

# Continuity of Prophethood and Messianic Sainthood

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**Abstract**—Finality of prophethood is one of the central doctrines of Islamic orthodoxy. Nevertheless, there occur plenty of prophetic traditions that foretell the advent of Jesus in the latter days. To reconcile the apparent contradiction, Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240/638) developed a novel classification of prophets. He formulated that, seen from the nature of their apostleship, prophets are divided into two categories: *khāṣṣ* (specific) and *‘āmm* (general). Prophets of the first type consist of those who bring new *sharī‘a* (law) and, by virtue of the arrival of Muḥammad, they no longer appear. On the contrary, prophets of the second type still exist and they turn out to be no other than the Muslim saints. It is so said because each of them possesses a personality that reflects the distinctive moral quality of an earlier prophet, from Adam to Muḥammad. Within this framework, the coming Jesus is perceived as the perfect seal of sainthood who combines in himself the personalities of all prophets. Thereupon, when he descends, he will be a saint-prophet and, at once, an adherent of Islam. This theory of Ibn ‘Arabī was ultimately put into action by the Founder of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, Mirzā Ghulām Aḥmad (d. 1908/1326). Having believed in the death of the Israelite Jesus, he proclaimed that he was the promised messiah whose rank is *khātam al-awliyā’* as well as being a subordinate prophet. Dictated by his revelations, he also declared that he was *jarī Allāh fī ḥulal al-anbiyā’* (champion of Allah in the mantles of the prophets). In him, therefore, the Islamic prophecies about parousia found their embodiment.

**Keywords**—Muḥammad, Jesus, Ibn ‘Arabī, Mirzā Ghulām Aḥmad, seal of prophethood, seal of sainthood

## I. INTRODUCTION

Religious orthodoxy is defined as acceptance of the teachings of a certain faith [1]. It is passed down through generations by pietistic authorities who claim to their leadership on the bases of charisma, learning, or on most occasions license from the already established adepts [2]. It is seen, from the perspective of cognitive structure, to exercise a consecrating effect on the ultimate impotence of human reason – in regard to spiritual matters – by fortifying it with buttresses that are exterior to its functioning [3]. Owing to this character of supportive exteriority, religious orthodoxy possesses the power to determine what piety and evil are for its adherents [4].

In Islam, the bearers of orthodoxy are known as the Sunnī [5]. Deeply rooted among the lay section of the Muslims, they confess theological doctrines that are founded upon the consensus of primarily scholars or legal specialists. These experts, in their efforts to enact formulas of belief,

look back at the original sources of revelation: the Qur’ān and the ḥadīth. They consider this method to be the standard practice of the religion. Anything that stands in contrast to it, thus, needs to be rejected and deemed a heresy [6].

Over the last millennium, Muslim intellectuals have authored a big number of books dealing with the issue of Islamic creedal formality. One of such writings is *al-‘Aqīda al-Ṭaḥāwīyya*, named after the Cairene imam, Abū Ja‘far al-Ṭaḥāwī (d. 933/321). In comparison with the other works of identical bent, it enjoys a special status of being celebrated by all schools within the Sunnī nomenclature although the author himself was a Ḥanafī by madhhab. Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 1370/771), the famous Shāfi‘ī jurist, expressed this in the ensuing way:

“The disciples of the four madhhabs are mutually agreed to acknowledge the creed of Abū Ja‘far al-Ṭaḥāwī which has found reception among the earlier (*salaf*) and later (*khalaf*) generations of scholars alike.” [7]

Speaking of its content, the creed of al-Ṭaḥāwī consists of in total 134 points of formulation. These span a wide variety of subjects, ranging from divine oneness to Islamic unity. Among them are, too, asseverations with respect to the profile and identity of Prophet Muḥammad. Dictums 32-34 of the book make a discussion about them which goes as follows:

“Muḥammad is His chosen servant, elected prophet, and contented messenger.

He is the seal of the prophets, the leader of the righteous, the chief of the messengers, and the beloved of God of all the worlds.

