the minds of Prophet

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1995), 352-53.

<sup>30</sup> Alford T. Welch, "Muhammad's Understanding of Himself—The Koranic Data" in Richard G. Hovannisian and Speros Vyronis Jr., eds., *Islam's Understanding of Itself* (Malibu, CA: Undena Publications, 1983), 15.

Muḥammad and the early Muslim community, its narratives, references, allusions, exhortations, and criticisms can be seen as a treasure of sociologically significant data. This holds true whether the interpreter is a confessional Muslim or an unbelieving historian. According to Welch, therefore, the Qur'ān may not record historical details, but it does give a starting point from where to examine other data. Defending his approach, Welch further notes:

The Koran is an unusual historical source. It is a contemporary and authentic record that responds constantly to Muhammad's situation, and yet it contains no historical narrative or description, and it does not have as its purpose the recording of history or biography.... Regardless of what view may be taken as to the authorship of the Koran, that is, whether God or Muhammad is regarded as its author, all would agree that as the Prophet and recipient of the revelation Muhammad must have known what the Koran says and must have agreed with the views it espouses. In other words, even if the traditional Islamic view of revelation is accepted, that is, that God is the author and speaker of the Koran, still it must be admitted that the revelation also reflects the views of the Prophet through whom it was imparted to [people].<sup>31</sup>

Despite the usefulness of the above approach, Welch's qualification that the Qur'ān is a reliable

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-17.

historical source only "if it is properly interpreted" still leaves room for different versions of the rise of Islam based on different hermeneutical frameworks. What exactly is meant by "proper" interpretation? Consequently, the Qur'ān can hardly be read as a commentary on events contemporary to its revelation without paying some attention to extra-Qur'ānic reports of those events. Neal Robinson argues this position as follows:

The earliest extant biographies of the Prophet were compiled at a time when Islam had become the ideology of a vast empire. Their historical value as a source of information about the earliest days of Islam is therefore questionable.... Yet if we leave the Islamic sources tradition to one side, and approach the Qur'ān without any presuppositions, the picture which emerges is extremely sketchy... If we wish to fill in this sketch and sharpen its focus, our only option is to draw on the early biographies. ... despite their relatively late date and their obvious ideological bias, these biographies [are] nonetheless likely to contain accurate information, particularly about Muhammad's raiding campaigns.<sup>32</sup>

In reconstructing the socio-historical aspects of the rise of Islam and particularly the self-understanding of Prophet Muḥammad concerning the nature of his mission, this paper will therefore rely mainly on the Qur'ān, without, however, ignoring or rejecting other Islamic sources.

<sup>32</sup> Neal Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'ān: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text*, 44-45.

### A Sociological Interpretation of the Rise of Islam

The emergence of Islam under Prophet Muḥammad has been interpreted by theologians and historians from numerous perspectives; the present paper too must take a position on this issue in order to contextualize its working assumption that the emergence of Islam can be studied as a social movement.<sup>33</sup> In this regard, Max Weber's key insight into the motivational dynamics of human actions may be fruitfully used to present a plausible view of the rise of Islam. In a famous passage Weber notes:

Not ideas, but material and ideal interests, directly govern [people's] conduct. Yet very frequently the "world images" that have been created by "ideas" have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamics of interest.<sup>34</sup>

Weber, apparently in conversation with the "ghost of Marx", was trying to incorporate the role of ideas in the materialist model of social change, and he did this by introducing the notion of "world images". These images

<sup>33</sup> The perspective presented here uses sociological tools of analysis; this approach in no way negates or invalidates theological perspectives, nor does it claim to reflect the totality of the Islamic phenomenon. More specifically, no suggestion is being made that Islam's origin can be reduced to material, particularly economic, factors.

<sup>34</sup> Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trs. and eds., H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 280.

are produced in the minds of human beings by ideas, and are, in turn, able to influence the way in which material and ideal interests play themselves out in socio-historical reality. In the rise of Islam under Prophet Muḥammad, it can be seen that ideas as a source of "world images" as well as the influence of these "world images" on shaping the configuration and actual operation of material and ideal interests played significant roles. The Qur'ān, when studied in the background of the socio-political environment of its revelation, provides the most interesting clues as to the nature of these ideal and material interests; this is partly so because the Qur'ān itself was the source of the ideas that shaped the "world images" in the minds of those who came to accept it as Divine revelation, reshaping and redirecting their ideal and material interest in specific ways.

As discussed in the previous section, the Qur'ān is not just a theological text but also a document that can be read as a reflection of certain psychological states and historical events. I suggest that *jihād* in its original sense — struggle — is the key Qur'ānic concept that must be carefully unpacked in order to gain an understanding of the socio-historical dynamics of the rise of Islam. As the subsequent discussion will attempt to show, the obligation of *jihād* was presented by the Qur'ān as a *religious* endeavour necessary for salvation in the hereafter, in which capacity it acted as the integrating element of *ideal interests*; at the same time, *jihād* was also presented by the Qur'ān as a *worldly* endeavour necessary

for the achievement of social justice in the here-and-now, in which capacity it acted as the integrating element of *material interests*. Consequently, it was the dual nature of *jihād* that seemed to have contributed to the convergence of the ideal and material interests of certain segments of Arabian society at a common point, and it was this convergence that significantly contributed to the rise of Islam as a social movement.<sup>35</sup>

In the Qur'ān, the word *jihād* mostly appears in the sense of a struggle that ought to be carried out by those who are faithful to God as an expression of their faithfulness. In this sense, *jihād* is often but not always qualified by the phrase *fi sabil Allāh* — in the way of God. The "way of God" or the "straight path" is a Qur'ānic metaphor describing a set of beliefs, attitudes, and practices that are supposed to lead to salvation for the human being, both individually and collectively, both in this world and in the hereafter. While salvation ultimately depends on Divine Grace, a minimum standard of right

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<sup>35</sup> The word *jihād* is a verbal noun of the Arabic verb *jāhada*, which means "he endeavoured" or "he strove". The related verbal noun *juhd* means "to strive for". *Jihād*, on the other hand, means "to struggle against". Specifically, this meaning implies one's involvement in a substantial struggle against some opposition or resistance in order to achieve a given aim; no religious connotations or value judgments are present at the level of this lexical definition. It may be noted that the Qur'ān generally uses the word *qitāl* to denote warfare, but also sometimes treats the latter as a subcategory of *jihād*, yet the two are not synonymous. The post-Qur'ānic usage of the term has not always been in strict accordance with its original sense in the scripture.

belief and righteous action has to be met in order to deserve that Grace. Travelling on the "way of God" or on the "straight path" towards salvation is by definition an arduous undertaking, requiring a struggle or *jihād* to overcome the many oppositions or resistances that one is likely to encounter. While the Qur'ān uses this term for a wide variety of righteous struggles — including an individual's struggle for self-reform, as well as to convey a truth to others that one has accepted for oneself — the most important Qur'ānic usage of this term relates to a collective and organized struggle directed towards the achievement of individual salvation on the one hand and the establishment of social justice on the other hand.

Before dealing with the issue of social justice, it is important to show how the notion of *jihād* might have created the "world image" through which certain ideal and material interests converged and contributed toward the rise of Islam. In order to demonstrate the role of *jihād* as the integrating element of ideal interests, I will show its relationship to human salvation within the Qur'ānic discourse. The Qur'ān makes it abundantly clear that salvation in the hereafter is as much a matter of having faith as fulfilling the obligation of *jihād*. Several Qur'ānic *āyāt* may be cited in this regard:

Do you think you will go to Paradise while God has not yet seen who among you struggle and persevere? (3: 142)

Do you think you will get away before God sees who among you would struggle...? (9: 16)

We shall guide those who struggle in Our cause to the

paths leading to Us... (29: 69)

O believers! May I offer you a bargain which will save you from a painful punishment? Have faith in God and His messenger, and struggle in the way of God, with your wealth and souls. This is better for you if you can understand. (61: 10-11)

They alone are believers who come to have faith in God and His messenger, then do not fall into doubt, and struggle with their wealth and their souls in the way of God. They are the truthful and sincere. (49: 15)

It is clear from these quotations that the Qur'ān view *jihād* as an indispensable part of the requirements for an individual's ultimate salvation; to the extent that salvation was seen by the associates of Prophet Muḥammad as the central element of their ideal interests, *jihād* must have appeared to them as the inevitable prerequisite for securing that interest. Even though *jihād* was a collective endeavour in this sense, its benefits were perceived as individually relevant: "The one who strives, does so for his [her] own sake..." (Qur'ān 29: 6).

