

Ubuntu Values in the Light of Prophetic Guidance: Mandela's Legacy and the Meccan Model of Transformative Mercy

Fatima Cheikh, PhD

fatimacheikh@gmail.com fcheikh@baadiyah.co.za

This paper explores how the moral and spiritual legacy of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) has resonated within African contexts, particularly in the ethical leadership of Nelson Mandela, by comparing and drawing an analysis between the Ubuntu philosophy and the Prophetic model of mercy during the divinely guided triumphant return of Mecca to Islam. While maintaining the theological distinction between the status of human leadership and prophethood, this paper reflects on how the Prophetic tradition (Sīrah) continues to inform African Muslim thought and ethics, especially in the pursuit of reconciliation, human dignity, and justice.

Ubuntu, a Southern African moral philosophy expressed in the Zulu medium “umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu” (“a person is a person through other people”), emphasizes restorative justice and radical forgiveness. These values were strongly embodied by Nelson Mandela following his release from his unjust imprisonment of 27 years. Instead of seeking retribution, Nelson Mandela prioritized national healing and unity, principles that echo, at a human level, the supreme model of mercy demonstrated by the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) during the peaceful return of Mecca to Islam. Faced with an opportunity for vengeance after years of persecution and unjust, cruel treatment, the Prophet (ﷺ) instead declared amnesty, upheld human dignity, and prohibited bloodshed and proclaimed, “Idhhabū fa-antum al-ṭulaqā” (“Go, for you are all free”).

By examining Nelson Mandela's legacy through the lens of the Sīrah, this abstract reveals the enduring influence of Islamic moral frameworks in African ethical leadership and literature. It argues that both examples offer timeless guidance on leadership, compassion, and the pursuit of national peace and unity. In doing so, the paper contributes to the broader objective of this conference which is to deepen our understanding of how the representation of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) continues to shape African Muslim scholarship, historically, culturally, and in contemporary society.

Keywords: Ubuntu, Prophetic mercy, Nelson Mandela, Sīrah, Islamic ethics, African Muslim thought, reconciliation, transformative leadership, justice, human dignity, Meccan model, moral philosophy, historical legacy.