

Imposture and Rebellion: Consideration of the Personality of Prophet Muhammad by Maʿruf ar-Rusafi

Abdou Filali-Ansary

At first glance, the notions of imposture and rebellion do not seem to go together. They do not form, in our imagination, a natural pairing, in the way that we associate 'crime and punishment' or 'prosperity and adversity'. Imposture contrasts with truthfulness or honesty. Rebellion is the opposite of submissiveness or resignation. Both imposture and rebellion however seem to stand equidistant from a third notion: moderation. There are perhaps situations where one of these will provoke the other: when imposture is upheld by blind force, rebellion becomes inevitable. These two conditions are thus extremes which impose themselves when moderation – the middle way – proves inaccessible. Such observations come to mind when we consider the case of the Iraqi poet Maʿruf ar-Rusafi (1873–1945) and his response to certain prevalent conceptions in Muslim beliefs and practice. His literary expression is incontestably an act of rebellion against some of the ways in which the founding moments of Islam are narrated. These narratives, channelled by the clergy, constitute in his eyes a genuine imposture which becomes apparent the moment one refers back to the original sources out of which they were constructed.

Maʿruf ar-Rusafi is known as a poet who combines great evocative power with a superb mastery of language and strict adherence to classical form. Some of his poems have become part of the essential baggage of every school student as determined by educators throughout the second half of the twentieth century. As a result he appears in manuals, anthologies and compilations of all sorts devoted to contemporary Arabic literature. His presence there is exclusively that of a poet and man of letters.

Recently however, this canonical image has been seriously complicated by the illumination of a work which had up to the present escaped the attention of the wider public: *The Personality of Mohammed or the Elucidation of the Holy Enigma* (كتاب الشخصية المحمدية أو حل اللغز المقدس). This text, composed by Rusafi towards the end of

his life, has finally found a publisher. Though completed in 1933 (it bears a signature dated 5th July 1933 at Fallujah, a placename that recently has been frequently in the news), it was not published until 2002. For more than 70 years, no publisher dared touch it. The one which has just done so is largely unknown in the publishing world (منشورات الجمل, Cologne, Germany).¹ Ma'ruf ar-Rusafi was certainly known to have a rebellious temperament. But no one had any real idea of the extent of his rebellion.

The Rebel's Invocation

Rusafi opens his work with a surprising invocatory formula which could be seen as provocative. Imitating the ritual invocation with which Muslims begin their speeches 'In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful,' he exclaims 'In the name of Truth, absolute and infinite, Praise be to her. May her prayers and her peace be upon us . . .'²

Following on from this invocation, he acknowledges that he had previously sanctified history and had wanted to dedicate his poetic achievements to posterity, precisely so that he might himself enter history. But he declares that he had quickly discovered that history was the place of untruth and the vehicle for blind passion. He quotes extracts from a poem he called 'History gone astray', in which he describes his personal journey in terms of the rejection of one form of faith and the adoption of another. Rejecting the 'falsely' divine, he turns instead towards Truth, which he sets above all, including all that the ancestors venerated and handed on. His god, as we are alerted from the beginning, is Truth. He holds Truth to be the sole sacred imperative, the only essence deserving worship. As a fervent worshipper, he is not certain he will come near to her or be blessed with her favour, but he takes comfort in not searching for anything that is beyond her bounds.

What he terms 'history' is predominantly the set of stories handed down principally by the clergy. He himself is committed to defending a form of history that is grounded in the critical analysis of the base texts rather than in legends generated at a later time. The imposture, in his view, resides in what might be called the 'popular vulgate', the strongly legendary version which has become embedded in the collective consciousness of Muslims. His rebellion aims at replacing this with a form of historical inquiry that is more faithful to the sources and more acceptable to reason.