On the other hand, the Qur'ānic articulation of material interests seems to revolve around the notion of social justice. I will comment on the relationship between the notions of *jihād* and social justice in the Qur'ān by relating both of them to Prophet Muḥammad's understanding of his mission. The following Qur'ānic passage, for instance, is quite clear in establishing the relationship between *jihād* and the prophetic mission:

Struggle in the way of God as you ought to struggle! He has chosen you [for this service] and laid no hardship on you in the way of religion — the faith of your father Abraham — He named you Muslim earlier as well as in this [Qur'an], in order that the messenger be witness against you and you be witness against humanity; so be firm in worship, pay the charity, and hold on firmly to God; He is your friend. How excellent a friend is He, how excellent a helper! (Qur'an 22: 78)

This passage announces the inception of the Muslim community by declaring *jibād* as its primary obligation and *raison d'être*. The notion that God chooses certain people to fulfil God's purpose is also mentioned elsewhere in the Qur'an (2: 143 & 3: 110). There is a clear emphasis that this new community is being formed in order to collectively struggle "in the way of God".

Several Qur'anic *āyāt* may be cited to show the relationship between social justice and the prophetic mission. I will quote two sets of such *āyāt*. The Qur'an presents the purpose of the advent of Prophet Muḥammad — his mission statement — in the following words:

[God] is the one who has sent His messenger with the guidance and the true way of life, so that he [or He] make it prevail over the totality of life [al-Dīn]... (Qur'an 9: 33; 48: 28; & 61: 9).<sup>36</sup>

<sup>36</sup> The Arabic text uses the word "*al-Dīn*" (singular) which has usually been understood as "all religions" (plural) by virtually all classical

The fact that this mission statement appears thrice in the Qur'an is an indication of its importance for grasping Prophet Muḥammad's self-understanding. Using the exegetical tool of inter-textual reading, the following *āyah* can be used to explicate the significance of the one quoted above, the two having very similar constructions:

We have surely sent our messengers with clear signs, and sent with them the Book and the Balance, so that people may stand by justice... (Qur'an 57: 25).

The first *āyah* describes the mission statement for one particular messenger (Muḥammad) while the second *āyah* provides the general mission statement for all messengers. According to the first *āyah*, God sent Muḥammad with the "guidance" and the "true way of life", while according to the second God sent messengers with the "book" and the "balance", in addition to "clear signs".<sup>37</sup> If the two verses are superimposed, the word "guidance" can be interpreted as "book" (or scripture) and "true way of life"

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commentators. Contemporary revivalist thought, however, identifies "*al-Dīn*" as the totality of human life, particularly the public or socio-political domain. Cf., Sayyid Abū'l-A'lā Mawḍūdī, *Qur'an ke Chār Bunyādī Iṣṭilāḥain* (Lahore: Islamic Publications Ltd, 1998), 122-136; Israr Ahmad, *The Objective and Goal of Muhammad's (SAW) Prophethood* (Lahore: Maktaba Markazi Anjuman Khuddam-ul-Qur'an Lahore, 1996). This shift is partly due to the fact that in pre-modern times the category of "religion" usually did not exist as a sphere that is distinct and apart from other spheres of society, culture, and politics.

<sup>37</sup> It may be noted that in the case of Prophet Muḥammad, the Qur'an argues for a virtual overlap between the "Book" and "clear signs".

can be interpreted as "balance" (a set of just ethical norms), both interpretations being in conformity with general Qur'ānic usage. More importantly, the meaning of the statement that the "true way of life" ought to "...prevail over all aspects of living" can be interpreted through the phrase "...so that people may stand by justice".

In short, these two *āyāt* provide interesting clues as to what Prophet Muḥammad and his earliest followers might have believed they were trying to accomplish through their struggle or *jihād*. It seems that, as far as their own self-understanding was concerned, the triumph of Islam was identical with the establishment of social justice. This position brings out the Qur'ānic basis of the intimate intertwining of the religio-ethical and the socio-political spheres in the life of Prophet Muḥammad, as already noted. It can be further supported through another pair of Qur'ānic *āyāt*, as follows: "O believers! Stand up for justice, as witnesses for God..." (4: 135) and "O believers! Stand up for God, as witnesses for justice..." (5: 8). This highly suggestive parallel construction and the virtual equation of "God" with "justice" provide evidence for the position that, in the minds of Prophet Muḥammad and his earliest followers, struggle in the way of God was very closely associated with struggle for the sake of justice; in fact, it is highly probable that the two were not clearly differentiated at all. A number of insightful students of the Islamic scripture have reached the same conclusion. For instance, Fazlur Rahman contends that,

according to the Qur'ān, the main purpose for the creation of a Muslim community and for the imperative of *jihād* was none other than the establishment of social justice:

There is no doubt that the Qur'ān wanted Muslims to establish a political order on earth for the sake of creating an egalitarian and just moral-social order. Such an order should, by definition, eliminate "corruption on the earth" and "reform the earth". To fulfill this task, to which every people whose vision is neither truncated nor inverted pays at least a lip-service, the Qur'ān created the instrument of *jihād*....<sup>38</sup>

To the extent that the Qur'ānic discourse can be seen as a reflection of the self-understanding of Prophet Muḥammad and his earliest followers, the *āyāt* quoted above provide strong evidence of the role played by the impulse towards social justice in the rise of Islam.

In accounting for the material interests involved in the emergence of Islam, Max Weber has emphasized the role played by the Bedouin warriors' propensity for power and booty. As is well known, Weber could not carry out the systematic study of Islam that he had planned, and his comments on Islam are therefore restricted to a number of scattered references. Weber seems to have believed that although the rise of Islam was

<sup>38</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'ān*, 62. Emphasis in the original.

based on the charisma of Prophet Muḥammad, the latter had to link his charisma to the material interests of a Bedouin "warrior class" that subsequently became the "carrier" of his ethical message, changing it substantially in the process.<sup>39</sup> This interpretation has been duly criticized by Turner<sup>40</sup> as being a one-sided analysis based on flawed assumptions. According to Turner, Weber did not take the Qur'ānic account seriously, which would have shown him that the followers of Prophet Muḥammad contained a group of opportunists or free-riders that consisted of some urban dwellers of Madīnah as well as of Bedouin tribes (Qur'ān 9: 101). These individuals were never considered among Prophet Muḥammad's close and trusted associates, and the Qur'ān repeatedly condemns them in the harshest terms, calling them *munaḥiqūn* or hypocrites.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, the religious sincerity of the Bedouins was always a matter of suspicion; as nomads, the Bedouins were generally more interested in the practical problem of surviving in the desert and were less inclined towards supernatural or purely ethical matters. It has been noted that the Bedouin "...were never particularly zealous in the practice of Islam..."<sup>42</sup> a fact duly reported by the Qur'ān (9: 97-98),

<sup>39</sup> Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, 51-52 and 87-88.

<sup>40</sup> Bryan Turner, *Weber and Islam: A Critical Study* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), 34-35.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>42</sup> Joseph Henninger, "Pre-Islamic Bedouin Religion" in Merlin Sevartz, tr. and ed., *Studies on Islam* (New York Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1981), 8.

although it does exempt some of them from the charge of hypocrisy and disbelief (9: 99). The wave of apostasy among the newly converted Bedouin tribes immediately after the death of Prophet Muḥammad is a case in point. Turner notes that "By lumping together a number of different types of commitment to Islam, Weber seemed to imply either that all Muslims were opportunists or that Muḥammad was prepared to accept a redefinition of the core of religion in militaristic terms".<sup>43</sup>

Moreover, it may be added that the very notion of a Bedouin "warrior class" is more like a nineteenth century European fantasy about blood-thirsty Arabs than an accurate description of historical reality. While pre-Islamic Arab poetry is full of self-praise regarding the valour and military exploits of the poet's tribe, this "evidence" should be treated with caution. The Qur'ān suggests that while raiding and looting was part of the Bedouin economy, these tribes were not really eager to fight in a situation where they could lose their lives for an ideal transcending their mundane existence. The frequent Qur'ānic exhortations in the Madīnan period to take up arms and fight can be understood as indicating not the militant nature of early Muslims, but as actually an index of the *unwillingness* of many, or at least some, among Prophet Muḥammad's followers to risk their lives.

