

Al-Risala

1993

September

Prejudice, past and present

At the time when the Prophet of Islam migrated from Mecca to Medina, there was a sizeable number of Jews living in the city. One day one of their renowned religious scholars came to see the Prophet and put to him a question of considerable difficulty. The Prophet's ability to answer it with ease made it clear to him that he was a true Prophet of God, and he thereupon accepted Islam.

Some time later, some other Jews came to meet the Prophet, ignorant of the fact that this former member of their community had accepted Islam, and now went by the name of Abdullāh ibn Salam. These Jews were asked by the Prophet what they thought of him. They replied that he was their leader and the son of their leader, that he was a great religious scholar among them and the son of a great religious scholar. Then the Prophet asked them what they would think of him if he were to accept Islam. They said, "God forbid! he could never do such a thing! Abdullah ibn Salam, who was present at that time inside the Prophet's dwelling, came out and said to the Jews, "Fear God! By God, he is God's messenger. He has been sent with the truth, and I have believed in him, You should do likewise."

On hearing this, the Jews' tone changed, and they told him that he was lying. According to another tradition, they insulted him by telling him that he was the worst person among them, and the son of the worst person.

It is regrettable that this form of prejudice is found today just as much as it was in the past.

Group loyalty

“A fisherman once told me that one doesn’t need a cover for a crab basket. If one of the crabs starts climbing up the side of the basket, the others will reach up and pull it back down” (Charles Allen, *The Miracle of Love*).

The nature of the crab has been bestowed upon it by God and the ways of the crab are indeed divine ways. It is through such examples as this that God conveys to mankind how social life should be organised, for unity is one of its most important elements. The best way to establish this unity is that which God has ordained in the world of crabs. This is to say that the moment an individual shows signs of deviating from the norm, it is the duty of the rest of society to bring him back to what is normal, human and decent. The individuals in the “basket” should not let even one of their number slip out of it.

Islamic history presents a splendid example of how just such a problem, which arose after the death of the Prophet, was satisfactorily solved. It seems that Sa’d ibn ‘Ubada of Medina held divergent opinions on the issue of the Caliphate. Most of the Prophet’s Companions were of the view that the Caliph should be of the Quraysh tribe, which was the most influential of all. Sa’d ibn ‘Ubada, for his part, felt that either the Caliph should be one of the Ansars (Medinans) or there should be two Caliphs, one from the Ansar and the other from the emigrants (Meccans). But history shows that the entire tribe, by presenting a united front, managed to prevent their leader’s wishes from materializing. At the crucial moment, they pulled him back into the “basket” again and saw to it that he stayed there.

Destined for great deeds

One always finds two types of people in the world. On the one hand, there are those who want immediate reward for all that they do, with their recompense exceeding the work they have put in. Then there are those who are not for any material reward. The knowledge that they have contributed in some way to a worthwhile cause is sufficient reward for them. If they receive no recompense for their efforts, it does not cause them concern or arouse their anger. They play their part, but forget about their personal contribution, so engrossed are they in the cause for which they are working.

Outwardly, both groups appear the same, but in reality there is a world of difference between the two. The first group, one might say, keep the markets of the world turning over, while the second group turn over new pages in human history. Such is the extent to which the two differ.

It is the second group who make meaningful, valuable contributions to the betterment of humanity, for it is they who are able to join in a common struggle, without which no worthwhile work can be achieved in this world. Whenever a number of people work together for a common goal, it is inevitable that some should receive more credit than others. Some are hailed for their achievements, while others are denied all recognition. This is true of all movements, whether popular or prophetic in nature. There is only one way for a common effort to prosper, and that is by people forgetting about their rights, and remembering only their responsibilities.

Unless there is a spirit of selfless struggle among those participating in a common cause, it is not only those who receive no recompense who will feel ill-treated. Even those who are rewarded for their contribution will feel that they have not been done justice. Seldom does the reward a person receives for his efforts live up to his expectations. It is a case of either being satisfied with nothing, or never being satisfied at all.

Those who are destined to perform great deeds in life are those who do not seek reward for what they have done; the very fact that they have done something is sufficient reward for them. The knowledge that they have played

their part is enough to make them content, even more so than those who have been abundantly rewarded for their efforts.

Trust is golden

With just a few hundred rupees capital, a man from Delhi started a business. He used to buy scraps of cloth which he would sell from door to door. When his business had grown somewhat, he obtained permission to sit on the pavement in front of a shop and sell his merchandise there. This freelance cloth-merchant built up a good deal of trust with his wholesaler, whom he impressed with his honesty and fairdealing. The wholesaler began to grant cloth on loan to the vendor, who always made an effort to settle his debt before the appointed date. This habit made him even more trustworthy in the eyes of the wholesaler, who granted him more and more cloth on loan. After just a few years, the wholesaler was giving this street-vendor Rs. 150,000 worth of cloth on loan, an amount which he would not have given anybody else except on the basis of a considerable cash down-payment.

Clearly, such a large amount of cloth could not be accommodated on the street. The cloth-vendor now required a shop. He bought one, and continued to run it in a principled manner. His profits continued to spiral, and before long he was among the leading cloth-merchants of the old city. It is a mistake to think of money as the greatest asset in life. The greatest asset is trust. On the basis of trust one can buy anything. What one lacks in other departments one can make up for in trust. Trust is an invaluable asset which can buy even more than money.