The work is massive (760 pages) but does not have the feel of a scholarly treatise. Nor does it resemble the writings of the traditional *ulamas*. But neither does it have the form of a modern piece of research. Without being 'structured' according to a given logic, it presents as a critical review of the stories bearing on the life and work of the Prophet, in more or less chronological order but with long digressions, repetitions and declarations inserted at different points in the text. The various incidents associated with the Prophet are reviewed in turn and are subjected to an often summary examination and dismissed with conclusions that brook no argument. The tone is not that of a scholar, whether ancient or modern. Vehemence, annoyance and categorical judgements dominate. The pronouncements do not spare reverence. Not that the Prophet is attacked or denigrated in any way: on the contrary, he is treated with the greatest of respect: 'the greatest of all great men', 'he who led the greatest

revolution in the history of mankind' . . . are typical of the expressions which frequently recur in the text. The poet's admiration for the Prophet is boundless. But it is an admiration which is in no way conventionally religious, in the sense that it does not rest on any of the representations of the Prophet that believers acknowledge. The work's title, *The Personality of Mohammed* (literally translated, *The Book of Mohammed's Personality: elucidation of the holy mystery*) is highly revelatory. The author is seeking to dissipate a mystery by diminishing the aura of holiness that enshrouds the person of the Prophet. His intention is to pierce the veil woven by the pious narratives as they have been incorporated into the religious tradition in order to discover the real person Mohammed, such as he can be reconstituted from the fragments which have been preserved. Rusafi's approach may be described as an attempt to dissipate the atmosphere of the sacred in which the religious character is bathed so as to rediscover the actual historical personage, to the extent that reason is able to detect it through a critical examination of the tales handed down by tradition.

The author assembles the stories in their most blunt form, without trying to attenuate their effect, or to justify anything in the behaviour of the Prophet and his contemporaries. The society within which the Prophet lived turned out to have been marked by the most extreme forms of violence. If, as the saying goes, Islam was born 'in the glare of history', it may be said that this history revealed types of cruelty and extremes of cynicism before which one cannot help but shudder. No character, no participant managed to escape the prevailing climate of violence, including the Companions of the Prophet, such as Abu Bakr, Umar or Ali. In Rusafi's work, these prestigious figures reveal features which are unfamiliar to those who have bathed only in the traditional hagiographies. The Prophet stands apart from his entourage less by his different behaviour than by a vision that rises above all passions, violence and treachery. Yet this vision does not prevent him from being caught up in the course of events. He is himself subject to the most violent outbursts of anger and shows himself liable to types of superstition, to passionate desires and to imaginings which situate him solidly within the milieu within which he lived. Rusafi brings out a certain number of character traits which, if considered separately from the religious meanings that have been attributed to them, show the Prophet to be a very human person very much of his own time. Thus he interprets as childhood fantasies maintained into adulthood the numerous stories in which unknown figures (sometimes men dressed in white, sometimes angels) take hold of the Prophet, open his chest, wash his heart, then take their leave after ascertaining that all impurities have been purged from his body and his soul. Similarly, at various points in the book, the author draws attention to how strong tribal feeling was in the Prophet, despite the universal character of his message. This allegiance to his tribe would explain many acts and deeds of the Prophet and would reflect the dominant outlook prevailing within his life environment. The theological explanations subsequently derived for these deeds come down, in Rusafi's view, to imposture. For Rusafi, by contrast, recognising the strength of his tribal feeling takes nothing away from the power and genius of the Prophet.

It is the same with his attraction for women, which he did not manage to suppress, along with his marital relationships which were tumultuous and 'exposed to public view', as the Prophet's entourage already was prepared to recognise. To want to see

them as other than what they were would amount to pure hypocrisy. The whole picture reveals, according to Rusafi, a man whose personality impacted heavily on the vision, constituting through this linkage an individual endowed with exceptional charisma and strength.