Sulayman Bashir, on the other hand, views the material interests of the commercial aristocracy of

<sup>43</sup> Bryan Turner, *Weber and Islam: A Critical Study*, 36.

Makkah — the elite of the tribe of Quraysh — to be at the heart of the rise of Islam. In other words, he argues that the movement under Prophet Muḥammad was a means through which existing class relations were reproduced and consolidated under a unified Islamic state, which became an instrument for the class interests of the wealthy merchants of Quraysh.<sup>44</sup> A similar view was presented earlier by anthropologist Eric Wolf, who argued that "...Mohammed accomplished for the Meccan traders that which they could not accomplish themselves: the organization of state power".<sup>45</sup> The numerous flaws and deficiencies of this interpretation have been discussed in detail by Talal Asad<sup>46</sup> who concludes that "...the origin and development of 'the Islamic state' cannot be explained in terms of the Engels thesis which Bashir adopts — because 'the Islamic state' was neither a response to the specific needs of a particular class prior to the Prophet, nor an unambiguous instrument of the ruling class after his death".<sup>47</sup>

In contrast to the views of Weber, Bashir, and Wolf, perhaps the most fruitful theory explaining the rise of

<sup>44</sup> Sulaymān Bashīr, *Tawāzun al-Naqā'id: Muḥādarāt fi 'l-Jāhiliyyah wa Ṣadr al-Islām* [The Balance of Contradictions: Lectures on the Pre-Islamic Period and Early Islam] (Jerusalem: 1978).

<sup>45</sup> Eric R. Wolf, "The Social Organization of Mecca and the Origins of Islam" in *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 7. No. 4 (1951), 353.

<sup>46</sup> Talal Asad, "ideology, Class and the Origin of the Islamic State" in *Economy and Society*, vol. 9, no. 4 (November 1980), 450-473.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 466.

Islam is still that of W. Montgomery Watt. Despite its problems and limitations,<sup>48</sup> Watt's perspective does pay attention to the relatively deprived and marginalized socio-economic status of the majority of Prophet Muḥammad's followers in Makkah, as well as the economic aspects of early Qur'ānic revelations. This is important in figuring out the role of material interests in the rise of Islam.<sup>49</sup> Becoming Muslim in Makkah was not an immediately advantageous undertaking, for this often resulted in social rejection, boycott, and persecution; it may therefore be fruitful to think in terms of the converts' long-term interests. If it was in the long-term material interest of the followers of Prophet Muḥammad

<sup>48</sup> Some of these problems have been noted by Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*, *passim*. See also F. E. Peters, "The Commerce of Mecca Before Islam" in Farhad Kazemi and R. D. McChesney, eds., *A Way Prepared: Essays on Islamic Culture in Honor of Richard Bayly Winder* (London and New York: New York University Press, 1988); and *idem*, *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam*.

<sup>49</sup> While this is a sociological study and therefore no explicit value judgments are being made about the role of material interests in the rise of Islam, it must be pointed out that, generally speaking, the Qur'ān shows a positive and approving attitude towards the human pursuit of legitimate material interests, referring to it as "seeking the bounty of God". What is sociologically relevant here is the fact that while ideal interests alone may motivate some individuals, a mass social movement is not likely to proceed unless the material interests of at least some significant groups are linked with the success of the movement. It may also be noted that while political and economic interests of various classes have often been important in the rise of contemporary Islamic movements, these interests often go unnoticed and unacknowledged by the movements themselves.

to be part of his movement — even if it brought short-term disadvantages — then it would be reasonable to argue that they must have come from relatively deprived or marginalized sections of society, and that they had everything to gain and very little to lose by joining the new religion. If so, then it is also reasonable to argue that they must have readily embraced the idea of social justice as the worldly goal of their religious mission.

According to Watt,<sup>50</sup> the Makkan society in early seventh century was in a state of transition from dependence on nomadic pastoralism to urban commercial life, and this had created a crisis of values particularly in terms of gross socio-economic disparity — a situation that disturbed many sensitive individuals, including Muḥammad. The rise of Islam can be interpreted as a response to this socio-economic unrest. According to Watt, the majority of Prophet Muḥammad's early followers belonged either to weak clans, or were younger members of more powerful clans; some of them may be well off economically, but they were relatively peripheral in the social hierarchy because they lacked effective clan protection.<sup>51</sup>

While there were some slaves among the earliest followers of Prophet Muḥammad, it is obvious from Watt's description that Islam cannot be characterized as

<sup>50</sup> William Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca*; Idem, *Islam and the Integration of Society* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1961).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

a class movement. It had attracted not only the marginalized but also some moderately prosperous and relatively powerful individuals of Makkah. This is in accordance with Weber's observation that charismatic prophecy is not restricted to any particular class.<sup>52</sup>

Having said this, however, it needs to be acknowledged that the top elite of Quraysh were the main opponents of this new religion, and remained staunch enemies of Prophet Muḥammad till the very end. Even though Islam was not a class movement, a more or less clear division across class and status lines can nevertheless be observed in the Makkan period. In addition to Watt, this conclusion has been reached more recently by Miklos Muranyi who contends that "...after approximately six years of activity as Prophet, both in public and in secret, Muḥammad had only a weak and socially unimportant following that could not stand up to the opposition in Mecca".<sup>53</sup> In other words, the majority of the early converts to Islam consisted of the relatively deprived and marginalized that can perhaps be characterized as belonging to the lower middle class (although status seems to be more important in this case than class *per se*), while the main opponents of his movement were the chiefs of different clans and/or the powerful merchants who had developed a monopoly in the Makkan trade. This indicates that the primary carriers

<sup>52</sup> Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, 101.

<sup>53</sup> Miklos Muranyi, "The First Muslims in Mecca: A Social Basis for a New Religion"? in Uri Rubin, ed., *The Life of Muhammad*, 104.

of Islam belonged not to the centre but to periphery of the socio-economic and political hierarchy of Makkah.

This fact is of vital importance in demonstrating the role of *jihād* as the integrating element of material interests in the rise of Islam. The material interests of the most wealthy and powerful typically lie in maintaining rather than changing the *status quo*, and the desire or motivation for social change typically comes from the disadvantaged sections. In addition, as Weber has shown, wealthy merchants are not likely to be attracted to an ethical religion of salvation. "Everywhere", Weber notes, "skepticism or indifference to religion are and have been the widely diffused attitudes of large-scale traders and financiers".<sup>54</sup>

This observation can be confirmed from the Qur'ān. In recounting the stories of the past, the purpose of the Qur'ān is never to provide historical records but to show how those stories are relevant to the present. Consequently, it is possible to read the situation of Prophet Muḥammad's time in the Qur'ānic stories of Hebrew and Arab prophets of the past. These stories often indicate the division of a nation across class and status lines, with the weak and oppressed invariably taking the side of the messenger of God against the elite of their nation; this narrative pattern indicates that an identical or very similar situation must have prevailed in the case of Prophet Muḥammad himself (7: 75, 76, 88, 90,

<sup>54</sup> Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, 92.

109, 127; 11: 27, 38; 23: 24; 26: 111). Other related themes of the Qur'ān include the manner in which people are misled by their leaders (14: 21; 33: 67; 34: 31-33; 40: 47-48), the Divine imperative for Prophet Muḥammad to take good care of his followers and not to give too much attention to the Makkan elite (6: 52-54; 15: 88; 18: 28; 26: 215; 80: 1-12), and the subtle but constant tension between *mustaḍ'afūn* (the oppressed) and *mustakbirūn* (the mighty and arrogant). Finally, the fact that the Qur'ānic theodicy seeks to explain political power, social status, and material fortune as transient and ultimately inconsequential (3: 196-197; 18: 32-44 etc.) indicates that the origins of the Qur'ānic ethics lie among the relatively deprived and marginalized. As is well known, Prophet Muḥammad himself belonged to a relatively weak clan, the Banū Hāshim, and his social status was rather precarious since he was orphaned in childhood, despite his subsequent prosperity due to marriage and success in business.

