Memories of Muhammad: Why the Prophet Matters, by Omid Safi. HarperCollins, 2009. 352pp., pb. \$14.99, ISBN-13: 9780061231353; hb. \$24.99, ISBN-13: 9780061231346.

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In the introductory chapter of *Memories of Muhammad: Why the Prophet Matters*, Omid Safi writes about the “Muhammad problem” in contemporary America. He mentions negative statements about Muhammad by Franklin Graham and Pat Robertson, although he is at pains to demonstrate that this “problem” is not a recent invention, but goes back at least to Dante. This opening chapter communicates well the author’s sense of urgency for a book like this: it is written to open up dialogue with those who have absorbed unthinkingly these negative portrayals of Muhammad and the religion of Islam. On this ground it is difficult to criticize this book, which succeeds in correcting those portrayals.

Memories of Muhammad is similar in goal to *In The Footsteps of the Prophet* by Tariq Ramadan (Oxford University Press, 2007). In that case too, the idea was to take the contested ground of the life of Muhammad and present it in a positive light, making clear how the details of this life can be appropriated by faith. The question to be answered in these books is: “What can this life mean to modern men and women?” It should be noted that this question is not a promising start for what we commonly expect from a biography. The book by Safi does not interact at all with scholarly work that has tried to untangle the historical Muhammad from later reports. Time after time hadith and stories drawn from the early biography of Ibn Ishaq are reported as simple fact. The reader should thus understand that *Memories of Muhammad* is not a critical biography.

In contrast to Tariq Ramadan’s book, Omid Safi’s account of the life of Muhammad draws heavily on Sufi and Shi’i views. The Sufi influence is most clear in the account of the ascension of Muhammad (chapter 3); the Shi’i material in the chapter looking forward to the death of Hossein (chapter 5). This emphasis is welcome and broadens the popular presentation of Muhammad. In keeping with this approach, Safi discusses the salafist desire to return to the era of the “righteous forefathers” in the first generation of Islam. Although Safi refrains from outright criticism, he points out that in the Shi’i tradition there is naturally a different view of these early years. It is reasonably clear that he himself sides with the Shi’i view that “...Islam is not a constant stream but one that spiritually ebbs and flows and is in need of occasional revitalization” (261).