Honouring the Prophet The Way He Taught Us To

By Shaikh Ahmad Kutty

My initial reaction to the murder of the Charlie Hebdo journalists in Paris was one of shock and horror. Along with multitudes of Islamic scholars from around the world, I condemned the attack as a betrayal of Islam’s teachings.

The use of violence goes against the very essence of the Prophet the killers were purportedly “avenging”.

This in no way diminishes my sadness at the vilification of the Prophet Muhammad that certain media participates in. Their continuous attempts to portray the Prophet in a degraded and derogatory manner are hard for us to stomach. We may feel provoked and, at the same time, powerless to right the situation. But, it is at such times that we should keep in mind the following wise counsel of the Prophet: “The strong is not one who knocks out another in a wrestling match; rather, it is the one who restrains his anger under provocation.”

The above words direct me to channel my feelings in a positive way. They also challenge me to look into how the Prophet would have dealt with such campaigns against his reputation. After all, the Prophet’s success was due to his finesse in winning over those opposed to his cause. Indeed, his enemies mobilized virtually every conceivable weapon in their arsenal to fight him: threats, intimidation, boycott, torture and even murder. They went so far as to lynch some of his followers to death.

Were he alive today, how would he have responded to such provocations? With the most powerful of weapons: the media.

It is a little-known fact that the Prophet actively advocated the use of the media of his time - which wasn’t dominated by the satirical news/cartoons/comics or social media outlets known to us. Instead, it was dominated by the arts of oratory and poetry.

The Prophet’s enemies were adept at using this media to relentlessly vilify him. His uncle Abu Lahab and his wife led the campaigns against him. Abu Lahab followed the Prophet around as he preached his message and tried to shout him down by calling him names. Abu Lahab’s wife, an accomplished poetess, attacked the Prophet using poetry, one of the most powerful mediums of the era. Some of the lines she composed became the talk of the town in Makkah. One line, for instance, read: “Mudhammam we are determined to resist, and his order, we oppose; his religion, we despise!”

Her words deeply affected the believers -- who had unbounded love for the Prophet. The Prophet, however, turned the tables and consoled them by saying: “See how God is protecting me: they are insulting mudhammam; I am Muhammad!”

We do not need to be overly imaginative to see the parallels between our situation and that which the Prophet faced. The Prophet did not react violently towards those who opposed him. Rather,
he met them on their own terms by harnessing the power of the same medium which they used to insult him.

Taking cues from the Prophet’s words, “they are insulting mudhammam; I am Muhammad!”, we ought to recognize the wide gap between the image of the Prophet cherished by the believers and the image depicted in the cartoons of today. The Prophet - the one praised in thousands of verses by some of the greatest artists of the world such as Hassaan, Zuhayr, Busiri, Rumi, Attar, Sa’di, Jami, Sanai, Showqi and countless others spanning centuries - is not the same person that the cartoonists target. The former is the Prophet who never tired of reminding himself and others that he was a humble servant of God; a friend of the poor, the compassionate, who commiserated with a child for the death of his nightingale. He was an orphan who lived poor, died poor, and supplicated to God, “God, let me live as poor, die as poor and raise me up in the company of the poor on the Day of Resurrection!”

He is the one described by Bosworth Smith in these words:

“He was Caesar and Pope in one; But, he was Pope without Pope's pretensions, Caesar without the legions of Caesar: without a standing army, without a bodyguard, without a palace, without a fixed revenue; if ever any man had the right to say that he ruled by the right divine, it was Mohammed, for he had all the power without its instruments and without its supports.”

Contrary to this, the person who is targeted by Islamophobic cartoons, movies and/or novels is someone else. He is a caricature with deep roots in history going as far back as the period of the Crusades. It is not the Muhammad that Muslims know and relate to; rather, psychologically speaking, it is ‘a projection of all that is evil within oneself’, and thus a rendering of the image of ‘the other’ or the ‘enemy to be subdued and defeated’!

We must reverse the way we look at the attempts to smear the Prophet; it is not the Prophet they are insulting but a caricature of their own imagination, depraved as it may be. To take their satire seriously we would be acquiescing that they reached their aim. But how would they have done so? Do their images come close to that of our beloved?

On the contrary, mudhammam is the one they are talking about.

Therefore, Muslims need to exercise creative and nuanced imaginations to formulate a response. Here, again, the Prophet comes to our rescue. The Prophet, who was ever averse to war and violence, considered the media as the most potent weapon to be used in service of his mission.

Here is an interesting story to highlight this point: In the ninth year of Hijrah known as the year of delegations (when the Prophet was at the apogee of his career), a delegation from a powerful tribe appeared in Madinah. Their chief knocked at the doors of the Prophet’s hut shouting: “Muhammad, come out. I want to challenge you to a duel of poetry and oratory!” The Prophet replied, “I was not sent with poetry; nor am I allowed to engage in boastfulness! However, I am willing to have a dialog with you.” The chief called his orator who delivered a powerful speech boasting of their great ancestry and lineage. When he finished he called his poet, who recited a poem extolling the extraordinary feats of his people. The Prophet asked his companions to
respond to the challenge. Accordingly, a Muslim orator came forward and delivered a powerful speech. This was followed by the veteran poet Hassaan b. Thabit, who poured his heart into a beautiful poem describing the beauty of the Prophet’s mission and character. No sooner he had finished that the chief bowed his head and confessed he had no case against the Prophet or his mission!

Hassaan would often take to the field to counter the satirical poems of the opposition with even sharper poems, thus rendering them silent. The Prophet said of the poems of Hassaan, “Your words are many times sharper than arrows and swords.”

In embracing the media in all forms, we can use it to present the Muhammad whom we cherish and love. Along with manifesting the beauty of Islam in our lives, this is the way to honor the Prophet!

Let the words of the Quran be a constant reminder for us in these trying times:

“Good and evil are not equal. Repel the evil with that which is beautiful, and behold, the one with enmity towards you becomes your intimate friend!” (Qur’an: 41:34)