A word may be added here regarding the inter-connection between ideal and material interests in the rise of Islam. The revelations of the Qur'ān from the early Makkan period, particularly the short *sūrah*s found in the last section of the scripture, emphatically critique the undesirable state of socio-economic disparity in the Makkan society. Because of the prominence of this theme in the early revelations, it can be argued that this was one of the key issues in the rise of Islam, and that this must have been one of the questions that Prophet Muḥammad

sought to resolve in his frequent mountain retreats before the beginning of revelation. Through its emphasis on the struggle for social justice, however, the Qur'ān seems to indicate the solution that dawned on Prophet Muḥammad, i.e., socio-economic disparity is not just a theoretical but a practical problem and, as such, it cannot be fully resolved in the realm of ideas. While gross injustice in the world appears initially as a theological issue — how could God allow this to happen? — it can be only partially resolved through religious insights. Sooner or later, the crisis of meaning caused by a sensitive person's encounter with the brutal fact of injustice has to be addressed in the realm of social and material reality. While one's *ideal interest* lies in developing an appropriate theodicy and a hope for salvation in the hereafter, the problem of injustice can only be adequately addressed by pursuing the fulfilment of the *material interest* of the weak, poor, and the marginalized. In the Qur'ānic discourse, religious insights about theodicy and salvation had to be supplemented with the imperative of this-worldly pursuit of social justice through the obligation of *jihād*; in the absence of the latter, the Qur'ānic solution to the problem of meaninglessness in the face of injustice would have remained limited and ineffective.

### Human Agency and Social Change

Qur'ānic ethics is founded on the Divine promise of rewards and punishments in the Hereafter, and therefore on the notion of human freedom. The Qur'ān emphasizes

that human beings do have a measure of freedom that, while limited and conditional, is significant enough to make them morally responsible for their choices and therefore accountable before God. This Qur'ānic emphasis on human freedom is important in the present context, for one of the tasks before Prophet Muḥammad must have been to convince his followers that personal and social transformation was not only desirable but also that it was *possible*. Perhaps the most significant Qur'ānic statement on this issue is the following: "...Verily God does not change the condition of a people unless they change what is in themselves..." (13: 11). Translated into sociological language, this can mean that social change starts from individual transformation, and that human beings have sufficient freedom of choice to take such initiatives.

Here I will briefly describe American sociologist Peter Berger's synthesis of modern sociological theories regarding the creation of culture and society, and will use his synthesis as a springboard to argue for the mechanism through which these can be transformed through conscious and deliberate human efforts — starting from individual transformation. In his seminal work on this subject, *The Sacred Canopy*, Berger starts by arguing that human beings create, and are being created, by society;<sup>55</sup> he describes this dialectical process as follows:

<sup>55</sup> Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), 3.

The fundamental dialectical process of society consists of three moments, or steps. These are externalization, objectivation, and internalization. Only if these three moments are understood together can an empirically adequate view of society be maintained. Externalization is the ongoing outpouring of human being into the world, both in the physical and the mental activity of [human beings]. Objectivation is the attainment by the product of this activity (again both physical and mental) of a reality that confronts its original producers as a facticity external to and other than themselves. Internalization is the reappropriation by [human beings] of this same reality, transforming it once again from structures of the objective world into structures of the subjective consciousness. It is through externalization that society is a human product. It is through objectivation that society becomes a reality sui generis. It is through internalization that [the human being] is a product of society.<sup>56</sup>

Even though society "...has no other being except that which is bestowed upon it by human activity and consciousness",<sup>57</sup> it is neither simple nor easy to change society in any substantial way through conscious human efforts. There are at least two reasons for this difficulty. First, Berger notes that "...the world-building activity of [human beings] is always and inevitably a collective enterprise".<sup>58</sup> In other words, while the society is created

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 7.

by human beings, it is never created by a single person in any deliberate way but always comes into being as a result of a collective process that includes both physical and mental activities of countless generations; most of these activities are likely to have been performed by unsuspecting individuals going about their daily business. Second, Berger points out that "The humanly produced world... consists of objects, both material and non-material, that are capable of resisting the desires of their producers... this world cannot simply be wished away".<sup>59</sup> In other words, once a society comes into being, it becomes relatively free of the control of its human producers; the society as well as its various constituents follow their own logic that may very well go against the desires and expectations of the human beings who have originally given rise to them. What is the role, then, for conscious human agency?

The key lies in two related facts pointed out by Berger. The first is that a society is *collectively* produced; the second is that it is *ongoingly* produced. Since a society is collectively produced, it can only be collectively changed. That is to say, a single individual, no matter how powerful, is not going to be able to single-handedly change society or any of its structures in any significant manner; however, a substantial number of individuals, working together, represent a qualitatively different force that can exploit the same mechanism that originally gave

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 9.

rise to society. Moreover, the fact that a society, once produced, cannot maintain its objective reality on its own but must be continuously supported and maintained by ongoing human physical and mental activity, indicates that human beings do have a measure of control over it. The internalization of social reality back into subjective consciousness as if it were a reality *sui generis* poses a limitation to the possibility of change; yet, as Berger notes, "...total socialization is empirically non-existent and theoretically impossible".<sup>60</sup> Since the process of internalization is always incomplete, human agency does seem to have an area of freedom over and against the coercive facticity of social reality.

Working within this free space, human beings can think and act in ways that are contrary to the ways in which they have previously functioned, leading to gradual changes in the objectivated social reality. Once that objectivated reality begins to change, initially in small ways but increasingly in more significant ways, the nature of what is internalized begins to change as well, with changes in the objectivated reality leading to corresponding changes in subjective consciousness. As the subjective consciousness begins to change in increasingly significant ways, the nature of what is externalized also begins to change, with human beings pouring out physical and mental stuff into the world that is increasingly different from what they have been pouring out

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 15.

previously. Just as the creation of a society takes place through a positive feedback loop, so does the process of its change, the crucial point of intervention being the transformation of individuals. In other words, small but persistent changes in subjective consciousness can gradually lead to increasingly significant changes in externalization, and therefore in the objective facticity of society itself.

There are two significant points in this framework that are worth repeating. First, the process of social change must start from individual human beings; this is not to underestimate the power of objectivated social reality or impersonal social structures, but to point out that the starting point of any social change has to be a change of subjective consciousness in the small area of freedom from socialization that all human beings enjoy. Second, while the initial change of subjective consciousness does not have to be a very substantial one, it must be represented in the physical and mental stuff that is externalized into the world and that increasingly affects the character of the objectivated reality. This means that it is not enough for some people to simply think or feel in different ways, but they must externalize these subjective changes through what they do and what they say, and that they must do this externalization in a collective — as opposed to isolated — manner. The recognition of the human role in constructing and maintaining reality — consisting of a world-view as well a set of coercive social structures — is perhaps the key

empowering element for social movements to grasp and inculcate. While religion mostly serves to maintain social reality, it occasionally empowers human beings to change that reality as well.