But the way to establish trust is not by repeating how trustworthy one is. No, it is by acting in a trustworthy manner. The outside world is very severe in this regard. Unless one proves one's trustworthiness by impeccable actions, one cannot expect to receive the benefit of the doubt. Only if one consistently shows oneself worthy of trust over a long period, as the cloth vendor showed himself in his dealings with the wholesale merchant, will one be accorded trust in this world.

Before lashing out, look within

While the Prophet was in Mecca, 'Abd al-Rahman ibn 'Auf, along with some friends, came to him. "We lived in honour when we were idolators", they complained. "But now, with belief, has come disgrace."

"Forgiveness has been enjoined on me", replied the Prophet. "You are not allowed to fight against these people who disgrace you."

This same event is mentioned in the Qur'an, in the chapter entitled "Women", where it is said: "Have you not seen those unto whom it was said: 'Withhold your hands, establish worship and pay the poor due (4:77). This verse has been explained in reliable commentaries of the Qur'an as meaning that the struggle which a believer wages within his own self, to bring his heart and soul in line with the teachings of Islam, comes before the struggle which he wages against disbelievers. (*Tafsir Mazhari*, Vol. II p. 165)

What the words of the Qur'an, "Withhold your hands and establish prayer," convey to us is: Make inward preparations before resorting to outward action. The true essence of prayer is remembrance of God: "Establish prayer for My remembrance," says the Qur'an. In Islam, however, prayer has been given a form which establishes it as a complete training for life. Prayer strengthens a Muslim from within, consolidating his faith and preparing him to face the trials of life in true Islamic fashion. For this reason 'Umar said that one who pays scant attention to prayer will be even less punctilious about other matters of moment.

In Islam, war is only justified in self-defence. The basic duty of a Muslim is not to fight, but spread the message of Islam. Peacefully and tactfully, he is required to call mankind to Truth. This is where the Islamic process begins, and here also does it end. There is no graduation from spreading the Word to taking up arms; only when their opponents refuse to desist from persecution are the Muslims allowed to fight against them.

But there is a condition attached even to defensive war, namely that Muslims should first have established prayer as a religious duty. What is prayer in its true sense? It is nothing less than a complete course of religious training. First the call to prayer is made, in which believers are invited to "come to salvation." Leaving

their daily tasks, the faithful hurry to the place of worship, and after cleansing themselves, join in the prayer. Time and time again during the prayer they repeat the words "God is great", thus acknowledging how small they are in relation to Him. The Muslims join ranks for prayer, lining up behind one leader; no one breaks ranks, or goes his own way. When the prayer is completed, the worshipper, turning to both right and left, repeats a prayer of peace. In this way he demonstrates that his benevolence towards his fellow beings is so great that he feels he must pray for them.

It is not until prayer of this nature has been accepted, not only as a ritual, but as a heartfelt moral responsibility, that Muslims may feel entitled to go forth and conduct a holy war against disbelievers. Prayer is their best training course. Until they have completed it, there is only one thing to do in the face of persecution: show exemplary patience.

Those who call for war against infidels, before they have understood the true nature of prayer are not in any real sense adherents of the religion revealed by God. They are simply following some religion of their own invention. If they cannot, or will not grasp the necessity to change their ways, it will not be salvation that awaits them, but ruin.

Putting aside petty issues

Those who become involved in petty quarrels over mundane issues have seldom any great goal to achieve, and those who have will never achieve it while they allow themselves to become sidetracked by trivial side-issues.

'Abdullah ibn 'Abbas tells how, when the Prophet Muhammad's uncle Abu Talib lay sick, he was visited by a group of Qurayshite leaders, among them Abu Jahal, who complained to Abu Talib about the conduct and preaching of his nephew Muhammad. They suggested that Abu Talib should summon his nephew, and tell him to stop abusing the gods of the Quraysh. Abu Talib thereupon sent for the Prophet. When the latter arrived and entered the house of his uncle, there was an empty sitting space in between the leaders of the Quraysh and Abu Talib. Abu Jahal was afraid that, should Muhammad occupy that seat next to his uncle, Abu Talib would feel compassion towards his nephew. So Abu Jahal jumped up and sat in the vacant place. Finding nowhere to sit near his uncle, the Prophet quietly sat down next to the door.

When Abu Talib had finished telling his nephew of the complaints of the Qurayshite chieftains, the Prophet explained that he only wanted one thing of the Quraysh. If they were to accept it, they would become lords over Arabia; even the people of Asia would pay tribute to them. The Quraysh expressed their readiness to make more than just one concession to the Prophet, but wanted to know what it was that he wished them to accept. "That there is no god besides Allah," the Prophet told them, but the Quraysh scorned the idea that all their gods should be made into One God.

