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Islam Stands the Test of History

Islam claims to be an eternal religion. Any claim of this kind invites people to judge its validity on historical grounds. If latter day history testifies to its claim, it stands endorsed, otherwise it must be rejected. Marxism in the 20th century is a clear-cut example of historical rejection. According to his concept of historical determinism, Karl Marx held that modern industrial capitalism bore within it the seeds of its own destruction. He further observed that according to its own inherent laws its antithesis would emerge which would destroy it. Whereupon a new synthesis would come into being. But, quite contrary to his prediction, industrial capitalism has not only survived, but is making great progress. Historical events have thus buried Marxist theory. Then there is the case of Adolph Hitler who made grandiose claims that Germans were the "master race" and were destined to rule all Europe. The rout of Hitler and his Nazi party at the end of World War II put paid to all such theorizing.

But the case of Islam is quite different. Even after a period of one thousand five hundred years, Islam has suffered no erosion of its validity. The well known British historian, Edward Gibbon, describes the rise and expansion of Islam as "one of the most memorable revolutions which has impressed a new and lasting character on the nations of the globe."

An Indian historian, M.N. Roy, has observed: "Muhammad must be recognized as by far the greatest of all prophets, before or after him." He goes on to say that "the expansion of Islam is the most miraculous of all miracles." (*The Historical Role of Islam*, pp. 4-5)

The American writer, Michael Heart, in his book, "The 100" has made a selection of the 100 most influential persons in history, who have achieved the most outstanding success in this world. Right at the top of this list is the Prophet Muhammad, may peace be upon him, of whom the author writes:

He was the only man in history who was supremely successful on both the religious and secular levels.

The great success that the Prophet Muhammad, may peace be upon him, had predicted for his mission at the very outset exactly came true. This too, in spite of the stiff opposition which Muhammad, may peace be upon him, faced right from the beginning, both from within his own family and from the outside world.

This was in 610 AD, the year when he first started receiving divine revelations. At this stage he felt totally helpless. But then, in this adverse situation, he received a revelation from God, which said:

They want to extinguish God's light with their mouths. But God will perfect His light, even though the unbelievers may detest it. It is He who has sent His Messenger with guidance and the Religion of Truth, so that He may exalt it over all religions, much as the pagans may dislike it.
(61:8-9)

At the very beginning of his prophetic career, the Qur'an declared that Muhammad, may peace be upon him, would certainly succeed in his mission. All his opponents, however powerful they might be, would ultimately be defeated. (This is pointed out at several places in the Qur'an in different wording). In history we find numerous personalities who began their work with towering claims, but none of them achieved the envisioned success. Throughout human history, the Prophet Muhammad, may peace be upon him, is the only exception to this rule, in that his predictions were fulfilled to the fullest extent.

Through the efforts of the Prophet and his companions, a unique event took place: starting from scratch, they succeeded in extending their influence to the entire populated world of that age. During this brief period, they not only conquered Arabia but also succeeded in crushing the two great empires of their time – the Roman and the Sassanid. This exceptional phase in history has been almost universally acknowledged by historians.

The Qur'an was revealed prior to the modern age of knowledge, yet fourteen hundred years ago, at the time of revelation, the Qur'an declared that the proof of its being divine in origin lay in its being in complete accordance with historical facts and in its remaining consistent with discoveries made contemporaneously and at all future times. Advances may be made in human knowledge, but they will never contradict Qur'anic statements. To a remarkable degree, latter day history has testified to this. While many statements contained in all the ancient books have been at loggerheads with the latest scientific discoveries, the Qur'an is unique in steering clear of all such contradictions.

As the Qur'an says: "Do they not ponder on the Qur'an? Had it been from other than God, they would surely have found therein much discrepancy." (4:82). (The word "discrepancy" here means inconsistency, that is, a Qur'anic

statement not agreeing with eternal knowledge).

Much has been written on this aspect of the Qur'an in modern times. The French scientist, Maurice Bucaille, has shown in detail in his book, *The Bible, the Qur'an and Modern Science*, how the statements contained in the Qur'an are astonishingly in exact accordance with the discoveries of modern science. This shows that the Qur'an perfectly comes up to the scientific standards.

This development of human knowledge in favour of the Qur'anic contents is no mere accident. It is another historical proof that the Qur'an is a book revealed by the Creator of the Universe, whose knowledge is not bound by the limitations of space and time. Hence we find in the Qur'an a unique prediction to this effect:

We will soon show them our signs in the Universe and in their own souls, until they clearly see that it is the truth. (41:53)

After completing his comparative study of the Qur'an and modern science, Maurice Bucaille comes to this conclusion:

In view of the level of knowledge in Muhammad's day, it is inconceivable that many of the statements in the Qur'an which are connected with science could have been the work of a man. It is moreover, perfectly legitimate, not only to regard the Qur'an as the expression of a Revelation, but also to award it a very special place, on account of the guarantee of authenticity it provides and the presence in it of scientific statements which, when studied today, appear as a challenge to explanation in human terms. (p. 252)

To sum up, there is no other scripture that, having challenged all of mankind to disprove its authenticity as the Qur'an did, finally gained total rational support for its supernatural origin and veracity, even from its bitterest opponents. And there is no other historic figure whose future success was as uncertain as that of the Prophet Muhammad, who was finally crowned with such supreme success.

Peace in the Quran

(continued from previous issue)

The Difference Between the Enemy and the Aggressor

Under the scheme of the divine trial of human beings, man has been granted freedom by God. Due to this freedom, enmities may develop between people (20:123), which sometimes lead them to war. But Islam makes a clear difference between enmity and war.