Despite its iconoclastic character, the book puts forward a number of interesting propositions relating to some fundamental questions. It proposes some very bold conceptions of religious history and theology. Among these is a theory of the revelation which breaks sharply with 'orthodox' conceptions and even with narrations accepted outside of the strict circle of believers. It takes extreme positions with regard to the doctrines of the inimitability of the Qur'an (إعجاز القرآن), of the divine origin of the Qur'anic commandments and of the infallibility of the Prophet. Rusafi's sources are all internal to Muslim tradition, which he exploits in the optimum manner, without having recourse to any of the reading interpretations adopted since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He refers exclusively to the great treatises written by the masters of orthodoxy, even demonstrating a degree of servility towards traditions which today appear of dubious reliability.

A Backdrop of Violence

The history that he reconstitutes, through bringing together various stories drawn from the classical works, is a harsh one. It baldly lays out the bare facts and deeds without the devices that allow a religious gloss to be given to them and their violence to be attenuated. Thus the author asserts that the Prophet himself instituted the death penalty for all those who showered him with insults. He had poets who slighted him killed. Thus he himself initiated the tradition of regarding his person as sacred and of punishing with death all those who derided him. In a general sense, plotting, deceit, physical elimination and everything generally linked to Realpolitik were omnipresent. The Prophet's adversaries made use of these measures to defend long-standing privileges, such as those held by the great families of Mecca in view of their position as guardians of the temple. The new religion immediately appeared to them as a major threat. For his part, the Prophet employed the same procedures to bring to fruition his great project, his vision which was of a completely different order.

Indeed, all the acts of the Prophet arose from his vision. He was, says Rusafi, a man in whom primary intelligence and simple basic reason triumphed. He was able to control his 'cultural' rationality, the intelligence that is acquired through immersion within a given milieu. In this way the author introduces, as it were, a theory of understanding which allows him to explicate the prophecy. Most people think according to categories transmitted by the culture in which they are bathed. Their rational thought is exercised through a language whose terms are already charged with meaning. There is no way by which they can reason outside of these meanings. Granted, they can accept or reject certain notions, stand back from this or that vision of things, maintain for example a critical attitude towards some or other aspect of their ancestral heritage or of their own societies' traditions, but only in part. They remain, whether they like it or not, prisoners of the 'moulds' which shape their

intelligence and channel their intellectual activities. Only a few exceptional individuals manage to get beyond these moulds and to think outside of their cultural and linguistic framework. These individuals arrive at ways of conceiving things which allow them to remove the absolute elements from their cultural categories and to step aside from prevailing beliefs and value systems in their environment, whatever the aura of holiness that may surround these or the authority that is lent to them.

The Prophet was without doubt one of those rare individuals. He was able to step back from his society and his time to see the world and history from the point of view of the totality. He thus understood that divinity is the totality of being, that it is, as the Sufis say, the oneness of that which is. The unity of being becomes accessible to those who achieve a state of detachment from their particular situation. Yet this gift is relatively widespread: intuiting the One becomes possible and indeed is attained by a significant number of people across many ages and cultures. Mohammed, who recognised that fact, allied with this intuition a powerful imagination, a tremendous sense of theatre, the ability to adapt to changing contexts and, above all, a majestic vision. His 'visions' enabled him to attain the viewpoint from which God himself beholds the world, as is very clearly shown in a Qur'anic verse. Rusafi makes use of this verse to demonstrate the difference between the Prophet's position and that of a great mystic like al-Hallaj. Contrary to the mystic who sensed the One and the Truth merging with his individuality, the Prophet sensed his individuality merging with the divine:

If you ask: Did Mohammed speak truly when he declared that the Qur'an was revealed by God and that it is the word of God and not his own word?

I would reply: your question is a fair one, but the sincerity of Mohammed is revealed by his attaining to the Oneness of Being, far beyond the understanding of the crowd, and such as is expressed in our affirmation: 'There is no One but God'. We have already mentioned that Mohammed had gifts which allowed him to step outside of his partial existence and to become absorbed into the total absolute infinity of Being, and so to be entirely drawn into this Being, losing his awareness of self. The words that he pronounced in such moments were divine words and his acts were the acts of God. He flung a stone at the infidel during the battle of Badr, saying that it was God who had flung the stone. He placed his hand over the hands of those who pledged allegiance to him at Hudaibiya and declared that it was the hand of God that was covering their hands. He blocked up the holes of his mosque (in Medina) and said that it was not he but God who had blocked them up. In all these moments he spoke truly, as is acknowledged by all those who recognise that there is no divinity other than God.