When the Prophet arrived at his uncle's house, he was faced with provocative treatment by Abu Jahal. He saw Abu Jahal jump up and occupy a seat which rightfully should have remained vacant for the Prophet himself to sit in. Under such circumstances, the Prophet could have contested with Abu Jahal over who had the right to occupy the seat next to Abu Talib. But he did not do so, for he had come for one purpose alone – to communicate to these assembled Qurayshite leaders the message of Islam. Had he come into conflict with them over a petty side-issue, attention would have been distracted from the basic purpose of his mission; he would no longer have been in a position to teach

them the Word of Truth, having set himself up as their rival for worldly position. So the Prophet forsook what was rightfully his in order to further his cause.

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10 September 1993

Learning from everything that happens

A cart pulled by two oxen, drove past Abu Darda. He watched as one of the oxen carried on pulling while the other stopped. "There is a lesson even in this," said Abu Darda. "The one that stopped was whipped, while the other was left alone."

(Safawat al-Safawah)

Working in unison

U.S. Shipbuilders take sixteen months to complete a 50 thousand ton tanker. The Spaniards take even longer to produce a ship of similar tonnage—24 months. But Japanese Shipbuilders do the job in just eight months.

What is the secret of this Japanese miracle? A survey conducted by western experts shows that the deciding factor is teamwork. Japanese workers and management function together in complete unison. At no stage during the work processes is this bond disrupted. The result is the production of high quality goods within an amazingly short time.

Group harmony is something which is part of the whole fabric of Japanese culture and work methods. Whether in the home or in the factory, in large institutions or small, the will to be co-operative manifests itself as the truly distinctive feature of the Japanese character. William Ouchi, an expert in Japanology writes: 'Every activity in Japan is group activity and not a springboard to individual glory and personal advertisement.'

(The Hindustan Times, February 16, 1986)."

It is to this speciality that Japan's greatest secret of national progress can be traced. The willingness of large numbers of people to work together with good grace is a prerequisite for success in any venture. The only flaw in this system of joint effort is that the personality of the individual has little opportunity to flourish. But it is only a nation which is made up of individuals who are prepared to make this personal sacrifice which can ever aspire to success. Where individuals keep pulling in opposite directions, no substantial progress can ever be made at the national level.

When work is co-operative in spirit, well co-ordinated in organization and an atmosphere of harmony prevails, the sky is the limit in quality and quantity of production. It is unity then which is the true key to success.

Reading the signs

With the increase of traffic in modern times, the danger of accidents has also increased. To obviate this danger, various forms of road signs have been erected for the guidance of motorists. One such sign reads: "Lane driving is save driving." Keeping to one's lane is an effective safeguard against accidents, averting the danger of colliding with other motor-cars, and ensuring that one's journey does not end in disaster.

An article in a British motoring magazine by an expert on driving gives some indispensable rules of thumb for drivers. If one is speeding down a mainroad, for example, and suddenly a ball appears from a side road one must realize that there is probably a child not far behind it. If one sees the ball, but fails to see the child, one cannot count oneself a good driver. The really good driver stops, not on account of the ball, but on account of the child that he sees with his mind's eye running behind the ball. It is the quickness of his imagination which saves the child from being run over.

The principles we are required to keep in mind while driving are the same as those we should keep in mind on our journey through life. If one wishes, one can learn from the 'highway code' the principles that one should follow in the vaster arena of life.

Always confine your activities to your own sphere; if you infringe on the sphere of others, you are sure to clash with them: your progress will come to an abrupt halt. When certain signs appear on the horizon of society, try to make out what these signs infer. Do not just go by outward signs; try to reach the meaning behind them. If one just goes by what one sees and fails to see what lurks in the background, one will not advance in one's journey through life. Others, more far-seeing than oneself, will forge ahead, while one falls victim to dangers that could have been avoided if one had read the signs properly.

A taste of honey

Of all the nectar that bees collect from flowers, only about a third is actually honey. In order to produce just one pound of honey, bees have altogether to collect nectar from 2 million flowers. This involves approximately 3 million flights over an aggregate distance of 50,000 miles. Only when the required amount of nectar has been collected does the process of honey-making begin.

In its initial state, honey is a liquid of roughly the same consistency as water. Bees' wings have been designed to act as a fan which vapourizes the excess liquid. When this has been removed a sweet liquid remains, which the bees suck. The mouths of bees contain a certain type of gland, which automatically transforms the sweet liquid matter into honey. Their honey prepared, the bees now store it in their hives in specially formed holes made out of wax. All this involves an enormous amount of work by other bees.' The safety and effectiveness of this method of storage is as complete as any packing in which humans encase honey. Only when the honey is needed for human consumption need it be taken from the hives.

Numerous other arrangements of this kind have been made for the preparation of honey. God is able to do all things: He could have brought honey into being by uttering a magic word: He could have caused it to issue from the ground, as He has done with water. But for the preparation of honey He has ordained this other, highly involved and perfect system. This is so that man may take heed and realize the manner in which God has created the universe, thus learning the laws and methods he must follow if he is to be successful in this world.

If we are to sum up the method employed by bees in the preparation of honey, we might say that it is a method involving perfect planning. This same method is to be followed by man. For man to achieve any worthwhile aim in life, he has to work towards it in a planned, methodical way. This is the only way to be successful in one's aims. What applies to the bees applies also to mankind.

