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THE CONCEPT OF PROPHETHOOD IN ISLAM AND HINDUISM



BY
E-DA'WAH COMMITTEE

**The Concept of Prophethood
in Islam and Hinduism**

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Introduction

In this short publication we are going to compare the concept of Avatar or incarnation of God on earth according to the Hindu philosophy with the concept of prophethood or messengership in the Islamic belief system. We will also explain why Muslims do not believe in incarnation as interpreted by Hindu scholars and philosophers.

What is Prophethood?



Prophethood or messengership in Islam is a special relationship between the seen and unseen worlds, the earth and the sky, the human being and the divine world, between the Creator and the creation. The concept of messengership in Islam is originally based on selection and choice of Allah. A prophet in Islam is a mediator between common people and Allah who receives a divine message and conveys it to people.

According to Islam, prophets and messengers are human beings in many natural features but at the same time they were characterized by many distinct features and special qualities that may not exist in many people; rather, those good qualities could not be found together in any person.

A poet demonstrated this point in a brief and unique style, he said: "Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is a human, but not like others. Rather, he is a ruby among stones."

The Definition of Messenger and Prophet



The word *an-Nabi* (the Prophet) and *ar-Rasul* are used interchangeably in the Islamic theology. However, the word “*Nabi*” has three possible Arabic root words: it is derived from ‘*Naba*’ i.e., to prophesy, or give information or news about something that is beyond the five senses, because a prophet gives news or information about an unseen thing or world.¹ Or the word ‘*Nabi*’ has been derived from ‘*Nabwah*’ that means to be high; therefore ‘*Nabi*’ means a man who has a high position in the court of Allah.² Or the word is derived from *an-Nabi* that is the right path.³

¹ Ibn Faris, *Mu`jam Maqayis Al-Lughah*, edited by Harun `Abdus-Salam Harun, Dar Al-Jeel, Beirut. Vol. 5, p. 385

² Ar-Raghib Al-Asfahani, *Al-Mufradat*, Dar Al-Qalam, Damascus, 1412 A.H. p. 482.

³ Ibn Manzur, *Lisan Al-`Arab*, Dar Sadir, Beirut, 1414 A.H., vol.1, p. 163.

On the other hand, the word *ar-Rasul* is derived from "*Risalah*" that means "to send". Thus, the word "*ar-Rasul*" denotes the person who is sent to some place or to someone. However, the word in the Islamic theology refers to a man who was sent from by with divine scripture to people.

A Muslim theologian says that *ar-Rasul* is a man who was selected by Allah (Glory be to Him), blessed with a divine scripture to convey His message, and supported by his Lord with some unique miracles to verify his truthfulness.⁴

⁴ Sa`d Ad-Din At-Taftazani, *Sharh Al-`Aqa'id An-Nasafiyyah*, Al-Matba`ah Al-`Alawi, Lucknow, without date, p.14.

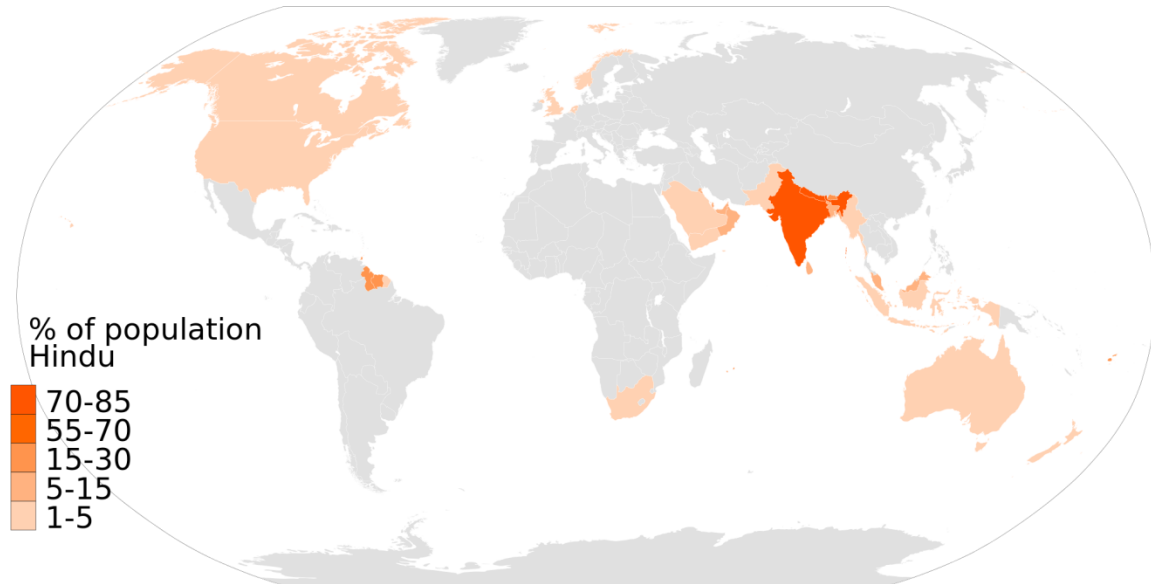
Are Prophets and Messengers Human Beings in Islam?