If you say: all living beings are, in relation to absolute Being, in the same position as Mohammed – how and why therefore should he be distinguished from them by the fact that his words and acts are divine?

I would reply: Mohammed is not a special case, for in fact that distinction is with all those blessed with special gifts and understanding that allow them to step outside of their partial existence and be absorbed into the total, absolute, eternal infinity of Being. Those who have these qualities are no different from Mohammed and have the right to proclaim these same things, on condition that they step out of their finitude and become as one with absolute Being. Otherwise they would fall into the error committed by Al-Hallaj when he thrust his own ego forward, saying: 'I am the Truth', meaning by that the opposite of what Mohammed expressed when he denied the ego representing his partial self, and which in

fact was not Being itself. Mohammed affirmed the opposite of what Al-Hallaj claimed. He said: 'It is not I who throw (the stone) but God who does it; it is not I who speaks but God who speaks, etc.' This is what we intended to say on this question and it is up to you to judge for yourselves what you have from it. (Rusafi, 2002: 414–415).

The sense of this role is apparent in the situations where the Prophet finds himself chastised by God. One might wonder – indeed it has been wondered – why the Prophet, chosen by God to be his messenger, should receive revelations where his own behaviour is censured and others where his passions have been affirmed. Rusafi sees in these verses evidence of a consummate art, a duality of utterance which aims, through the reprimand directed at the Prophet, at reinforcing the otherness of the voice that is heard in the Qur'an. This 'art' may also be seen, says Rusafi, in those situations where the Prophet declares that he 'sees' things happening in a realm beyond reality, in the other world. To a mother who sees her son die on the field of battle he declares that he beholds him already received into paradise. His description is so sharp that the mother is able to depart comforted.

To be sure, the Prophet never effected any material miracle, despite the challenges and injunctions to do so by his enemies. He never claimed to have supernatural power nor to have in hand the key to unlocking the mysteries of Being (الغيب). In Rusafi's view, he did not need to have it. The power of the divine is expressed through the laws of nature and their regular and implacable character. The Qur'an was Mohammed's sole miracle. The effect that it has had, the power of persuasion that it has generated and the great transformations that it has originated over the course of history have been much more powerful than any other 'wonder' which might have contravened the natural course of things.

The Qur'an might well have had a title and not simply be called 'the reading' or 'the recitation'. It could well have been entitled 'Monotheism and Polytheism' or else 'The book of effects through repetition'. Its effect has been such that there has not been observed in it the work of a man, any more than it has been considered as the book of Mohammed. The repetitions and textual loops have been taken by commentators as proofs of inimitability, of absolute superiority in comparison to human utterances. They do not preclude the divine voice being perceived through them by those who have ears to hear and who can see beyond the material forms and imperfections that this voice is carried by. Imperfections which Rusafi sees as being numerous both in the substance and in the form of the Qur'anic verses. He does not hesitate to repeat, in citing verses: 'Mohammed said in his Qur'an' . . .

The Prophet's Project

Mohammed was thus able to see the world 'as one', to consider it from a viewpoint that transcended the confines of a particular culture. He was furthermore driven by an imagination and a will that was exceptional. He conceived for his own people a majestic project that would draw them out of their state of marginality and usher them on to the stage of history through the grand entrance. In the time of the Prophet the Arabs felt outcasts in their own region, considered to be 'barbarians', rejected and