The question of eternity

God created man as an eternal being. Then, out of his life span, He assigned about one hundred years as the period he would spend in the present world, and the remaining years He reserved for the next world, the one after death. It is, therefore, the supremely wise man who keeps in mind the eternal nature of his existence and who patterns his living accordingly. His life, in short, should be *Akhirat-oriented*

In the words of a Western writer:

It is a question for us now to consider whether we have any personal relations towards the Supreme Power; whether there exists another world in which we shall be requited according to our actions. Not only is this a grand problem of philosophy; it is of all questions the most practical for us, the one in which our interests are most vitally concerned. This life is short, and its pleasures are poor; when we have obtained what we desire it is nearly time to die. If it can be shown that by living in a certain manner, eternal happiness may be obtained, then clearly no one except a fool or a mad man will refuse to live in such a manner. (*The Martyrdom of Man*, London, Watts & Co. 1948).

How vital is the question of eternal life, but what utter disregard man shows for it!

Inventing new myths

In ancient times, the whole system of life was riddled with superstitious beliefs. Many strange, unfounded ideas were generally in vogue. Nicolson, in his *Astronomy* (1978) has recorded an interesting historical curiosity: "When an eclipse occurred, the Chinese thought that the Sun was swallowed by a huge dragon. The whole population joined in making as much noise as possible to scare it away. They always succeeded!"

It is now known that the eclipse of the sun or the moon can be predicted, its causes are known, and it is also known that the period of time for the eclipse is fixed. There is no question of its beginning or ending at a different time because of human intervention. But, in their ignorance, the ancient Chinese thought that the great noise they made caused it to disappear!

This kind of superstition has largely come to an end in modern times. But other kinds of myths are still extant, and are accorded a similar degree of acceptance. The occurrence of events which are caused by external circumstances is attributed to human effort. For instance, the modern age has seen a revival of religions all over the world. This phenomenon has definite universal causes and scores of books on the subject have been published. A noteworthy article on this topic appeared in the American magazine, *Span* (December 1984), entitled, 'A Return to Religion. But there are people in this world who believe that this revival is attributable solely to their own religious leaders, and proclaim this fact to the skies. These leaders are then regarded as the heroes, if not the creators, of the modern age.

Such mythical beliefs have the bedrock of modern 'religion'. When one set of myths disappears, man's fertile mind invents another. Thus myths and myth-making will survive as long as man himself.

The greatest news

June 30, 1985 was a historic day for Gwalior. At the military airport, there was a special flurry of activity, for India had recently bought from France a war plane, the Mirage 2000, and the ceremony to mark its addition to the strength of the Indian Air Force was to be held. The twelfth Air Chief Marshal, L.M. Katri, (1927-1985) looked very happy that day, and participated in this ceremony with great enthusiasm. No sooner had he returned to Delhi after this splendid ceremony than he suffered a heart attack. He was immediately taken to the military hospital, where he was declared dead only a matter of hours later on 1st July 1985.

Air Chief Marshal Katri had the distinction of being India's ablest fighter pilot, and had set up a splendid record in a number of aerial attacks he had made against the enemy. But this great fighter of enemy planes could not combat the silent attack of death. He, who had flown so high to achieve military victories, was defeated when brought face to face with the forces of death below, for the power to counter them was not in his hands.

The confrontation of power with powerlessness is faced every day in one form or the other. Everyday, some "Air Chief Marshal" is defeated by the silent attack of death. This experience announces to others the truth that man lives in a world where every victory finally ends in total defeat, that life is a journey from power to powerlessness. Death warns man of this reality, but, at this point in time, when one is riding on the crest of a wave, this is a news that no one wants to hear.

Taking a long route

One of the facilities enjoyed in technologically advanced nations is a highly efficient telecommunications system. Of course, telephones abound in the third world also, but the service they provide leaves much to be desired. In India, for instance, one will encounter all kinds of problems in making trunk or local calls within the country. If, on the other hand, one dials a London number from Delhi, one is likely to obtain an immediate connection, and the quality of reception will also be good.

A story concerning this discrepancy appeared in a newspaper recently. An African lady wanted to order some meat from her local butcher. She tried to telephone him, but was unable to get through. But when she phoned her mother, who was living in London, she had no trouble getting a connection there. During the course of her conversation, she casually mentioned her inability to establish contact with a local number. "I wanted to order some meat, and was trying to get through to the butcher for a whole hour," she told her mother. "Tell you what," her mother replied over the line from London. "I'll put a call through to him from this end." And she did just that. She dialled her daughter's butcher back in Africa. Immediately the phone started ringing in a shop thousands of miles away. The gap left by local telephone lines was bridged by international telecommunications.

The necessity to find unusual ways of bridging gaps and speeding up the normal business of life is applicable not only to telephone connections, but to our journey through life itself. But we must first understand what our best course of action is. Sometimes we try to take short cuts, but find them so full of obstacles that we actually spend longer on the 'short' cut than we would on a long, but unobstructed road. Sometimes a road only appears interminable to us, but when we actually come to traverse it, we find that it has taken us far less time to do so than we had at first imagined. The reverse is true of apparently shorter roads which can lead us into unexpected detours. Before setting out on a chosen path, we should take stock of the means at our disposal and make due allowances for unforeseen factors which could hamper our progress. All such factors should be given equal consideration.