### Religion as a Source of Human Empowerment

Traditional Marxist approaches failed to take religion's revolutionary role seriously, and fell into a unilateral view according to which religion is always ideological, always alienating, always "opium of the people". As Maduro notes, "...Marx and Engels wanted to shy away from conceptions defending the absolute autonomy and efficacy (independent of the social structures) of religious institutions".<sup>61</sup> This emphasis resulted in an unjustifiably one-sided view of religion and culture among their early followers. Again, as Maduro has pointed out, while it is true that the ideas of the ruling classes tend to be dominant in any society, there are always other ideas that challenge the dominant ones in various ways.<sup>62</sup> Just as socialization is always incomplete, the superstructure is never a monolithic entity, providing another window of opportunity through which social change may be initiated. Commenting on the revolutionary potential of religion, Maduro notes:

This unilateral emphasis, at least with regard to religion,

<sup>61</sup> Otto Maduro, "Marxist Analysis and the Sociology of Religion: An Introduction", 312.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 313.

can already be ascribed, not only to their successors, but also to Marx and Engels themselves. By taking the proletariat to be the final class, and the one which would consequently reject all religion, our authors blocked the path to understanding that exploited classes frequently find themselves related to a particular religion in such a way that, instead of finding it an obstacle to their emancipation, they can find original, unexpected and fruitful perspectives in it for their revolutionary struggle.<sup>63</sup>

In a similar vein, Berger explains the double role of religion in causing both alienation and de-alienation.<sup>64</sup> Since religion is the supreme defense against anomie, it must normally hide the human origins of social reality. However, under certain conditions, religion ceases to be alienating and acquires an empowering and liberating character by exposing the human hand behind what is commonly taken as the objective facticity of society. Berger notes:

....while religion has an intrinsic (and theoretically very understandable) tendency to legitimate alienation, there is also the possibility that de-alienation may be religiously legitimated in specific historic cases.<sup>65</sup>

In studying the rise of Islam as a social movement,

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 314.

<sup>64</sup> Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, 95.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 96.

the alienating and de-alienating roles played by religion can be clearly discerned. The economic domination of the tribe of Quraysh was dependent on its control of the ancient shrine of Ka'bah, which in turn was related to the Arab belief in a pantheon of numerous gods and goddesses. The pagan Arab religion played an alienating role not only by bestowing reality upon these deities but also by giving legitimacy to the closely related economic arrangements in which the trade caravans of Quraysh enjoyed unrivalled protection throughout Arabia because of their control of the sacred shrine, leading to an unchallenged monopoly in international trade. The monotheistic religious message preached by Prophet Muḥammad had a de-alienating quality in this context, for it sought to demonstrate the human construction of pagan deities as well as of the economic organization that was dependent on the reality of those deities. Attacking polytheism in that milieu was not simply a theological debate but had serious political and economic implications.

The Qur'ān specifically stressed that all deities other than the one God are human inventions — merely "names" without a corresponding ontological status (7: 71; 12: 39-40; 53: 19-23). The Qur'ān also condemned many Arab rituals and religious practices on the grounds that these have not been explicitly commanded by God, and are, therefore, merely human fabrications (5: 103; 6: 138-139, 143-144). The implications of this wholesale desecralization of what was considered most inviolable

stemmed partly from the fact that, by proclaiming such ideas, Prophet Muḥammad was threatening the system of religious legitimation that had so far supported the social, political, and economic *status quo*. At the same time, of course, he was also claiming a transcendent — "charismatic" — authority for himself that sought to go beyond the tribal system of loyalties. Such desecralization and de-alienation of the *status quo* is in the very nature of prophetic charisma, and is also at the heart of social change.

#### The Limitations of Human Agency

Despite the reality of human freedom, even collective human effort eventually meets certain objective limitations. Far from being a cause for despair, this only means that the need for utopian visions must be balanced by the requirement of cool and detached acceptance of the concrete reality within which human actors must struggle. While human imagination knows no limits, social movements must know that they can go only so far at any given point in history.

The limitations of human agency can be seen in the life and struggle of Prophet Muḥammad. In contrast to the interpretation of the rise of Islam that I have adopted in this paper, Hamid Dabashi argues that the emergence of Islam cannot be described in terms of a movement for social justice, since a number of unjust practices remained even after Prophet Muḥammad's death:

...many Islamicists have argued explicitly or implicitly that the "corruption" of Arab society gave rise to a religious movement that offered a more "just" alternative — a particularly untenable argument because of the continuity of such practices as slavery from the pre-to post-Islamic periods. Considering the Muhammadan movement as a social rebellion against an "unjust" system is an anachronistic reading of the phenomenon.<sup>66</sup>

The point that has been missed here is that the continuation of slavery or other unjust practices from pre-Islamic to Islamic times does not necessarily prove that the rise of Islam was not a social rebellion against injustice. It is perhaps more fruitful to argue that while social unrest and discontent did provide a substantial part of the motivation among marginalized elements for joining the religion of Prophet Muhammad, certain objective conditions prevented the full manifestation of all the implications of the Islamic ideal of social justice during Prophet Muhammad's own life-time, and even during subsequent centuries. A number of scholars have noted that even though the changes in belief patterns, life-style, values, and attitudes that were envisioned and advocated by Prophet Muhammad did become concrete realities to an extraordinary extent among a large number of his followers, and that substantial social, political, and

<sup>66</sup> Hamid Dabashi. *Authority in Islam: From the Rise of Muhammad to the Establishment of the Umayyads* (New Brunswick, NJ; Transaction Publishers, 1989), 17.

economic changes took place under his leadership, there were a number of socio-cultural and historical constraints that prevented the full flowering of his vision. Among others, this viewpoint has been presented by Robert Bellah. In his paper "Islamic Tradition and the Problems of Modernization", Bellah comments on the remarkable modernity of early Islam:

There is no question but that under Muhammad, Arabian society made a remarkable leap forward in social complexity and political capacity. When the structure that took shape under the prophet was extended by the early caliphs to provide the organizing principle for a world empire, the result is something that for its time and place is remarkably modern. It is modern in the high degree of commitment, involvement, and participation expected from the rank-and-file members of the community. It is modern in the openness of its leadership positions to ability judged on universalistic grounds and symbolized in the attempt to institutionalize a nonhereditary top leadership.<sup>67</sup>

In the larger flow of human history, the emergence of such ideals in the tribal society of Arabia in the seventh century represented an anomaly, an untimely innovation that required institutional support for its full manifestation but the time was not yet ripe for the

<sup>67</sup> Robert N. Bellah, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditionalist World* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1970), 150-51.

development of that institutional support. Bellah argues that the radical changes brought about by Prophet Muḥammad could not be sustained because human society in his time was simply not ready for his egalitarian and democratic vision:

In a way the failure of the early community, the relapse into pre-Islamic principles of social organization, is an added proof of the modernity of the early experiment. It was too modern to succeed. The necessary social infrastructure did not yet exist to sustain it.<sup>68</sup>

There are several realms in which the validity of this statement can be ascertained. In the political realm, the inability of the early Islamic community to evolve institutions that would guarantee the implementation of meritocracy and democracy has been duly noted. Bellah contends:

When dissatisfactions and demands from important parts of the community built up under the third caliph, the institutional structure was too fragile to contain and meet them. Instead a chain of political disturbances was set off that resulted in the establishment of hereditary kingship, mulk, under the Umayyads. ...the traditional Muslim suspicion of them...is another indication that something precious was lost with the collapse of the early experiment, something that would continue to exercise the

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 151. Emphasis added.

pressure of an ideal through subsequent centuries.<sup>69</sup>

After only a few decades of relatively democratic and egalitarian rule, the Islamic government started to degenerate into clan-supported monarchy, the same imperial pattern of governance that it had initially sought to replace. In this regard, Hamilton Gibb notes that since civil institutions did not evolve in early Islamic history, there was soon a concentration of power in the hands of the only institution — the government.<sup>70</sup> Writing about the “political tragedy” of early Islamic history, Gibb contends:

During the first century or so of its existence, the new ideology had not yet embodied itself in any social institutions other than that of government. Consequently there was no other institution to dispute the monopoly of power enjoyed by the institution of government. The alternative did not lie between the government's monopoly of power and its abdication of some of its power to some other institution. There was no other institution, and in any case power cannot be transferred. The only alternative lay between a monopoly of power — whether that was exercised by the Umayyads or by some other group — and anarchy.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Hamilton A.R. Gibb, *Studies on the Civilization of Islam* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1962), 34–46.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 39. Emphasis added.