despised by the great civilisations that surrounded them (Byzantine Syria, Sassanid Persia, Ethiopia). Through adhering to a common faith, through adopting a code of conduct and specific forms of action, they could raise themselves above these peoples and even reduce them to subjection. The Prophet had discovered, as he often repeated to those prepared to listen to him, the way that would lead to unchallengeable superiority, compensating in the process for the Arabs' apparently insurmountable state of weakness and curing the divisions and backwardness from which they suffered. The religion that he preached was the means by which a new society could be created, a community of a type never before seen which would unite the diverse peoples of Arabia, lead them beyond the state of perpetual civil war and anarchy in which they lived and help them conquer the neighbouring empires, however powerful these might appear to be. One might well wonder, observing Rusafi hammering his point with statements attributed to the Prophet, whether the latter might well be construed as the visionary proponent of a new political form, by which an empire was not simply a territory or a collection of disparate peoples subdued by military force, but a united body of people mobilised by a project of stupendous reach and made homogeneous by adherence to a single set of beliefs, values and guiding principles. In other words one could wonder whether he was the visionary founder of a form of political integration which went far beyond the kind by which people and societies of that era were associated: an integrated structure for which monotheistic religion and the moral order that was associated with it provided the cement, the foundation of the social and political order. Could Mohammed be considered as the brilliant ancestor of nationalism, even of the ideologically-based state? What is certain, Rusafi tells us, is that his ambition was not comparable to that of a preacher, a moralist or a straightforward founder of empire. His intent was to be the creator of something much greater, of a way of life and of political practice that humanity had never known before.

Another proof of the distance separating his project from all preceding ones can be found in certain of his actions. By way of example let us recall that he never claimed for himself any of the privileges or dignified status that kings or prophets accord themselves. By setting his name alongside that of God in all prayers and invocations, he wished both to elicit the immediate and total obeisance of his contemporaries and to establish for himself a very particular presence in human memory. To affirm the doctrine of monotheism it would have been sufficient to retain simply the first profession of faith (شهادة): 'There is no god but God'. The fact of adding a second component ('Mohammed is God's Messenger') could conceivably be damaging to the monotheistic principle, but nevertheless expresses the specificity of the message.

Likewise, Mohammed did not seek power for his close kin, but simply special esteem (المودة, kindly treatment). He wished to reserve the supreme power for his wider kin-group, his tribe, and preserve the privileges that it enjoyed in his time, and this despite the hostility of which he had been a target at the start of his ministry. Rusafi considers as authentic a hadith of the Prophet specifying that the caliphate (the Prophet's succession at the head of the community) should be confined to the Quraish, the tribe he had come from. Even a ritual as essential for Muslims as the pilgrimage apparently arose from the desire to retain for the Prophet's tribe the privileges and resources that it drew from its role as guardian of the holy places. Likewise,

when, after the destruction of the idols which habited the Mecca temple, the polytheists could no longer access the holy places, the poll-tax (جزية) is likely to have been established to compensate the Quraish for the loss of revenues they had just suffered. The retention of pre-Islamic ritual practices (such as the annual pilgrimage, the حج) and the establishment of the poll-tax had, in Rusafi's view, nothing to do with the reasons and justifications that theologians subsequently found for them. Here the poet seems to be going too far. Could it be simply that the Prophet considered certain pre-Islamic rituals worthy of being retained, as some classical authors affirm?

Rebellion and Transgression

Thus far, Rusafi has assailed with the greatest virulence, but also through a minute sifting of the narratives that have come down to us, the representations of the Prophet and the foundations of Islam that are deeply embedded in the consciousness of Muslims. But he does not stop there.

He insists on the fact that the Qur'an was first handed down 'through its meaning' and not by the letter, at the time of the Prophet and over the first decades subsequent to his death. The early Muslims memorised the sense of the verses but exercised a certain liberty in reproducing their actual words. The systematisation and singularisation of the text appeared to have been a later imposition. The Qur'an itself emphasises, Rusafi insists, that the Revelation descended upon Mohammed's heart and was not dictated to his ears.