18 September 1993

To collaborate in injustice is sinful

Wasilah ibn Asqa once asked the Prophet what constituted bigotry. "Collaborating with your own people in wrongdoing," answered the Prophet.

(Abu Da'ud, *Sunan*)

18 September 1993

Justice for the weak and strong alike

Muawiyah ibn Abu Sufyan once asked Dharar Sadai to tell him about Ali Dharar said, amongst other things, that "he lived among us like anyone of us. No one, however strong he might be, hoped to receive any aid from him in his unjust cause, while the weak had no reason to despair of receiving justice from him."

18 September 1993

Granting forgiveness to one who seeks it

The Prophet Mohammad is recorded by Abu Hurayrah as having said, if one's Muslim brother comes to ask forgiveness for something, he should be excused, whether or not he speaks the truth. One who does not do so will not reach me, to be given water by me at the pond of plenty on the Day of Judgement."

(At-Hakim)

Bearing witness to the truth

God has promised the Muslims that He will help them and grant them dominance in the world. For this to come about, however, Muslims must feel themselves duty-bound to perform the task assigned to them. If they stand as witnesses to the Truth, they will rise high in the world. But, if they neglect this duty, their place will be one of ignominy and disgrace.

A Muslim's basic duty in this world is to bear witness to the Truth before mankind. It was to this duty that the Prophet alluded when he said to his followers: "You are God's witnesses on earth." This subject is mentioned time and again in the Quran, from which we build up a comprehensive picture of the actual significance of bearing witness to the truth. Its frequent recurrence in the holy scriptures impresses upon the reader the fact that man has been put upon this earth to be tested. Does he acknowledge the Truth, or does he deny it? Does he mould his life to the encompassing realities, or does he beat his own rebellious path through life? Throughout human existence, this is the test with which man is confronted.

This is no trivial matter. Its seriousness can be gauged from the fact that it is upon the outcome of man's testing period in this life that his eternal future in the next life will be decided. It is on the basis of how individuals are rated in this life that some will be raised up to enter the gardens of eternal bliss, while others will be cast down to suffer eternal damnation.

The name of da'wah has been given to the task of spreading the message of Islam. Those who perform it are called witnesses, because it is they who will bear witness in the court of God when all mankind is brought before Him. It is they who will testify before God as to who accepted the Truth and who rejected it.

God has promised the Muslims that He will help them and grant them dominance in the world. For this to come about, however, Muslims must feel themselves duty-bound to perform the task assigned to them. If they stand as witnesses to the Truth, they will rise high in the world. But, if they neglect this duty, their place will be one of ignominy and disgrace.

The individual's whole existence is moulded according to his chosen purpose in life. If Muslims make it their purpose to be witnesses to Truth on Earth, there will take place in them an enormous transformation. Their entire attitude to life will

be transfigured. All mundane issues will pale into insignificance as they unflaggingly pursue their eternal goal. Without waiting for a change of heart in others, they will unilaterally put an end to all their worldly conflicts with other nation, and will be content to bear any sacrifice for the sake of peace. They will be fully aware of the fact that it is only if there is peace between Muslims and other nations that non-Muslims will be disposed to listen to them, and to give serious thought to the message they convey.

20 September 1993

The God-fearing treats others best

Maamar, who belonged to the next generation after the Companions, tells us that the latter used often to say: "Your greatest well-wisher is he who fears God with regard to you."

Coming to terms with sectarianism

Sectarianism among followers of the same religion is almost invariably the upshot of clashes over relatively minor issues, and does not stem as one might imagine, from misinterpretations of, or confusion about fundamental religious tenets. Among Muslims, there is no controversy over the major points of Islamic doctrine, such as, for example, the prophethood of Muhammad – a point on which all Muslims are in accord. It is matters of secondary importance, such as the manner in which blessings should be invoked upon the Prophet, that spark off dissension. For instance, when the Prophet's name is mentioned, the Sunnis invoke blessings on him alone, while the Shias are particular to include his offspring. Differences over such minor points are regrettably all too common.

It is not only to matters of doctrine, but also to the rules of social conduct that this applies. No one would dispute that when two Muslims meet, they should greet one another and shake hands. But, strange as it would seem, there is rancorous disagreement on what form the handshake should take. Those who are of the Hanafi School (a school of jurisprudence) maintain that it should be done with both hands, while others, including those of the Ahl-e-Hadith School, feel that only one hand need be extended. And so there is much needless expenditure of mental energy on something which should not be an issue at all.

Such controversies over minor issues have been a perennial feature in every age of all religious communities. While there is nothing particularly bad about debating such matters, and no great harm comes to the community as a result, there is always the danger that what started as an amicable discussion can develop into an all-out fight to establish the personal superiority of particular groups. Such escalations almost inevitably lead to members of the same religious community becoming estranged from one another, their having quite lost sight of the fact that the whole conflict rests on some triviality.

In any discussion of this nature, tolerance and broadmindedness should be the prevailing attitudes. Particularly in the case of social behaviour, the acceptability of more than one mode of conduct should be established at the outset, provided that no moral infringement is entailed. On such matters, people whose opinions differ should be able to adopt any posture they please

without it leading to dissension and bitterness. Personal superiority or inferiority should never be the points at issue.