In addition to politics, the limitations imposed by socio-cultural and historical constraints on the full flowering of Prophet Muḥammad's vision can also be seen in the social realm, where the eradication of tribal and ethnic pride and privileges turned out to be an incomplete and somewhat of a transient achievement. Similarly, numerous reforms brought about by Prophet Muḥammad to elevate the status of women and slaves — reforms that can be envisioned as being aimed at their full emancipation in step with expected improvements in subjective attitudes and general social conditions — met the same fate. According to Bellah:

The history of the family in Islam shows a similar picture of development and arrest. The main burden of the Qur'anic family legislation, it seems clear today, was to stabilize the nuclear family, limit polygamy and divorce, and to protect the interests of wives and children. The Islamic family as it took shape under the Prophet's guidance was to reflect the reduced significance of extended kinship in the new Muslim community and to express the enhanced dignity of the individual, including women and children, as persons standing in direction relation to God. Once again, as in certain aspects of early Muslim political experience, this is a strikingly modern series of developments.<sup>72</sup>

Once again, the exigencies of historical circumstances

<sup>72</sup> Robert N. Bellah, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditionalist World*, 154.

prevented further development along the direction laid down by the Qur'ān and Prophet Muḥammad. Bellah notes:

The main tendencies of Qur'anic thinking about the family, however, were not only not developed in the early centuries of Islam, but they suffered a serious retrogression.... Unfortunately, in accordance with the way Islamic law developed, it was the post-Qur'anic and not the Qur'anic provisions that became the effective precedents in Sharia family law. While a family ideal of mutual respect and obligations between all members continued to be enjoined as exemplary, in fact practices tending to undermine inner family equality and solidarity and elevate patriarchal arbitrariness were pronounced legitimate.<sup>73</sup>

Writing in a similar vein, Fazlur Rahman makes the following observation about polygamy and slavery:

There is apparently a contradiction [in the Qur'ān 4: 3 & 4: 129] between permission for polygamy up to four; the requirement of justice among co-wives; and the unequivocal declaration that such justice is, in the nature of things, impossible.... The truth seems to be that permission for polygamy was at a legal plane while the sanctions put on it were in the nature of a moral ideal towards which the society was expected to move, since it was not possible to remove polygamy legally at one stroke. We encounter a similar phenomenon with regard

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

to slavery, since it was impossible to legislate it away at one stroke, but strongly recommended and encouraged emancipation of slaves (Qur'ān 90: 13; 8: 89; 58: 3), and, in fact, asked Muslims to allow slaves to purchase their freedom by paying an agreed sum in instalments (Qur'ān 24: 33)....<sup>74</sup>

For both Bellah and Fazlur Rahman, the expected social changes did not materialize in subsequent centuries due to the persistence of socio-historical conditions that favoured the reassertion of pre-Islamic and anti-Qur'ānic norms, and the Islamic reforms that were quite revolutionary in their original context were turned into rigid customs and immutable laws that resisted further development in accordance with what can perhaps be seen as Prophet Muḥammad's vision of gradual reform.

It would therefore be erroneous to argue that if Islam were really a movement for social justice then it would have achieved full democracy and complete liberation of women and slaves within the life-span of Prophet Muḥammad. Such a view is based on an exaggeration of the power of human agency and a relative disregard for objective conditions that invariably restrict the actual achievement of any ethical vision that is sufficiently ahead of its time. When human beings attempt to change the flow of history — even when they are divinely inspired and supernaturally guided — they must do so within history.<sup>75</sup> Since Prophet Muḥammad had to struggle

<sup>74</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'ān*, 47-48.

<sup>75</sup> This seems to be one of the important implications of the repeated

within a particular historical context, it is worth remembering that that context had put specific limitations on the extent of socio-political changes that he could have brought (as well as the methods and strategies that he could have adopted).

### The Balance of Continuity and Change

The Qur'ān contends that when God sends a messenger to a nation, the messenger always speaks the language of his audience: "We never sent a messenger who did not speak the language of his people, that he may explain to them distinctly..." (14: 4). In several other passages, the Qur'ān emphasizes that it has been revealed in Arabic, e.g., "We have sent it down as an Arabic recitation so that you may understand" (12: 2), emphasizing that a scripture in a language other than Arabic, no matter how eloquent, would not have fulfilled the requirements of clear communication to an Arab audience. Taking the word "language" mentioned in the Qur'ān (14: 4) in its broad sense of commonly understood cultural symbols, it can be argued that a social movement has to employ and exploit the symbolic universe of the very society that it wants to change.

Indeed, one of the central problems facing a social movement is how to present a set of fresh solutions to the intellectual, social, political, or economic problems

Qur'ānic insistence that Muḥammad was "only" a human being, despite the fact that he was unlike anyone else.

without alienating its audience culturally. This point is the first of many articulated by American sociologist Rodney Stark in his attempt to describe a Rational Choice model of successful religious movements. Among other important factors, Stark identifies the retention of "...cultural continuity with the conventional faiths of the societies in which they appear or originate"<sup>76</sup> as an important element that determines the success of a new religious movement. This acute observation can be extended to the case of a social movement, which must couch its articulation of the targeted problem and its envisioned solution in a language that is comprehensible and familiar to its audience, by using the configuration of symbols already available and understood in society. Describing the ways in which Islam maintained its cultural continuity, Stark observes:

...Islam presented itself as the final unfolding of a prophetic tradition embracing both Old and New Testaments, thus maintaining continuity with Judeo-Christian culture (indeed, Mohammed expected acceptance from neighboring Christian and Jewish communities).... Of course, Muhammed's own Arab people were pagans. Yet, Islam achieved an extraordinary degree of continuity with this religious culture too. Thus, while the Arabs worshipped many gods, their pantheon included a superior deity called Allah (albeit his functions were

<sup>76</sup> Rodney Stark, "How New Religions Succeed: A Theoretical Model" in David Bromley and Phillip Hammond, eds., *The Future of New Religious Movements* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press; 1987), 13.

obscure). Therefore, in asserting the existence of one, all-powerful god called Allah, Mohammed was not introducing an unknown deity. Moreover, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca to perform rites during a holy month had been a prominent part of Arab religion since long before Muhammad's time. Hence, here too Mohammed built upon the familiar. Finally, Mohammed maintained that he was a Hanif. Although little is known about this group. We do know that they were Arabs and that they claimed spiritual descent from Abraham. Clearly, they enjoyed special spiritual standing among Arabs.... In claiming that the new revelations he preached were a continuation of Hanifi teachings, Mohammed again laid claim to and utilized familiar culture.<sup>77</sup>

While Stark's observations are clearly on the mark, it is important to remember that what Prophet Muhammad offered his audience was a set of fresh and innovative ideas, even though they were expressed in familiar language and expressions. While the Qur'an claimed continuity with the Judeo-Christian tradition, it also took both communities to task for their faults; similarly, while the Qur'an embraced certain pre-Islamic rituals and beliefs, it also sharply criticized the vast majority of them. What we see in the rise of Islam, therefore, is a delicate balance between continuity and innovation.

While the Qur'an argued in the language of the people it was initially addressing, in both the narrow and the broad meanings of the word, it also changed that

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

language in the process by setting new standards of expression and introducing new concepts. The language of the Qur'ān is deeply rooted in the religious and cultural traditions of seventh century Hījāz, yet it developed its distinctive style and concepts out of the raw material that was already in vogue in its cultural milieu, as noted by Endress:

[Muhammad] brought the Arabs the Revealed Message in their own language; he drew for that message on the language of the tribal poets who had already transcended the limits of the different dialects; but it was he who really created a common literary language for the Arabs. The form of his speech is related to the language of the ancient Arabian seer (kāhin), as in the form of rhyming prose (saj'), which joins the verses of a sura or a shorter group of verses through common end-rhymes.... Apart from these ancient and traditional elements we can observe in the Arabic of the Koran an unprecedented richness of religious language and of literary expression in general.<sup>78</sup>

In addition to the points of cultural and religious continuity with Judeo-Christian and Pagan traditions of Arabia, the rise of Islam also represents adaptation and extensive modification of pre-Islamic Arabian ethical values. The famous semantic study of the ethical terms of the Qur'ān by Toshihiko Izutsu, entitled *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'ān*, remains the most useful guide to

<sup>78</sup> Gerhard Endress, *An Introduction to Islam*, tr., Carole Hillenbrand (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 25-26.