He goes even further when he directly challenges other fundamental doctrines, such as that of the inimitability of the Qur'an (إعجاز القرآن) and of the divine origin of the Qur'anic commandments. He devotes considerable space to showing that any original work is perforce inimitable, that no imitation can reach the height of the original, whatever that original might be, and that a work's originality of itself could not be taken, as Muslim theologians have argued, as a proof of its divine origin. But he takes this even further. The quality of all Qur'anic verses is, in his appreciation, not even. Supported by examples, he sets out to show that while some are remarkable, others might well be considered rather poor. As a general rule, while the Prophet was able to impress a number of his contemporaries, the way he argued was rather weak and dubious. The frequent objections he had to confront, as emerges from the Qur'an itself, were not due solely to the haughty disdain of his interlocutors, but as much to the audacity of his 'demands' or claims and to the weakness of his arguments. Those close to him were able to accept what he was telling them through the power of his charisma, but only force was able to silence the recalcitrant. It is true, the author observes, that irrationality has always been the mark of religious beliefs. The supernatural, though absent from the events that marked the Prophet's life and the foundation of Islam, is powerfully reintroduced in the notions carried by religious tradition. Even in the Prophet's time, certain people believed, precisely 'because it was impossible to believe'.

The Qur'an's commandments and the prescriptions that have been drawn from them are also subjected to devastating criticism. Some he considers to be arbitrary, unjustifiable, borrowed word-for-word from other religious traditions or quite

simply to be expressing circumstantial measures. Much discussion in the poem is devoted to the imbalance, which he finds striking, between the punishments prescribed for adultery (الزنا) and slander (القذف). The first, which initially met with lack of understanding, encountered difficulties of application in the Prophet's time. Spouses, both men and women, accused of adultery were subject to death by stoning, a penalty which may have been derived from Jewish traditions. But the conditions laid down for the sentence to be pronounced were practically impossible to realise (they required two witnesses to have observed the act being committed). Rusafi considers the situation created by these prescriptions to be paradoxical. Marriage has never been a protection against temptation, even among the most disciplined of people. Therefore there occurs to him the following question: why create an avenue for transgression and then punish those who go down it? Numerous social evils seem to him to derive from religious interdictions which were as arbitrary as they were severe. The corrections imposed on society through this type of prescription tend rather to lead to greater moral depravity and to engender more serious vices than those that they are supposed to repress. Indeed, such excess and irrationality were to have a definite outcome on the historical level, as later developments proved, even though the legitimacy or the divine grounding of the prescriptions set in train was not necessarily able to be demonstrated.

An Inopportune Book?

Should it be a matter of regret that such a book is not circulating widely within Muslim societies? Or conversely should it be considered a danger to the faith or to public order? For certainly it virulently attacks the essential components of religious doctrines, and, beyond them, some notions that are accepted even outside of religious circles. It totally rejects the orthodox theory of prophecy as passive transmission. It points out that this idea has not always been the position of the ulamas, the religious clerics. By this means Rusafi demonstrates the historic development behind orthodoxy. He puts forward a way of conceiving the Prophet's mission that he considers more faithful to the sources and in greater conformity with the elementary requirements of reason. He proposes a 'disenraptured' or 'demythologised' reading of the Prophet's life and work. From this the latter emerges diminished from the point of view of supernatural 'wonders', but as much more human and admirable as a visionary and leader of men.

It should be noted that the author does not activate any of the theories that have recently emerged in the fields of human and social sciences, even if his conception of the world is clearly informed by the scientific theories that were in circulation at the beginning of the twentieth century, such as the theory of relativity or Darwinism. He is furnished rather with an excellent mastery of the Arabic language, a solid common sense, a good general culture and especially a demand for rigour that nothing can temper. He makes clear mention of his knowledge of Turkish and he quotes Persian poetry. He reveals an openness to the issues of his time, which he followed through well-reputed journals published in the Arab world of the era. It is the combination of intellectual honesty together with immoderate vehemence which is the most striking