All claims to prophethood after him are just error and digression.” [8]

This quotation indicates that belief in the closure of the door of prophethood is one fundamental pillar of Islamic orthodoxy. Prophet Muḥammad, being *khātam al-nabiyyīn*, is recognized as the last in the line of messengers who come to teach humanity God’s religion. In so professing, Muslim theologians make reference to both the Qur’ān and the ḥadīth. The main Qur’ānic text on which they build their interpretative construction is Sūra al-Aḥzāb verse 40 that means:

“Muḥammad is not the father of any one of you men. He is God’s Messenger and the seal of the prophets. God knows everything.” [9]

As for the ḥadīth, they narrate that the prophet is reported to have said:

“The Israelite used to be guided by prophets. Whenever a prophet passed away, another prophet would succeed him. However, there will be no prophet subsequent to me. There will be instead caliphs whose number is going to increase.” [10]

Such are the two basic references constituting the backdrop of the belief in the seal of prophethood. Commenting on them, Ibn ‘Aṭīyya al-Andalusī (d. 1147/541), the renowned Mālikī exegete, gave his evaluative remark:

“These utterances, conforming to the gathering of scholars, be they of earlier or later period, are meant to be of full generalization and emblematic of the consideration that there will be no prophet coming after him.” [11]

Someone who believes in the appearance of prophets following the demise of Muḥammad, therefore, must be designated a heretic. In this connection, Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373/774), the esteemed Damascene commentator with Shāfi‘ī affiliation, harshly stated:

“Allah the Almighty has informed in His book and so done His prophet in the successive (*mutawātira*) tradition which originates from him that there will be no prophet coming after him. This is so for the people to comprehend that everyone who claims to this station subsequent to him is but an impostor and liar as well as a deceiver (*dajjāl*) being simultaneously misguided and spreading misguidance.” [12]

The duo of Ibn ‘Aṭīyya and Ibn Kathīr are clearly affirming here the credo set forth by al-Ṭaḥāwī. Nevertheless, it is this same al-Ṭaḥāwī who articulated in his aforementioned authorship the doctrine of the advent of Jesus near the end of times. In the point 129 of it, he asserted:

“We believe in the signs of the latter days, the likes of the appearance of the antichrist and the heavenly descent of Jesus. We believe as well in the rise of the sun from the west and the unveiling of the beast of the earth from its lockup.” [13]

Just as the first credenda, the second one also stems from unanimous collection of Prophet Muḥammad’s successive tradition. Ibn ‘Aṭīyya, for this reason, wrote in a daring and straightforward tone:

“The Islamic nation (*umma*) has agreed upon a consensus, as it is mentioned in the successive ḥadīth, that Jesus is still alive in the heaven and that he will descend at the end of times.” [14]

Likewise, ingeminating the attitude taken by his influential exegetical predecessor, Ibn Kathīr recounted in his talk about the topic:

“The ḥadīth has proved to be successive from the Messenger of Allah that he prophesized the descent of Jesus son of Mary prior to the day of judgement in the capacity of a just leader and a fair arbiter.” [15]

This indeed creates confusion. For, the entire Muslim community professes the faith that Jesus is a prophet of God. If he appears for the second time at the last of the ages, will it be tantamount to breaking the Muḥammadan seal of

prophethood? Many groups have attempted to provide a most proper and adequate reply to this question. And, as a matter of fact, some sects like the Mu‘tazila and the Jahmiyya have gone so far as to reject the parousia. Because of that, along with other related factors, their names are put down on the list of the heretical denominations [16].

## II. IBN ‘ARABĪ’S CONCEPTION OF PROPHETHOOD AND SEAL OF SAINTHOOD

To solve the problem under discussion, Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240/638), the great Muslim mystic, invented a new prophetology. He divided apostleship into two categories. The first of them is specific (*khāṣṣ*), while the second is general (*‘āmm*). This partition is dependent on the nature of their mission in receiving the divine message and propagating it in the midst of humanity.

