On revelation and the ‘vital lie’: a Beckerian approach to prophethood

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The greatness of prophets is understood to inhere in a mix of personal piety and Divine grace, together with the granting of evidentiary miracles that establish the authenticity of the message in the minds of the recipient communities. This paper attempts to look at prophethood from a different perspective, focusing on the transformatory nature of revelation as an antidote to what cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker terms the ‘vital lie’.

For Becker, the ‘vital lie’ is the accumulation of myths and self-deceptions out of which human beings devise cultural, social and political constructs in order to mask their unresolved fear of mortality and denial of death. This paper argues that arguably the most significant feature of prophethood is not personal piety or evidentiary miracles but, rather, the willingness of the prophet to question these ‘vital lies’ and puncture the dangerous bubble of complacency which surrounds unreconstructed man.