feature of the stands that he takes. His attacks against Shi'ites, Persians and 'converted Jews' constitute another, less attractive side of his character. Nonetheless the author reveals, often through allusion, a conception that can be considered different from 'orthodox' visions in the sense of stripping from orthodoxy all its mythical, supernatural and apologetic elements. For Rusafi, the divine is omnipresent. It constitutes the totality of being and is irreducible to parts and particular places etc. His conception aligns with that adopted by various Muslim mystics and philosophers of the classical period – a sort of Spinozist pantheism, but without the world-system developed by the latter. The function of God's messenger is thoroughly reworked. He is not a passive agent, summoned by the Ultimate Authority simply to deliver a message of good news and warning, but rather a human being in tune with the Absolute and able to conceive a stupendous project breaking completely with the thought of his time. This project ambitioned the creation of a new human community characterised by a historic mission: to bring disparate peoples together as one, to destroy local, ethnically related 'empires' and replace them with a vastly more extensive grouping, founded on common beliefs and on moral principles of universal application.

The vision attributed to the Prophet includes a strong sense of the politic and a large dose of realism: man is both body and spirit. The political dimension encompasses moral principles and self-interested sentiments. In the project conceived by the Prophet, beliefs, allegiances and ambitions are combined in such a way as to produce the greatest effect upon history. The Prophet was not seeking to create an empire for himself, but to immortalise his name as the human who was in closest touch with the divine, the one who had conceived for humanity a project which would open for it the way to 'rebirth' as well as horizons unimagined. In this guise, the Prophet is not a man taking dictation from God, but one who can perceive the divine all about him, both in nature and in the depths of his own being, and who is endowed with a finely honed sense of history. From this he was able to conceive a new direction for humanity.

Rusafi to a certain extent seems to be close to Ali Abderraziq (1994). Like the latter, he was imbued with a traditional culture, but at the same time brings with it a powerful insistence on rationality. He clearly shows a genuine openness of mind, but does not betray any direct influence of modern theories, such as have emerged in the West. He shares with Ali Abderraziq the idea that historical criticism can assist in distinguishing the basic principles from their application within history. Rusafi goes nevertheless somewhat further in that he undertakes a veritable desanctification of the person of the Prophet. Even if he presents the latter as a unique hero in the history of humanity, and thus attributes to him a different form of sanctity, he strips him of the religious aura, the character imagery and the role he plays in the popular imagination.

There is no doubting that Rusafi's book represents the most serious assault on orthodoxy that has been launched on it in modern times. He expresses this in the most explicit of terms. Even the exceptionally high status he accords to the Prophet in no way mitigates the seriousness of his attacks. To cast the Prophet as a political and religious genius, as a manifestation of Reason emerging and unfolding within history, as a leader who is prepared to go down the winding roads of the negative in

order to arrive at a supreme affirmation of Being accomplished by no other, claiming a divine inspiration but in fact, through the application of a thoroughly human wisdom, unlocking the door to the divine which exists within nature and history, is clearly to go against everything that Muslim tradition, in all its great diversity, has upheld. The intensity of his argument causes the author to attack prestigious historical figures who appear to him suspect and ill-disposed towards the religion they had adhered to. He virulently attacks the Shi'ites, firstly by taking up on his own account the arguments of Sunni polemicists towards the claims of Ali ibn Abi Talib, the fourth caliph, then by adopting the most elementary of prejudices against their rituals and in general against their religious observances. He totally ignores the scholarly traditions of Shi'ism and thus reveals an astonishing restriction of his intellectual outlook to the domain of Sunni scholarship.

What effect might one expect a book like this to have on present-day Muslims? With Muslims societies traumatised by a sense of being the objects of aggression, some of which is real and some probably more in their imagination, it is difficult to believe that adopting an extreme position, in the way Rusafi does, will be capable of 'rousing their awareness' or 'drawing them out from the sleep of their belief systems'. These societies risk rather being stricken by a profound shock, a sense of damage or grave injury to their conception of the sacred at the most deeply embedded level of their consciousness, even those least attached to the letter of the texts or to the prescriptions of orthodoxy. It risks therefore reinforcing the rejection of rational inquiry into and modern interpretations of the religious heritage. It is perhaps the case that Muslims project a 'mystic' aura around the person of the Prophet (though the historical facts mentioned by Rusafi are not unknown to them, but simply inserted into narratives which give them completely different significations), but the conditions which would allow them to have a calm debate around this are not currently realised (Bilgrami, 2003).