Concerning the specific prophethood, Ibn ‘Arabī opined that it is limited to legislative messengers who bear a new law (*sharī‘a*) for their followers. Explicating this matter, he first orated that prophethood is a spiritual office bestowed by God – as the Possessor of exalted attributes and Lord of the throne – upon His servant who maintains good conducts and favorable acts. These beautiful morals of his have to be recognized by the people’s hearts and so be undeniable. Reason is his guidance in this, whilst it is also purposeful and has a curing impact on social pathology. Hence, when God looks at him with the intention to appoint him His vicegerent and representative, it is at this very moment that such a personality is granted the absolute divine message (*al-inbā’ al-ilāhī al-muṭlaq*). He breathes His spirit into his bosom and he is now entitled to warning (*al-indhār*) mankind of the path of God. This task of giving people divine alarm is an inseparable feature of the specific prophethood that causes it to differ from the general one [17].

Afterward, regarding the general prophethood, Ibn ‘Arabī proceeded to say that it is not time-restricted. Rather, it will continue to exist forever [18]. While law-bearing type of prophethood has been terminated in the very figure of Muḥammad, sticking to the ḥadīth that no divine messenger will come after him, the existence of the non-legislative of it finds its manifestation in the institution of sainthood (*al-walāya*). Saints function as heirs to prophets in terms of their knowledge about divine verities. On account of their mastery over prophetic wisdom, they have the competence to exert independent reasoning (*ijtihād*) about legal aspects of the religion [19]. In this sense, namely through the properties of sainthood, Ibn ‘Arabī made it clear that prophethood will always be in operation until the day of judgement. For, it serves as God’s nutrition without which spiritual life becomes utterly impossible [20].

Counted in the enumeration of the family (*āl*) of Muḥammad, saints are the holders of the general prophethood. Their standing is exactly that of the foregone apostles with no law bore and title labeled being the difference. This runs in accordance with a popular ḥadīth therein Muḥammad is narrated to have voiced that the divines amid his people will be like unto the Israelite messengers [21]. Each of the Islamic saints reflects the peculiar attribute of an earlier prophet. Some may resonate the brightness of Abraham, whereas others may echo Moses’ and Jesus’. The loftiest station of sainthood is occupied by the primest of them who is called *khātam al-*

*awliyā'* just as the prophet – being the primest of all his apostolic peers – is summoned *khātam al-nabiyyīn*. Two groupings are there with a view to this terminology. The first is seal of the Muḥammadan sainthood. Such falls to a saint of Arab ancestry who has a strong resemblance to the prophet's personal quality. He inherits the perfection of his obeyed prophet's spiritual grandeur and he numbers no more than one throughout the history. Ibn 'Arabī identified himself as the embodiment of this genus of *khātam al-awliyā'* upon getting informed by God in the Islamic year of 595. Thereafter, considering the second of the two genera of sainthood bestness, it is termed as the universal and absolute seal and applied to no other than the coming Jesus [22].

That Jesus is believed to be the universal and absolute seal of sainthood means that, despite being in essence a saint within the Muḥammadan dispensation who abides by his law, upon him will, too, be bestowed the rank of clear prophethood. In other words, direct revelation will come to him from God, teaching him the correct interpretation of the Islamic legislation. His *ijtihād* will be considered to be final and best. He will outclass all the other saints within the Islamic community, including the elevated personage of Abū Bakr, and even outshine the rest of the saints who have appeared and will make appearance in the world, since the time of Adam until the last of the times. After him, no saint will be there to emerge, except those who become his pupils. On the day of judgement, therefore, he will encounter two sorts of resurrection. The first is of prophetic nature, that is, he will be awakened among the group of God's messengers under the banner of apostleship as, just like them, a man followed (*matbū'*). And, in relation to the second character of his resurrection, he will be reanimated amid the council of Muslim saints as a follower (*tābi'*) of Muḥammad. In sum, he will combine in his individuality the attributes of both prophethood and sainthood and this will perform as a source of true pride and splendor for the prophet himself [23].