this subject. In the chapter on "The Islamization of Old Arab Virtues", Izutsu notes:

It is true that in many important respects Islam broke completely with the old paganism; but is, we should not forget, no less true that, in spite of the bitter attacks on the pagans and their idolatrous customs, the Qur'ān adopted and revived, in a new form suited to the needs of monotheism, many of the outstanding virtues of paganism. There is a certain respect in which we might perhaps speak of the moral aspect of Islam even as a restoration of some of the old Arab ideals and nomadic virtues which had degenerated in the hands of the wealthy merchants of Mecca before the rise of this religion.<sup>79</sup>

The restoration of old ideals, however, was not a simple matter of their revival; instead, the rise of Islam represents a thorough re-working and modification of those ideals according to a fresh ethical vision. Izutsu notes:

...Islam did not revive or restore these nomadic virtues as it found them among the Bedouin. In adopting and assimilating them into its system of moral teachings, Islam purified and freshened them, making their energy flow into certain channels which it had prepared.<sup>80</sup>

The way in which available cultural resources were

<sup>79</sup> Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'ān* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1959/2002), 74.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

selectively revived, adapted, assimilated, modified, and channelled in specific directions by the Qur'anic revelation represents a worthwhile subject of study for social movements.

### Three Areas of Social Change

Drawing upon the life and career of Prophet Muhammad, it is possible to identify at least three more or less distinct, yet interdependent and overlapping, areas in which basic transformative activity must take place for a social movement to proceed optimally. They include: (1) the inner transformation of a group of human beings, who would act as catalysts for the envisioned social change; (2) the intellectual engagement of the movement with its hostile or indifferent environment using available cultural resources; and (3) the execution of organized political struggle to bring about structural changes. Any social movements must be conscious of the internal logic of these three areas of activity, as well as the way in which the logic of each area influences, and is influenced by, that of the other two. While the sociological model of prophecy mentioned before privileges the role of political struggle, this three-fold scheme gives a more or less equal emphasis to religious factors too, as manifested in propagation and individual conversion.

The first area is based on the notion, already discussed, that any change at the collective level must

involve a prior change in at least some individuals. This area, in other words, involves the creation and maintenance of a cognitive minority that is able to experience reality in ways that are consistent with the envisioned goal of the movement, yet are different from the ways in which reality is normally and normatively experienced in that society. The idea of inner transformation is also related to the requirement of psychological development at an individual level, indicating that certain areas of character and personality must be cultivated in order to help this cognitive minority remain perseverant in the face of inevitable opposition and social pressure, as well as provocation, persecution, and general frustrations. Such a transformation, while individual, can only take place within the social context of a formal or informal group or movement.

The second area is related to the observation that all social, political, and economic structures generate their own legitimations that are often couched in sophisticated philosophical or theological language. These legitimizing beliefs or arguments constitute an intellectual impediment for a social movement aiming at changing the practices that such beliefs or arguments serve to justify, support, and validate; consequently, any social movement must involve itself in an intellectual engagement with its milieu. The aim of such an engagement is to reinterpret reality in a fresh way by employing existing cultural resources, and to offer innovative solutions to commonly experienced

unrest or discontent.

The third area has to do with the insight that the common perception of truth or falsehood of ideas, or of rightness and wrongness of practices, is closely related to the political power of those who advocate and embody these ideas and practices. Moreover, the actual transformation of practices often requires changes in institutional structures, which are impossible without some sort of power struggle. Any set of established institutional structures provides various forms of advantages to specific groups or classes of people who, in turn, must defend and preserve those structures with which they also closely identify, thereby necessitating the political component.

### Heinz Kohut and Inner Transformation

In the life and struggle of Prophet Muḥammad, the first area — inner transformation — manifested itself as religious and moral conversion of individuals, a transformation that involved not only a different way of experiencing reality but substantial development of character and personality along a particular trajectory. The Qur'ānic revelations themselves played the most significant role in bringing about this inner transformation. Among modern psycho-analytical

theories, the self-psychology of Heinz Kohut<sup>81</sup> provides

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<sup>81</sup> Heinz Kohut (1913–1981) was an Austrian-American psychoanalyst who corrected some of Freud's theories and advanced his own under the title of self-psychology. In describing the process of the development of self, Kohut argued that the grandiose-exhibitionist self and the idealized parent imago are two unconscious configurations that constitute the core of the narcissistic sector of human psyche. In case of normal psychological development, the child's need to be admired, accepted, and appreciated ("I am perfect") is fulfilled by the significant others in his or her life through what Kohut called "mirroring transference". At the same time, the child's need to idealize, and feel part of, a perfect parental figure ("You are perfect, but I am part of you") is fulfilled when the father and mother allow themselves to be idealized by the child through what Kohut called "idealizing transference". If growth proceeds normally, the archaic unconscious configurations of the grandiose-exhibitionistic self and the idealized parental imago become modified and integrated into the mature personality as healthy ambitions and ideals, respectively. According to Kohut, this happens through one's encounters with "selfobjects". Kohut distinguishes between a "true object" which is psychologically experienced as separate and distinct from the self and a "selfobject" which is psychologically experienced as part of the self; the latter experiences may be provided by other individuals as well as cultural entities. The need for selfobjects is a life-long requirement for the maintenance of a healthy self, although there is a difference between the pathological and unlimited need for selfobjects as found in narcissistic disorders and the healthy and limited need for selfobjects as found in individuals with cohesive selves. Selfobject experiences can be seen as spiritual nourishment; just as one's body never outgrows the need to eat, one's psyche or soul never outgrows the need for selfobject experiences. Kohut's important works are Kohut, Heinz, *The Analysis of the Self: A Systematic Approach to the Psychoanalytic Treatment of Narcissistic Personality Disorders* (Madison, CT: International Universities Press, Inc., 1971); Idem, *The Restoration of the Self*

powerful analytical tools that can be used to shed light on the transformative role of the Qur'ānic revelations at an individual level. In a thought-provoking paper, psychologist Hedayat-Diba argues that the Qur'ān acts as a Kohutian selfobject in Muslim piety, stimulating and guiding the development of a healthy and strong self; her paper, however, does not directly deal with how the Qur'ānic revelations might have served this function for the earliest followers of Prophet Muḥammad in Makkah, particularly in the context of maintaining cognitive dissonance in the face of considerable social pressure to conform.<sup>82</sup>

Since the ritual structure of Islam was not fully developed in Makkah, the primary act of ritual piety among the early converts during the initial years was limited to a night vigil with recitation of the Qur'ān as its central feature (73: 1-8 & 20). The Qur'ānic command to continuously recite these revelations (e.g., 18: 17; 29: 45), particularly when occurring in conjunction with the exhortation for remaining steadfast in the face of

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(Madison, CT: International Universities Press, Inc., 1977); Idem, *How Does Analysis Cure?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Idem, *Self-Psychology and the Humanities: Reflections on a New Psychoanalytic Approach*, ed., Charles B. Strozier (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1985). For a systematic summary of his views, cf., Allen M. Siegel, *Heinz Kohut and the Psychology of the Self* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>82</sup> Zari Hedayat-Diba, "The Selfobject Functions of the Koran" in *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*. Vol. 7, no. 4 (1997), 211-236.

persecution or temptation, link the ritual of recitation to the requirements of the social movement. The role of this recitation in the lives of early Muslims cannot be fully appreciated without due attention to the primarily oral-aural nature of the Qur'ān and its physical and sensual effects,<sup>83</sup> particularly with reference to the poetic milieu of pre-Islamic Arabia. The Qur'ānic revelations, perceived as messages of the Almighty, also served as a defence against despair and frustration. Prophet Muḥammad was personally at risk (18: 6; 26: 3), and, as a charismatic leader, his personal despair would have seriously affected the fortunes of the movement. Consequently, the Qur'ān repeatedly encouraged him with supportive and soothing words, exhorting him not to give up and to remain patient and steadfast despite all the obstacles (11: 114-117; 30: 60; 40: 55-57; 74: 7; 68: 48 etc.). The fact that the Qur'ānic revelations provided step-by-step guidance as well as timely feedback, exhortation, encouragement, and a defence against despair points to its possible role in sustaining the psychological strength of the movement at an individual level by providing what Kohut calls "mirroring" and "idealizing" forms of transference.

