

### Prophet Muhammad and His Western Critics: A Critique of W. Montgomery Watt and Others

*Zafar Ali Qureshi, Idara Ma'arif Islamic, Lahore, 1992, 2 Vols, p. 1103.*

This book by the Pakistani scholar Zafar Ali Qureshi is devoted to an important aspect of the relationship between Islam and the West. The image of the Prophet Muhammad (pbu) produced by western scholars of Islam has determined, in many ways, the parameters of the relationship between the two religions and the respective civilizations to which they have given rise. The main argument of Qureshi's extremely well-researched book is that the western scholarship bred by the centuries-old Christian prejudices against Islam has tried to undermine the religious and intellectual basis of Islam by undermining the central place and authority of the Prophet of Islam. This strategy was in no way accidental, because the Christian conception of religion takes as the basis of the Divine revelation not the revealed book, i.e., the Qur'an or the Bible, but Jesus Christ. Seen through the eyes of Christology, Islam could not be anything other than 'Muhammadanism', and any scholarly treatment of it was bound to be based on the figure of the Prophet of Islam. It was within this framework that a number of historicist and materialist accounts were given to prove that the Prophet Muhammad was not an authentic prophet and that his motives were basically political, tribal or economic.

The number of books produced in this line of spurious scholarship is immense, and Qureshi has carried out an immense survey of western literature on the life and personality of the Prophet. Although the author spans through hundreds of books produced in the West, he focuses on the work of Rev. Montgomery Watt, the celebrated western scholar of Islam. The reason for this concentration is that Watt's two-volume work on the

Prophet of Islam has become one of the most widely read books on the life of the Prophet, both in the West and in the Islamic world. It has also been acclaimed as an objective book based on historical sources, without, thus, necessarily following the footprints of received prejudices and ignorance about Islam and its Prophet. This opinion, however, is called into question by Qureshi, who believes that "Dr. Watt has presented a highly distorted picture of the life and teachings of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him)." In fact, Qureshi convincingly shows that the Prophet of Islam becomes the imaginative prophet of the Orientalist discourse even in the work of Watt. As Qureshi makes it abundantly clear in his critical approach, the so-called historical methodology of Watt is, in fact, based on the premises of historicism which regards everything, including revelation and prophecy, as a mere result of socio-historical and economic conditions. Another point made by the author is that Watt looks at the Prophet of Islam through the eyes of the western scholarship of Jesus Christ, viz., "quest for historical Jesus". The underlying assumption is that what befell the founder of Christianity at the hands of so-called objective historical research is assumed, or expected, to have happened also to the Prophet of Islam.

Throughout the book, Qureshi embarks upon a scathing criticism of Watt's presentation of the life of the Prophet by focusing on his two books *Muhammad at Mecca and Muhammad at Medina*. In this part of the book, Qureshi presents a very detailed critique of Watt's construction of the life and battles of the Prophet. The author, however, does not only quote long passages from Watt's works, but also allocates a considerable space to quotations from the works of other Orientalists and western scholars of Islam. The list of the names from which the author quotes is a very long one. One is dazzled here by the breadth of Qureshi's scholarship, which spans through hundreds of names and books from Thomas Carlyle and William Muir to Alfred Guillaume and D. S. Margoliouth. The long quotations, which attest to Qureshi's *adab* of fair and faithful criticism, however, render his book rather difficult to read. It is not completely out of place to consider reducing these long quotations to a reasonable amount for the sake of readership. By way of criticism, one should also note that Qureshi's immense scholarship and diligent survey of this vast field is somewhat clouded by his language which turns, some places, unnecessarily polemical and apologetic.

Despite these minor points, Qureshi's two-volume work is a pleasant contribution to this much-neglected field. He should be congratulated for