The way Ibn 'Arabī addressed the question of discord between the Muḥammadan seal of prophethood and the advent of Jesus is obviously unique. By pointing to the fact that, although Jesus will be a prophet – to wit, the one owning distinctive moral qualities and is blessed with revelations from God with the task of bringing people closer to His presence – at the moment of his second coming, he will concurrently be a saint who embraces the Muslim law and derives his eminence from the radiance of the prophet, it is able to obliterate the trouble faced by Islamic orthodoxy without being deviant from the path of its pupils. In fact, as proposed by Michel Chodkiewicz, Ibn 'Arabī is a completely orthodox scholar who is often misinterpreted by his critics. Similar assertion is also posed by William Chittick whose careful study depicts Ibn 'Arabī as a mainstream Sunnī thinker of the highest integrity with a message, to his co-religionists, that imparts a new and deeper understanding of the Qur'ān and the ḥadīth without departing from the letter of Muslim revelation [24]. To make it plain and simple, he is an imam in divine reality (*ḥaqīqa*) to which the Ṣūfis aspire, while his adversaries are also imams, howbeit, of the basic stage of *sharī'a* [25].

### III. MIRZĀ GHULĀM AḤMAD AS THE SEAL OF SAINTHOOD

More than 600 years after the demise of Ibn 'Arabī, his notion about seal of sainthood was finally materialized by Mirzā Ghulām Aḥmad. Born on 13 February 1835 to a family of Persian descent in Qadian, British India, Aḥmad was a charismatic figure with incredible literary skills in mainly Urdu, Arabic, and Persian. He founded the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community on 23 March 1889. Later on, through the period of 1890-1891, he announced that Prophet Jesus, who was sent to the children of Israel, had actually died and the one who was foretold to come was none but he [26]. Until the last breath of his life, he was fond of explaining his claim to the office of messiahship in most of his books amounting to greater than 90 [27]. He heralded to have been vouchsafed all these things by God.

Mirzā Ghulām Aḥmad began his religious career by authoring his first ever book published, *Barāhīn-i-Aḥmadiyya*. The first volume of it was issued in 1880, the second in 1881, the third in 1882, and the fourth in 1884. At this stage, he was still a believer in the commonly accepted creed that Jesus was alive in the heaven and would physically descend to the earth. Yet, it was also at this time that he declared, as dictated by his revelations, to be the covert manifestation of the second coming of Jesus. To him, his disposition and that of the Messiah greatly resembled each other, "As if they are two pieces of the same jewel or two fruits of the same tree." This implies that, "The spiritual supremacy of the religion of Islam which depends upon irrefutable proofs and manifestly valid arguments," would be brought about by him. He was chosen because the age in which he lived provided facilities for religious propagation in an excellent manner thanks to, "The opening up of the paths of travel and communication between one nation and the other, and between one country and the other." Then, when Jesus himself would be bodily present, the Islamic victory would take another form which is linked with secular and governmental affairs. Accordingly, "The religion of Islam would spread over the entire expanse of the world at his hands." [28]

In 1890-1891, nevertheless, through the publication of the trilogy of *Fatḥ-i-Islām*, *Tawḍīḥ-i-Marām*, and *Izāla-i-Awhām*, Mirzā Ghulām Aḥmad disclosed that the Israelite Jesus had passed away. He would never return to this world for the second time. In lieu of his position, he came at the head of the fourteenth century after Muḥammad to rejuvenate the Islamic religion and rekindle the spirit of righteousness just as Jesus was, "A restorer of faith who appeared 1,400 years after Moses at a time when the Jews had become very weak in faith, when they had come to suffer from evils of various kinds, all symptoms of this one malady." He was, thenceforth, a type of Jesus (*mathīl al-masīḥ*) in consonance with the prophet being a type of Moses (*mathīl al-kalīm*). He was, too, the caliph of Allah at the night of decree. In this role, he was given the title of *muḥaddath* or a prophetic prototype in the likeness of 'Umar b. Khaṭṭāb [29]. It is true that the prophethood of a *muḥaddath* is not complete, but he is, in part, undoubtedly a prophet. For, Aḥmad continued, "He has the honour of talking to God and the secrets of the unseen are unraveled to him. Like His apostles, the revelations he hears are free from satanic interference. He is taught the deeper meaning and essence of the law. He is ordained exactly like prophets and,

like them, is under obligation to openly pronounce and declare his ministry. Anyone who rejects him incurs a kind of divine chastisement.” As such, he was invested with the holy spirit (*rūh al-quds*) emanating from the union of his love and that of Allah [30]. At this stage, thus, he no longer had the belief in the overt advent of Jesus which he previously held on to. He instead presented 30 verses from the Qur’ān and several excerpts from the ḥadīth which tell that, in imitation of the other messengers, he was already dead [31].