The prophets and messengers according to the Islamic faith were human beings; however, they were distinguished men characterized by the purest and highest mental and spiritual qualities that made them able and ready to receive revelation from Allah (Glory be to Him). A messenger, according to the Islamic belief system, eats food, buys, sells, gets married and has children. A messenger also undergoes many natural experiences of disease, pain, strength, weaknesses, life and death, but he is surely free of everything that is hated or ugly.⁵

⁵ As-Sayid Sabiq, *Al-`Aqa'id Al-Islamiyyah*, Al-Fath Lil-I`lam Al-`Arabi, 10th ed., 2000, p. 154.

Were Messengers Sent to the Hindu Nation?



According to the Islamic belief system, every nation in the world was blessed and honored with a prophet or messenger in every age until Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was sent as the final of all prophets and messengers. His message is intended for all peoples and all nations around the world, irrespective of their color, race, nationality and sex and it will continue until the Day of Judgment. There is no new prophet after the Last and Final Prophet, Muhammad (peace be upon him). No nation in the world was deprived of some kind of divine message as stated by the Glorious Qur'an.

Allah (Glory be to Him) says:

By Allah, We did certainly send [messengers] to nations before you.(An-Nahl 16:63)

And there was no nation but that there had passed within it a warner.(Fatir 35:24)

And for every people is a guide. (Ar-Ra`d 13:7)

These verses clearly indicate that the Indian people were honored with divine revelation through some prophets and messengers, but we cannot identify their names or scriptures accurately. However, we are sure that their messages and scriptures were changed and altered over time. Therefore, the original message could not be distinguished from the duplicate and wrong message due to the large distortions in the course of time. It can be said that some Hindu religious thoughts may be a remnant of those antique messages. The idea of charity, fasting and worship in general refers to the advent of some prophets or messengers in the Indian subcontinent.

Why do Hindus have to believe in Islam?



After the advent of Prophet Muhammad, the Last and Final Messenger of Allah, there is no salvation for any person in the world but through belief in his message. All people in the world, be they Hindu, Jewish, Christian, Magian or atheist, have to know and believe in his message, since the Islamic divine sources have combined all good qualities of the previous religions, brought the message of Allah in a correct and accurate style that is more suitable for the human nature and needs and contained general principles and rules for everything that happens today or will happen in the future until the Day of Resurrection.

If you want to know, for example, the Islamic ruling on trading in the human organs, which is a recent issue, you can find in the Glorious Qur'an and the blessed Hadith some general principles that can explain the accurate ruling on this issue.

In fact, the message of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the summary and nectar of all previous messages.⁶ For example, some Hindus claim that monotheism had been the doctrine of the ancient Hindu religion and the worship of idols or adoring the manifestations of the nature were strictly forbidden. So, if you believe in the Islamic monotheism, you will be a true and honest believer in monotheism by all standards because the doctrine of monotheism is the peculiarity of Islam in every time and place.

⁶ Muhammad Abu-Zahrah, *Al-'Aqidah Al-Islamiyyah*, Majmu` Al-Buhuth Al-Islamiyyah, 1969, p. 87.

Why does humanity need a messenger?



The purpose of the messengers and prophets is to invite people to the worship of Allah in a right method and to establish the divine religion. Allah (Glory be to Him) says:

And verily, We have sent among every nation a Messenger (proclaiming): "Worship Allah (Alone), and avoid all deities." (I.e. do not worship any deity besides Allah). (An-Nahl 16:36)

The establishment of religion and the worship of Allah include: faith in Allah, His angels, His Books, His Messengers and the Last Day. Also, this includes good deeds and ethics that cleanse and purify the human souls and instill good inclinations in the human souls in order to gain physical and

moral perfection in this life and to make it ready for eternal bliss in the Hereafter.

This is all about the concept of prophethood in Islam briefly; now we will present the idea of incarnation in the Hindu religion.

The Concept of Incarnation from an Islamic Perspective



We think that Hinduism has totally a different perception of the human relationship with the Lord. The Hindu philosophy is based on the incarnation of God in a human form. According to Hinduism, God has incarnated into human and animal forms in order to execute some noble tasks, and when god has incarnated into a human form or assumed an animal nature, He became under the general principle of natural law; He eats, drinks and can have sexual intercourse and undergoes all human experiences of sickness, hunger and death.