Another pernicious aspect of becoming preoccupied with side issues is that basic issues become lost in the morass of argument. It is only if proper emphasis is laid upon the fundamentals of religion, that its adherents can remain united.

22 September 1993

The Prophet's way of giving advice

The Prophet once said of Khuzaim, one of the Companions, "What a fine fellow Khuzaim would be, if only his locks were not so long and his shawl did not drag on the ground (Abu Da'ud, *Sunan*)". When Khuzaim heard what the Prophet had said of him, he took a knife and cut off his locks. In like manner, the Prophet said of another companion, Abdullah by name, what a fine fellow he would be "if only he prayed at night." When Abdullah heard this, he immediately started praying at night, sleeping for only a very short time.

(Al-Bukhari, *Sahih*)

Divorce in Islam

Nature demands that men and women lead their lives together. The ideal way of leading such a life is, according to the Shariah, within the bonds of marriage. In Islam, marriage is both a civil contract entered into by mutual consent of the bride and groom, and a highly sacred bond to which great religious and social importance are attached. As an institution, it is a cohesive force in society, and worth protecting and preserving for that reason. To that end, detailed injunctions have been prescribed to maintain its stability and promote its betterment.

However, in the knowledge that an excess of legal constraints can lead to rebellion, such injunctions have been kept to a realistic minimum and have been formulated to be consistent with normal human capabilities. Moreover, their enforcement is less relied upon than the religious conditioning of the individual to ensure the maintenance of high ethical standards and appropriate conduct in marital affairs and family life.

The state of marriage not only lays the foundations for family life, but also provides a training ground for individuals to make a positive adjustment to society. When a man and woman prove to be a good husband and a good wife, they will certainly prove to be good citizens in the broad spectrum of their social group. This has been aptly expressed in a *hadith*: 'The best of you is one who is best for his family.' (Ibn Majah, *Sunan*).

The family being the preliminary unit for the training of human beings, its disintegration has an injurious effect on the society to which those human beings must individually make a positive contribution, if collectively they are to form a good and just nation. If the family no longer exists, it is the whole of humanity which suffers.

Once a man and a woman are tied together in the bonds of matrimony, they are expected to do their utmost, till the day they die to honour and uphold what the Qur'an calls their firm contract, or pledge. To this end, the full thrust of the Shariah is levelled at

preventing the occurrence of divorce; the laws it lays down in this regard exist primarily, therefore, as checks, not incentives.

Islam regards marriage as an extremely desirable institution, hence its conception of marriage as the rule of life, and divorce only as an exception to that rule. According to a hadith, the Prophet of Islam said, 'Marriage is one of my *Sunnah* (path). One who does not follow it does not belong to me.' (Ibn Majah, *Sunan*).

Although Islam permits divorce, it lays great emphasis on its being a concession, and a measure to be resorted to only when there is no alternative. Seeing it in this light, the Prophet Muhammad said, 'Of all things permitted, divorce is the most hateful in the sight of God.' (Abu Dawud, *Sunan*).

When a man and a woman live together as husband and wife, it is but natural that they should have their differences, it being a biological and psychological fact that each man and each woman born into this world are by their very nature quite different from each other. That is why the sole method of having unity in this world is to live unitedly in spite of differences. This can be achieved only through patience and tolerance, virtues advocated by the Prophet not only in a general sense, but, more importantly, in the particular context of married life. Without these qualities, there can be no stability in the bond of marriage. According to Abu Hurayrah, the Prophet said, 'No believing man should bear any grudge against a believing woman. If one of her ways is not to his liking, there must be many other things about her that would please him.' (Muslim, *Sahih*).

It is an accepted fact that everyone has his strengths and his weaknesses, his plus points and his minus points. This is equally true of husbands and wives. In the marital situation, the best policy is for each partner to concentrate on the plus points of the other, while ignoring the minus points. If a husband and wife can see the value of this maxim and consciously adopt it as the main guiding principle in their lives, they will have a far better chance of their marriage remaining stable.

However, it sometimes happens, with or without reason, that unpleasantness crops up, and goes on increasing between husband and wife, with no apparent indication of their being able to smooth

things out by themselves. Their thinking about each other in a way conditioned by their mal-adjustment prevents them from arriving at a just settlement of their differences, based on facts rather than on opinions. In such a case, the best strategy, according to the Qur'an is to introduce a third party who will act as an arbiter. Not having any previous association with the matters under dispute, he will remain dispassionate and will be able to arrive at an objective decision acceptable to both parties.

For any arbiter to be successful, however, the husband and wife must also adopt the correct attitude. Here is an incident from the period of the four pious Caliphs which will illustrate this point.

When Ali ibn Abi Talib reigned as fourth Caliph, a married couple complaining of marital discord came to him to request a settlement. In the light of the above-mentioned Qur'anic guidance. Ali ordered that a board of arbiters, one from the husband's family and one from the wife's family, be set up, which should make proper enquiries into the circumstances and then give its verdict. This verdict was to be accepted without argument by both sides.

As recorded in the book, *Jami 'al-Bayan* by al-Tabari, the woman said that she gave her consent, on the book of God, whether the verdict was for or against her. But the man protested that he would not accept the verdict if it was for separation. Ali said, 'What you say is improper. By God, you cannot move from here until you have shown your willingness to accept the verdict of the arbiters in the same spirit as the woman has shown.'