Entering the year of 1900, through his book, *Khuṭba Ilhāmīyya*, Mirzā Ghulām Aḥmad further released that he was the seal of saints just as his master, Prophet Muḥammad, was the seal of the prophets. No saint, thereby, would come after him apart from those who belonged to his followers and maintain a spiritual relationship with him. He was commissioned with the fullness of glory, blessing, and grandiosity, setting his foot on the highest of the minarets [32]. One year later, he reiterated and reaffirmed his stance on the nature of his prophethood. Citing a number of his revelations, he responded to a devotee of his denying, being confronted with an objection, that he had not claimed to be an apostle. He said that it was impossible for him to reject the divine messages – having been abundantly and lucidly descending to him – which denominated him a prophet and a messenger. Thus, he was indeed His envoy, but he was so only by way of reflection (*ẓill*) and shadow (*burūz*) after traversing the *sīrat-i-ṣiddīqī* or losing himself in path of the prophet. In this fashion, “His being a prophet is not a matter for jealousy. For, he does not derive this status from himself, but from the the holy prophet’s fountain. And, it was also not for his own glory, but for the glory and majesty of the holy prophet. For this reason, he is named in the heaven Muḥammad and Aḥmad.” At the current stage, he redefined the term *muḥaddath* in its relation to prophethood. He stressed that, notwithstanding one being a *muḥaddath* signifies that he is enabled to see the secrets of the unseen, it does not guarantee that the quantity and quality of such disclosure is as big as the epiphany of prophethood. In fact, he alluded, “I would counter that no lexicon attributes to being *muḥaddath* the unveiling of the invisible, while prophethood means so.” He was, in short, wholly a prophet and a messenger in the sense that he obtained spiritual grace from Muḥammad whom he followed and, having received his name solely because of his perfect love for him, he gained the knowledge of the unseen from God. To him, this vividly does not break the sacredness of the seal of prophethood [33].

This was his last standpoint until he departed from the world in 1908. A year beforehand, he summarized his discussion about the meaning of the Muḥammadan seal of prophethood and the temper of his being a prophet by saying:

“Verily, our prophet is the seal of the prophets. No prophet will come after him with the exception of him who has been illumined by his illumination and his appearance is, thus, just a reflection of his appearance. On account of this, revelation is one that we deserve and it becomes our possession succeeding our adherence to him. It is indeed the quiddity of our penchant that we find in this obeyed prophet. We are given it freely without having to purchase. The perfect believer is he who is gifted with this favor by way of bestowal. It is feared for someone who is not gifted with

anything from it that he will meet an awful ending (*sū’ al-khātima*).” [34]

Once again, he verbalized:

“By Allah! I am verily the promised messiah whose coming has been prophesized at the end of times and on the days of the spread of misguidance. Truly, Jesus had passed away and the faith of trinity is false. You have really lied to Allah in asserting that I have claimed to the office of prophethood, whereas prophethood had been terminated after our prophet. There is no holy book for us after the Qur’ān which is the best of the previous scriptures. And, there is now law for us after the Muḥammadan law. The catch is, I have been named a prophet through the tongue of the best of mankind. And, that is only a matter of reflection emerging from the blessings of adherence. I see no goodness in myself. I find everything that I have found purely from this holy personage. Allah does not intend from my prophethood, except to stand for the preponderance of divine converse (*al-mukālama*) and discourse (*al-mukhāṭaba*). May the curse of Allah be on him who yearns for anything beyond it, or assumes that he is somebody, or gets his neck out of the servitude of the prophet! Our messenger is certainly the seal of the prophets. In him had been terminated the dispensation of the prophets. Therefore, it is not something that one deserves to claim to prophethood after our chosen messenger in an independent manner (*‘alā al-ṭarīqa al-mustaqilla*). There is nothing left after him, apart from the preponderance of divine converse. This is, too, on the condition of adherence to the best of mankind and not without it. By Allah! I do not earn this station except from the lights of adherence to the brilliancies of the prophet. I am named a prophet as well in a metaphorical sense (*‘alā ṭarīq al-majāz*), not in its actuality (*‘alā ṭarīq al-ḥaqīqa*). Thereupon, Allah’s jealousy is neither provoked here nor is that of His messenger. For, I am nurtured under the wing of the prophet and this foot of mine is under that of his.” [35]