On the contrary, Islam regards the incarnation of God into a human form or in any other form as an impossible issue. Still, Islam recognizes the concept of prophethood and messengership that are based on receiving the divine revelation or message and conveying it to people.

The Glorious Qur'an mentions that Prophet Moses (peace be upon him) asked his Lord to show him His self but Allah (Glory be to Him) said: "You cannot see Me."

The Glorious Qur'an mentions the story and says:

And when Musa (Moses) came at the time and place appointed by Us, and his Lord spoke to him, he said: "O my Lord! Show me (Yourself), that I may look upon You." Allah said: "You cannot see Me, but look upon the mountain if it stands still in its place then you shall see Me." So when his Lord appeared to the mountain, He made it collapse to dust, and Musa (Moses) fell down unconscious. Then when he recovered his senses he said: "Glory be to You, I turn to You in repentance and I am the first of the believers." (Al-A`araf 7:143)

This demonstrates the impossibility of His appearance to people, because His Entity is completely different from this

world and its nature. Nevertheless, what is the attitude of the Hindu philosophy towards the concept of incarnation?

Islam recognizes the appearance of angels in a human form in more than one context. Islam verifies the appearance of demons (Satan) in many bodily forms. If we analyze the Hindu concept of incarnation according to the Islamic perspective, we can conclude that Hinduism may have mistaken the appearance of angels and demons in a physical form for the appearance of God in a physical form.

Perhaps, the angels appeared to perform some tasks on the earth by the order of Allah (Glory be to Him), but some Hindu monks thought that God Himself appeared to them or perhaps the demon (Satan) appeared in some physical form to mislead people but the Hindu Rishis thought them god.

In addition, some Hindus believe in three gods: Brahma, Vishnu and Maha Dev. However, some of them have interpreted that the three gods are in fact the equities and powers of the same one God. He is called Brahma because He creates and, He is called Vishnu because He protects the creation, and He is called Mahadev because He is the destroyer of the world.⁷

⁷ Mirza Muhammad Hasan Qateel, *Haft Tamasha*, Munshi Naval Kishor, 1875, p.11.

However, the Hindu philosophy does not answer, if the same entity is called Brahma, Vishnu and Mahadev, how every one of them can have a wife and children. The power or quality of something or some person is an inseparable part of its entity that has no independent physical existence.

Muslims believe that Allah (Glory be to Him) has appointed prophets and messengers to invite people to the right path and guide them to the truth and honesty.

Incarnation in Hinduism



Avatara means to descend (especially the descent of a deity from heaven, or appearance of any deity upon earth but more particularly the incarnations of Vishnu in the ten principal forms.) In addition, any new or unexpected appearance is also called "Avatar". Any distinguished person in the language of respect is called an Avatar or incarnation of a deity.⁸

⁸ Sanskrit English Dictionary, Oxford University Press, Amen House, London E.C-4,1960, p.99.

Avatar in Sanskrit refers to the incarnation of a deity in a human or animal form to counteract some particular evil in the world. The term usually refers to the ten appearances of Vishnu. However, the number of Vishnu's avatars is sometimes extended or their identities are changed, according to local preferences. Thus, Krishna is in some areas elevated to the rank of a deity and his half-brother, Balarama, is included as an avatar.⁹

In Hinduism, an avatar is the bodily incarnation of a deity on earth. A Hindu god can incarnate in one place at a time and as a full avatar in many places simultaneously through partial avatars. The avatar appears to the devotee in whatever form the worshiper envisions, which, according to Hindu belief could be Muhammad (peace be upon him), Krishna, Buddha or any other personal god.¹⁰

⁹ <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/45474/avatar> (Last accessed on 7-12-2014)

¹⁰ <http://www.gotquestions.org/avatar-hinduism.html> (Last accessed on 7-12-2014)

The Purpose of Incarnation in Hinduism



The purpose of the avatar's manifestation is to restore *dharma* or righteousness to the cosmic and social order. *Dharma* encompasses behaviors such as duty, ritual, law, morality, ethics and good deeds, etc. while any unnatural or immoral act or belief is called *adharma*.¹¹

When we compare the purpose of prophethood in Islam with the purpose of incarnation in Hinduism, we find them generally similar in many points. But Islam makes this purpose amongst the duties and missions of the prophets and messengers who are human beings but chosen by Allah (Glory be to Him) for guiding people to the right path while

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Hindus believe that God Himself incarnates into a human or animal form to achieve these noble purposes.