It is these conditions which would enable the following question to be posed: for how much longer will Muslims only have the choice between 'imposters', such as those who simply reiterate the formulaic teachings of late-developed orthodoxy, and 'rebels', who reject everything out of hand. When will it be possible to enter into an open debate on the sensitive questions of the religion, at once by the initiation of research and open investigation and by respecting the symbols of a moral ethos powerfully embedded within the conscience and in the unbending demands of reason? Such a study, however far it might challenge revered viewpoints, should have its rightful place within the awareness of Muslims. It would not indeed be the first in history. Writings of a similar type have been attributed to certain classical authors, whose books have not come down to us. But it is to be feared that such a treatise might further stir passions that are already too violent and drive further into distress a Muslim sense of self that is already too ill-at-ease.

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Chronology of Ma'ruf Rusafi's Life

- 1873 Born in Rusafa, on the eastern bank of the Tigris in Baghdad. Studies in the Arabic language. Admitted to the Ottoman military academy, which he quit after a short time.
- 1908 Travelled to Istanbul to work as an editor on a newspaper through which he could express his ideas. Rejected immediately, he returned to Iraq.
- 1909 Return to Istanbul as a teacher of Arabic. Attended a school for religious preachers.
Elected as a deputy for an Iraqi district in the Ottoman parliament.
- 1921 Joined the Ministry of Education in Iraq as a deputy-director of the translation committee.
- 1923 Published the newspaper (الأمل) in collaboration with Ibrahim Hilmi.
- 1924 Appointed inspector of Arabic language.
- 1927 Appointed professor of Arabic at the teacher's college, a position he did not like.
- 1928 Resignation from the National Ministry of Education.
Regularly elected to the Iraqi parliament. In 1930 as a parliamentarian he opposed the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty.
- 1945 Death.

Notes

1. The work has had many ups and downs. Before its publication, several hand-written or typed copies circulated in Iraq. One copy was lodged in the Harvard University Library in the United States. A book in Persian published in Beirut (probably in 1974) seems to be 'broadly inspired' by it, to the extent of being taken for a loose translation, including emendations in the form of suppressions and additions. That particular book has been translated into English and published under the title of *Twenty-Three Years: A Study of the Prophetic Career of Mohammed*. The translator, F.R.C. Bagley, attributes it to Ali Dashti, an Iranian literary critic and political activist, who allegedly passed it on to him, while asking that he not publish the English translation until after his death (الشرق الأوسط, 22 June 2005).
2. *'In the name of Truth, absolute and infinite,
Praise be to her. May her prayers and her peace be upon us. . . .
I was writing for history, according to a value such that I dedicated to it all that I wrote. But life reveals diverse facts to man and leads him on from one situation to another. Thus it was that life led me to consider history less highly and to deny it all weight, after discovering that it was the cradle of untruth, the place of error and the vehicle of the passions of one and all.'*

باسم الحقيقة المطلقة اللانهائية
الحمد لها والصلاة والسلام منها علينا وبعد، فقد كنت أكتب للتاريخ وكنت أحسب للتاريخ حساباً وأجعل
له منزلة يستحق بها أن أكتب ما أكتب حتى لقد قلت فيما قلته من قبل:
وأكتب للتاريخ ما أنا كاتب ليحمله أحداثه كل فجر ولكن الأيام تنضح المرء بحوادثها فيستحيل من حال إلى
حال وينتقل من طور إلى طور. وكذلك فعلق الأيام بي حتى أصبحت لا أقيم للتاريخ وزناً ولا أحسب له حساباً
...لأنني رأيت بيت الكذب ومناخ الضلال ومتشجع أهواء الناس

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