Revelations played a prominent role in the prophetic life of Mirzā Ghulām Aḥmad. One of the most principal of them was that which styled him *jarī Allāh fī ḥulal al-anbiyā’* or ‘the champion of Allah in the mantles of the prophets’. This was received by him at the very beginning of his apostolic mission. Natheless, it is of huge importance to note that, through the stages described above, his understanding of it underwent a gradual evolution. Firstly, he comprehended it as pointing to the fact that his status of admonition and guidance and of being a recipient of divine revelation was basically a mantle of the prophets conferred upon him as a loan. It was so in order for him to lead defective individuals to perfection, referring to the ḥadīth wherein Prophet Muḥammad likened the divines of his people to the Israelite prophets. Here, Aḥmad was yet to advertise to be endowed with greatness over that of Jesus. He just avowed that he was entrusted with a messianic function [36]. Subsequently, as his contemplative cognizance of his becoming a *muḥaddath* grew at the second stage, he began to announce that he was better than Jesus, albeit only in some particularities (*faḍīla juz’iyya*). It was the fruit of the Muḥammadan discipleship that enabled him to concentrate in his selfdom, by way of reflection, the excellences found in different prophets as originals [37]. Thereon, at the third stage, he openly manifested that he was thousand times superior than Jesus just as Muḥammad, his master, was the same manifold more dignified than Moses [38]. All the more so, he now put

forward the exclamation that he was the personification and realization of all prophets. For, all the names of them had been bestowed on him. Consequently, he was Adam, Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, Jesus, and Muḥammad in the form of reflection [39]. This changes of interpretation, he remarked, resulted from his being only human who followed God's revelatory command [40].

As the promised messiah, namely, *al-masīh al-maw'ūd*, and the seal of the saints, Mirzā Ghulām Aḥmad occupied the position of a just arbiter (*ḥakam 'adal*) amid the Islamic community. He was dispatched at a time when friction and disagreement in matters of faith were rampant so that he might judge between them by picking up the correct opinion and abandoning the erroneous one. His judgment was determined as final and binding. To so exercise, he acquired its preliminary knowledge from the immediate teaching of God, not from the ordinary transfer of scholarship. Divine guidance always accompanied him just as it was in Muḥammad's case [41]. In addition, God designed behind the sending of Aḥmad as the promised messiah and the seal of the saints to prove in front of the world the Muḥammadan exaltedness. That is, due to the Christians having exaggerated the praise of Jesus, Allah desired to demonstrate that, through promoting a servant of his to the two sublime ranks, how lofty and mighty the status of Prophet Muḥammad was [42].

#### IV. CONCLUSION

From these extracts, it can be distinctly observed that Mirzā Ghulām Aḥmad made Ibn 'Arabī's theory come true. In point of fact, the latter served as one of the former's apostolic inspiration. Like Ibn 'Arabī, Aḥmad maintained that God still provides prophetic guidance to humanity and continues to do so after the death of Muḥammad. Both of them also believed that divine messengers are not all equal. A major division can be made between the bearers of a new divine law, such as Moses and Muḥammad, and the others who perfect or reflect that law to address the problem of the times, as Jesus did for Moses. Aḥmad's claim was to be a subordinate and subservient prophet, reflected in the glory of the Muḥammadan seal of prophethood while perfecting his message to reform the decay of the Muslims at the current age [43]. On these grounds, Aḥmad was often perceived as generating controversies among Sunnī clerics and conservative Muslims who saw in it a challenge to the traditional prophetology [44]. In reality, that aspiration of his was not at variance with the classical Ṣūfī concept of sainthood [45].

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