### Gramsci and Social Change

Some of the ideas developed by Italian socialist leader and

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<sup>83</sup> Cf. William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 79-115. Michael Sells, *Approaching the Qur'ān: The Early Revelations* (Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press, 1991), *passim*.

author Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) can be employed to illuminate the second and third areas of social transformation, particularly his distinction between "coercion" and "hegemony".<sup>84</sup> At the risk of over-

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<sup>84</sup> As a Marxist theoretician and activist, Gramsci believed that the kind of society in which a socialist revolution is attempted has a direct bearing upon the sort of strategies that will be truly effective. Bolshevik Revolution in Russia took place through political agitation and a violent overthrow of the government because it was an autocratic and stagnant nation. The same methodology cannot be fruitful in the industrialized Western Europe, for the latter has developed extensive and deep-rooted institutions of civil society that normally shape public opinion in favour of the *status quo*. Modern European societies are governed not just through brute force but also, and more importantly, through persuasion and conformity of the masses. In light of this observation, Gramsci developed his famous distinction between the two ways in which a particular *status quo* is maintained, i.e., coercion or domination by force (or threat of force) on the one hand and popular consent or hegemony on the other. In general, Gramsci thought that the former operated through the political society while the latter through civil society, although he recognized that there were numerous points of contact and even some degree of overlap between the two. Recognizing the importance of civil society and the conformism it generates, Gramsci argues that the proletariat must produce its own counter-hegemony before it can seize political power. This counter-hegemony is to be achieved through the development of "organic intellectuals" who would counter the influence of "traditional intellectuals". Gramsci defines intellectuals in terms that indicate not an emphasis on mental activity but on their leadership role in different spheres of society, like politics, administration, science, technology, culture, religion, education, and so on. In a capitalist society, traditional intellectuals produce and propagate ideas that serve to maintain bourgeois hegemony by legitimizing the dominant ideology. In order to launch a counter-

simplification, it may be said that, for Gramsci, the term coercion stands for domination by force while hegemony stands for popular consent; these may be characterized as the two mutually supporting ways in which a modern *status quo* is maintained, and, consequently, the two fronts at which the socialist movement must focus its endeavours. Gramsci argued that coercion operated through political society and hegemony through civil society. The institutions of civil society generate conformism among the masses by convincing them that the existing distribution of power and resources represents the natural order of life. Consequently, the overwhelming majority of masses give their consent either actively (when they enthusiastically embrace the commonly accepted values and worldview) or passively (when they are not fully convinced but see no better alternative). However, there is always a potential threat of discontent and rebellion, and the state must maintain a coercive mechanism to preclude such a threat or to deal with it in case it materializes.<sup>85</sup> For Gramsci, the socialist

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hegemony, the proletariat ought to produce its own intellectuals who remain organically linked to the masses, give voice to their hopes and aspirations, help raise their consciousness by providing them with the necessary conceptual tools to understand their own exploitation, as well as direct and organize them in their struggle. These organic intellectuals then work to wrestle the moral and intellectual leadership of society from the hands of the traditional intellectuals in order to transform the hegemonic structures, as a prerequisite for changing the *status quo* by seizing political power.

<sup>85</sup> For a better appreciation of Gramsci's thought, cf., Antonio

movement must first overcome the hegemony of the *status quo* in the moral, cultural, and intellectual spheres, before entering into the arena of political conflict to challenge the coercive machinery.

The area of intellectual engagement suggested in this paper is closely related to Gramsci's idea of a counter-hegemony, the general aim of both being a transformation of subjective consciousness — transformation at a cultural rather than a political level — as a prerequisite for concrete structural changes. A significant part of Prophet Muḥammad's activities during the Makkan period can be interpreted in light of this discussion. While the details of this interpretation remain open to critique and correction, the general framework does help to clarify the picture in sociological terms. On the one hand, Prophet Muḥammad in Makkah was engaged in the effort to educate, train, and mentor the early converts, an activity in which the Qur'anic revelation played a significant role. From a social movement perspective, this activity may be interpreted as being directed towards the creation of a cognitive minority. At the same time, he was engaged in the effort to challenge, critique, de-legitimize, and de-sacralize the pagan worldview and related social, political,

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Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, trs. and eds., Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971); Joseph Femia, "Hegemony and Consciousness in the Thought of Antonio Gramsci" in *Political Studies*, Vol. 23 (1975), 29-48; Idem, *Gramsci's Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness, and the Revolutionary Process* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981).

and economic arrangements. From a social movement perspective, this can be interpreted as an intellectual engagement, or counter-hegemony against the dominant ideology. The latter manifested itself in wide-ranging debates and arguments on various religious, moral, and social issues, the gist of which finds extensive reflections in the Qur'anic discourse. Through a combination of these two sorts of activities, Prophet Muḥammad successfully raised a group of individuals who could provide an alternate moral and intellectual leadership.

However, it is important to remember that the Makkan *status quo* was maintained not only on the basis of hegemony but also coercion, i.e., the ability of the Quraysh to mobilize various tribes against any threat to its ascendancy. This meant that a political struggle was inevitable. Prophet Muḥammad's effort for the transformation of subjective consciousness went on for about a decade, until it became obvious that no further gains are likely to be achieved and a migration to Madīnah became necessary on account of the rising persecution. It was at this point that the third area, that of political struggle, appeared on the horizon in the clearest and overt form, manifesting itself in his strategy of alliance formation and treaties with various Bedouin tribes, as well as raids and armed encounters against the Quraysh and its allies that culminated in his triumphant return to Makkah.<sup>86</sup> In this context, the Gramscian recognition of

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<sup>86</sup> It is important to point out the fact that the first two areas did not disappear after the rise of the third, but continued to play significant

the role of hegemony and coercion provides yet another way of conceptualizing the intimate relationship between the religio-ethical and socio-political spheres of activity in the career of Prophet Muḥammad.<sup>87</sup>

roles, albeit through somewhat different dynamics.

<sup>87</sup> This interpretation also helps to contextualize the role of warfare in the career of Prophet Muḥammad. It can be seen that warfare was part of the *mode* in which Prophet Muḥammad actualized the political component of his mission, for this was among the most obvious and effective ways of carrying out a political struggle that were available to him within his historical context. For those wishing to learn from the model of Prophet Muḥammad, it is important to keep in mind that, in our day and age, political struggles can be carried out in numerous non-violent ways as well, and that warfare is not the only effective option available today. In fact, as a result of various developments in human social history, the use of violence has actually become a counter-productive and self-defeating option for social movements, and a strong case can be made that it should be avoided on purely strategic grounds, if it is not already being shunned on ethical ones. The use of violence is sometimes avoided by social movements on the basis of religious and ethical convictions. In most nonviolent social movements of the twentieth century, however, nonviolence was used primarily because it was found to be strategically effective, whereas opinions varied regarding the ethics of violence. Cf., Stephen Zunes, Lester Kurtz, and Sarah Beth Asher, *Nonviolent Social Movements: A Geographic Perspective* (Malden, MA and Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1999); Peter Ackermann and Christopher Kruegler, *Strategic Nonviolent Conflict: The Dynamics of People Power in the Twentieth Century* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994); for a discussion of the ethical dimension, cf., Joan V. Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1958/1988); for recent discussions of Islamic perspective, cf. Jonathan E. Brockopp, ed., *The Islamic Ethics of Life: Abortion, War, and Euthanasia* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002).

## Conclusion

This paper has attempted to show the relevance of modern analytical tools in understanding the rise of Islam, as well as in interpreting the life and career of Prophet Muḥammad in terms of a model for contemporary social movements. Clearly, the topic has much more to offer than what has been presented here. It is worth emphasizing, however, that in drawing practical imperatives from the biography of Prophet Muḥammad, Islamic movements need to demonstrate a careful awareness of their respective social contexts as well as exercise self-criticism, epistemological humility, and interpretive flexibility, while avoiding dogmatic closures.