This makes it clear that a true believer should wholeheartedly accept the arbiters and their verdict in accordance with the Qur'anic injunctions. Once their verdict is given, there should be no further dispute.

However, it has to be conceded that life does not always function smoothly, like a machine. Despite all safeguards, it sometimes does happen that a couple reach such a stage of desperation that they become intent on separation. Here the Shariah gives them guidance in that it prescribes a specific method for separation. The Qur'an expresses it thus: 'Divorce may be pronounced twice, then a

woman must be retained in honour or allowed to go with kindness' (2:229).

This verse has been interpreted to mean that a man who has twice given notice of divorce over a period of two months should remember God before giving notice the third time. Then he should either keep his spouse with him in a spirit of goodwill, or he should release her without doing her any injustice.

This method of divorce prescribed by the Qur'an, i.e. taking three months to finalize it, makes it impossible for a man seeking divorce suddenly to cast his wife aside. Once he has said to his wife (who should not at this time be menstruating) 'I divorce you,' both are expected to think the situation over for a whole month. If the man has a change of opinion during this period, he can withdraw his words. If not, he will again say, 'I divorce you,' (again his wife should be in a state of 'purity') and they must again review the situation for a further month. Even at this stage, the husband has the right to revoke the proceedings if he has had a change of heart. If, however, in the third month, he says, 'I divorce you,' the divorce becomes final and the man ceases to have any right to revoke it. Now he is obliged to part with his wife in a spirit of goodwill, and give her full rights.

This prescribed method of divorce has ensured that it is a well-considered, planned arrangement and not just a rash step taken in a fit of emotion. When we remember that in most cases, divorce is the result of a fit of anger, we realise that the prescribed method places a tremendous curb on divorce. It takes into account the fact that anger never lasts – tempers necessarily cool down after some time – and that those who feel like divorcing their wives in a fit of anger will certainly repent their emotional outburst and will wish to withdraw from the position it has put them in. It also takes into account the fact that divorce is not a simple matter: it amounts to the breaking up of the home and destroying the children's future. It is only when tempers have cooled down that the dire consequences of divorce are realized, and the necessity to revoke the decision becomes clear.

When a man marries a woman, he has to say only once that he accepts her as his spouse. But for divorce, the Qur'an enjoins a three month period for it to be finalized.

That is, for marriage, one utterance is enough, but for a divorce to be finalized, three utterances are required, between which a long gap has been prescribed by the Shariah. The purpose of this gap is to give the husband sufficient time to revise his decision, and to consult the well-wishers around him. It also allows time for relatives to intervene in the hopes of persuading both husband and wife to avoid a divorce. Without this gap, none of these things could be achieved. That is why divorce proceedings have to be spread out over a long period of time.

All these preventive measures clearly allow frayed tempers to cool, so that the divorce proceedings need not reach a stage which is irreversible. Divorce, after all has no saving graces, particularly in respect of its consequences. It simply amounts to ridding oneself of one set of problems only to become embroiled in another set of problems.

Despite all such preventive measures, it does sometimes happen that a man acts in ignorance, or is rendered incapable of thinking coolly by a fit of anger. Then on a single occasion, in a burst of temper, he utters the word 'divorce' three times in a row, '*talaq, talaq, talaq!*' Such incidents, which took place in the Prophet's lifetime, still take place even today. Now the question arises as to how the would-be divorcer should be treated. Should his three utterances of '*talaq*' be treated as only one, and should he then be asked to extend his decision over a three-month period? Or should his three utterances of '*talaq*' on a single occasion be equated with three utterances of '*talaq*' made separately over a three-month period? There is a hadith recorded by Imam Abu Daud and several other traditionists which can give us guidance in this matter: 'Rukana ibn Abu Yazid said '*talaq*' to his wife three times on a single occasion. Then he was extremely sad at the step he had taken. The Prophet asked him exactly how he had divorced her. He replied that he had said '*talaq*' to her three times in a row. The Prophet then observed, 'All three count as only one. If you want, you may revoke it.' (*Fath al-Bari*, 9/275).

A man may say *'talaq'* to his wife three times in a row, in contravention of the Shariah's prescribed method, thereby committing a sin, but if he was known to be in an emotionally overwrought state at the time his act may be considered a mere absurdity arising from human weakness. His three utterances of *'talaq'* may be taken as an expression of the intensity of his emotions and thus the equivalent of only one such utterance. He is likely to be told that, having transgressed a Sahriah law, he must seek God's forgiveness, must regard his three utterances as only one, and must take a full three months to arrive at his final decision.

In the first phase of Islam, however, a different view of divorce was taken by the second Caliph, Umar ibn al-Khattab. An incident which illustrates his viewpoint was thus described by Imam Muslim.

In the Prophet's lifetime, then under the Caliphate of Abu Bakr and also during the early period of the Caliphate of Umar, three utterances of *'talaq'* on the one occasion used to be taken together as only one utterance. Then it occurred to Umar ibn al Khattab that in spite of the fact that a system had been laid down which permitted the husband to withdraw his first, or even second *'talaq'*, men still wanted to rush into divorce. He felt that if they were bent on being hasty, why should not a rule be imposed on them binding them to a final divorce on the utterance of *'talaq'* three times in a row. And he proceeded to impose such a rule. (Muslim, *Sahih*, 10/70).