Avatars are most often associated with the god Vishnu, one of the members of the Hindu “Trinity” or *Trimurti* (although any Hindu god may manifest as an avatar). Vishnu is considered the maintainer or preserver, as opposed to the other members, Brahma the creator and Shiva the destroyer. According to the *Bhagavata Purana*, Vishnu has incarnated as innumerable avatars in unlimited universes.¹²

The principal avatars are those of *Vishnu*. Vaishnavas (worshippers of Vishnu) normally recognize ten avatars, although figures such as Gandhi and Jesus are recognized as avatars by some people.

¹² *Ibid.*

The ten avatars of Vishnu are:

1. Matsya – The Fish
2. Kurma – The Tortoise
3. Varaha – The Boar
4. Narasimha – The Man-Lion
5. Vamana – The Dwarf
6. Parasurama – Rama with the Axe
7. Rama of Ayodhya (Ramachandra)
8. Krishna
9. Buddha
10. Kalki¹³

According to the Hindu philosophy, God came down many times from the sky to the earth in the shape of a human being or in the shape of an animal in order to introduce people to His teachings and when God incarnated into the human form He was called Avatar and all of His qualities and habits were like humans. Thus, He carried out His duties as a god and taught people His wisdom as a wise person.¹⁴

¹³ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/rs/god/hinduismrev2.shtml>

¹⁴ Mirza Muhammad Kazim Birlas Muradabadi, *At-Tathlith*, Matba`a Gulzar Husni, Mumbai, 1896, vol. 3, p.380.

Some extraordinary and odd stories have been mentioned regarding every incarnation, one of them is that a devil in the ancient times gained some extraordinary powers through some spiritual exercises and snatched a Hindu divine scripture namely the Anant Veda from Brahma and threw it into the water, then God incarnated into the shape of a fish and dived into the water and brought the Veda back.¹⁵

The story says that a devil snatched the book from Brahma, the question is that how can a devil snatch the book from Brahma? Was the devil more powerful than Brahma? Is not the devil a creation of Brahma? If the devil was more powerful, then the devil would be the Hindu god not Brahma. Also why will god need an incarnation while He is Omnipotent?

In addition, the idea of incarnation of the Hindu god is not confined to the human form, but it includes the turtle and pig form along with the human form.

I think that the manifestation of God in these disgusting forms is incompatible with the glory of the divinity and greatness of God. On the other hand, Islam attributes to

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

God all good qualities and declares that He is far from every bad quality and ugly nature.

Even, we find in our modern days that some Hindu brothers worship the tortoise believing in this creature as the manifestation of a Hindu god and worthy of worship because it was an incarnation of god as was reported in a news report of the BBC from the Indian state "Orissa".

The news report says: "Officials in the Indian state of Orissa have filed a case against a priest for illegally keeping a rare turtle under the belief that it is a god."¹⁶

The news added that the distinctive markings of the turtle apparently convinced villagers that it was an incarnation of Lord Jagannath, the presiding deity of the Orissa state. In the Hindu mythology, sea turtles are believed to be an incarnation of the god. The soft-shelled creature was found by Ramesh Patra in a river in Kendrapara district and is being kept in a water tank on the premises of the local temple. Hundreds of people from the nearby villages have been flocking to the temple to catch a glimpse of the "divine turtle" since it arrived.¹⁷

¹⁶ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/8359324.stm

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

The case was filed after the local officials, who had gone to rescue the turtle on Thursday, were chased away by irate villagers, who believed the creature will bring peace and prosperity to their community.

Earlier, activists of a local non-governmental organization tried in vain to convince villagers about the need to release the turtle.¹⁸

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

Perhaps, the philosophy of incarnation has led the Hindu society to many evils in both belief and practice. Many persons in the Hindu community get the position of god and Avatar due to the concept of Avatar and incarnation. Many Hindu holy men were caught in recent months while involved in many ethical, social and financial corruptions. In addition, the door of paganism became widely open for the Hindu people when they believed that God might incarnate into a person, animal, or object. Many examples for this phenomenon are found in the Indian daily newspapers.

The appearance of god in the form of a human being or in the shape of an animal is totally contradicting the greatness of God, because every human being and animal during their birth undergoes a series of natural procedures. At first, it becomes sperm then turns into a shape similar to the leech and the embryo lives on menstrual blood. Then it is delivered through the vulva of a female. When it is born, it needs to eat, drink and sleep, and to relieve nature. This kind of need if it matches the position of a creature, it never matches the greatness of the Creator.

It is clear that the philosophy of prophethood and messengership is more evident, more appropriate, more reasonable, purer and closer to the plain logic than the concept of incarnation or Avatar. At the same time, the philosophy of prophethood does not have the negative results, which have been seen in the philosophy of incarnation or Avatar.