This act on the part of the Second Caliph, apparently against the principles of the Qur'an and Sunnah, did not in any way change the law of the Shariah; to think that this led to any revision of Islamic law would be to misunderstand the situation; the Caliph's order merely constituted an exception to the rule, and was, moreover, of a temporary nature. This aptly demonstrates how the Islamic Shariah may make concessions in accordance with circumstances.

Each law of the Shariah may be eternal, but a Muslim ruler has the power to make exceptions in the case of certain individuals in special sets of circumstances. However, such a ruling will not take on the aspect of an eternal law. It will be purely temporary in nature and duration.

Various traditions in this connection show that the second Caliph's treatment of certain persons was not in consonance with the laws of the Shariah. The rulings he gave on these occasions were in the nature of executive orders which were consistent with his position as a ruler. If he acted in this manner, it was to punish those who were being hasty in finalizing the divorce procedure.

It is a matter of Islamic historical record that when any such person was brought before Umar for having uttered the word '*talaq*' three times on the one occasion, he held this to be rebellious conduct and would order him to be flogged on the back. (*Fath al-Bari*, 9/275).

Perhaps the most important aspect of this matter is that when Umar gave his exceptional verdict on the divorce being final after the third utterance on a single occasion of the word '*talaq*', his position was not that of a powerless *alim* but of a ruler invested with the full power to punish – as a preventive measure – anyone who went against Qur'anic injunctions. This was to discourage haste in divorce. By accepting a man's three '*talaqs*' on the one occasion as final and irrevocable, he caused him to forfeit his right to revoke his initial decision, thus leaving him with no option but to proceed with the divorce.

On the other hand, the Caliph had it in his power to fully compensate any woman affected by this ruling. For instance, he was in a position to guarantee her an honourable life in society and if, due to being divorced, she was in need of financial assistance, he could provide her with continuing maintenance from the government exchequer, Baitul Mal, etc.

Today, anyone who cites Umar's ruling as a precedent in order to justify the finality of a divorce based on three utterances of the word '*talaq*' on a single occasion should remember that his verdict will remain unenforceable for the simple reason that he does not have the powers that Umar, as Caliph, possessed. Umar's verdict was that of a powerful ruler of the time and not just that of a common man. It is necessary at this point to clear certain misunderstandings which has arisen about the extent of agreement which existed on Umar's ruling. Of all the Prophet's companions who were present at Medina

at that time, perhaps the only one to disagree was Ali. As a result of this, certain ulama have come to the conclusion that the Prophet's followers (*sahaba*) had reached a consensus (*ijma'*) on this matter. (*Rawa' i' al-Bayan*, 1/334).

But the consensus reached was not on the general issue of divorce, but on the right of Muslim rulers to make temporary and exceptional rulings, as had been done by Umar. It is obvious that the Sahaba could never have agreed to annul a Qur'anic injunction or to modify for all time to come a prescribed system of divorce. All that was agreed upon was that exceptional circumstances warranted exceptional rulings on the part of the Caliph. He was entitled to punish in any manner he thought fitting, anyone who digressed from the Shariah. This right possessed by the ruler of the time is clearly established in the Shariah. Many other instances, (not necessarily relating to personal disputes) can be cited of his exercise of this right.

Conclusion

From the above discussion it becomes clear that the Shariah's prescribed method of divorce entails the pronouncing of the word '*talaq*' at intervals of one month over a three-month period, the third pronouncement making the divorce final. However, just as there are always cases of abuse of the law, there are always cases of divorce carried out by the improper method of uttering the word '*talaq*' three times on the one occasion.

When the law is misused in this way, there are two ways of dealing with the offenders. Either he can be made to counsel his three utterances of '*talaq*' as only one, in which case he can still benefit from the right to revoke his initial decision, or he may, as a punishment, be forced to suffer the consequences of his irresponsible behavior, i.e. immediate separation from his wife and resulting destruction of his home and family life. Such a punishment meted out to one man can be a strong deterrent to others. Once it is understood how grave are the consequences of a hasty divorce, few will be inclined to follow the same path.

The executive order of Umar ibn al-Khattab was not meant to become a permanent law of the Shariah to be generally enforced at all times. It was meant only to discourage deviation from the Shariah and to engender respect for the proper way of divorce. Although an exception to the general rule, Umar's verdict could at some future date be adopted, if the circumstances so warranted it, and it could be enforced just as it was in the past, provided that whoever made such a ruling was vested with the same political power as Umar ibn al-Khattab. The right to pass an executive order belongs only to an administrator. The common man has no such right, whatever the circumstances, because, he does not have the requisite power to deal with the social consequences of such a ruling.

32 September 1993

Affluence is the greatest trial

Saad ibn Abu Waqqas tells of the Prophet saying; "I fear for you in the trial of worldly deprivation. But I fear for you even more in the trial of affluence. You have remained patient in the face of worldly oppression, but will you not be carried away by the sweetness and luxuriance of this world?"

(Abu Ya'ala)