Believers do not have the right to wage wars against their enemies. What the believers have to do as regards their enemies is far from waging war. Their duty is to peacefully convey to them the message of Islam. The Quran gives a clear injunction on this subject: And good and evil deeds are not alike. Repel evil with good. And he who is your enemy will become your dearest friend (41:33-34). That is to say, Islam believes in turning one's enemy into a friend through peaceful means, instead of declaring him an enemy and then waging war against him.

Islam does give permission to do battle. But such permission is given only in the case of an attack by opponents in spite of the policy of avoidance by the Muslims, thus creating a situation where self defense is required. The Quran has this to say: Permission to take up arms is hereby given to those who are attacked because they have been wronged (22:38). At another place the Quran gives a valid reason for fighting: They were the first to attack you. (9:13)

This shows that according to the teachings of Islam, war is to be waged not against the enemy but against the aggressor. If Muslims hold someone to be their enemy, that does not give them the right to attack him. The one and only right given to them is to convey the peaceful message of Islam. Islam permits defensive fighting against violent aggression, but only when all efforts at avoidance and reconciliation have failed. The practical example of the Prophet of Islam provides an incontrovertible proof of the value of this policy.

Bringing monarchy to an end and establishing the caliphate in its place in the first phase of Islam was the beginning of this process. The system was first established in Arabia. At that time there were two major empires. The Byzantine

and the Sassanid, to both of which the reform movement in Arabia posed a challenge. As a result, these empires wanted to crush it. The Prophet's companions therefore faced stiff resistance but by God's succor they were successful in their mission and the coercive system, termed absolute imperialism by the French Historian Henri Pirenne, was uprooted.

It took this revolutionary event to end a coercive system which had been established for centuries and replace it with a system based on freedom. This goal could not have been achieved in its first stage. But by divine succor Islam succeeded in breaking the historical continuity of this ancient coercive system in the 7th century. Subsequently, this change affected all of human history and as a continual process, ebbed and flowed until it reached its culmination in the 20th century. Then came the de-centralization which took place at the beginning of the 20th century, political power being limited solely to the administration. And the interference of political institutions became very limited. Social departments became generally independent of it.

This great change in the pattern of human life was exactly in accordance with Islam. It thus became possible for believers, whether they possessed political power or not, to attain constructive goals without any hindrance. It was this system which effected the change from the age of kingship to the age of institutions.

Thus it has become possible for the believers to establish various institutions of their own on a large scale, and indirectly bring political institutions under their influence. And through these institutions, they can penetrate society, which was earlier possible only through political power: for instance in training the new generation, creating an intellectual atmosphere by making available the print and electronic media, the propagation of ideas through books, continuing the process of *Ijtihad* through research institutions, safeguarding religion by opening more mosques and schools, the acquisition of finance through industrial institutions, universal organization of one's objectives through the means of communication, organization of religious and cultural affairs through different channels, etc.

In modern time those nations who have understood this have achieved success even without having political power. Some have become established and excelled in the field of education, while others have set up empires in industry, communications or finance. The last in the list of these non-governmental empires is that of computers. This has given man the opportunity to keep his

finger on the pulse of human activity not only at the national level, but also at the international level.

When the Quran says, "And religion is wholly for Allah" it portrays the most important aspect of the change of times. This change has reduced the status of political power to the point where it is no longer necessary for believers to wage a war for its acquisition, as it is no longer needed to secure the desired benefits. Non-political institutions serve this purpose equally well.

The Power of Peace

According to a hadith, "God grants to gentleness what he does not grant to harshness." That is to say, peaceful activism is distinctly superior to violent activism. There is nothing mysterious about the point made in this hadith. This is a simple and a well-known fact of life in a situation of war and violence, feelings of hatred and enmity flare up between the two sides and, in the process, the existing resources are destroyed. People from both sides get killed and the entire society turns in to a jungle of negative feelings. It is quite obvious that in such an atmosphere no constructive and consolidated work can be done. There is nothing to be achieved in war and violence, save death and destruction.

On the contrary, an atmosphere of peace enables normal relations to be established between people. Feelings of love and friendship prevail in such a situation. In a favourable atmosphere constructive activities flourish and the existing resources can be used for development or activities. A positive bent of mind will prevail which will help develop academic and intellectual activities.

The greater ill-effect of war is that it limits opportunities whereas the greatest benefit of peace is that it opens up opportunities to the ultimate extent. War invariably results in further loss, while peace invariably results in further gain. That is why Islam teaches us to avoid war and confrontation at all costs and commands us to establish peace to the greatest possible degree.

Clarification of a Fallacy

There are certain verses in the Quran which convey injunctions similar to the following: 'kill them wherever you find them.' (2:191)

Referring to such verses there are some who attempt to give the impression that Islam is a religion of war and violence. This is totally untrue. Such verses relate in

a restricted sense, to those who have unilaterally attacked the Muslims. The above verse does not convey the general command of Islam.

The truth of the matter is that the Quran was not revealed in the complete form in which it exists today. It was revealed from time to time, according to the circumstances, over a time span of 23 years. If this is divided into years of war and peace, the period of peace amounts to 20 years, while that of war amounts only to 3 years. The revelations during these 20 peaceful years were the peaceful teachings of Islam as are conveyed in the verses regarding the realization of God, worship, mortality, justice, etc.

This division of commands is a natural one and is found in all religious books. For instance, the Gita, the holy book of the Hindus pertains to wisdom and moral values. Yet along with this is the exhortation of Krishan to Arjun, encouraging him to fight (3:30). This does not mean that believers in the Gita should wage wars all the time. Gandhiji, after all, derived his philosophy of non-violence from the same Gita. The exhortation to wage war in the Gita applies only to exceptional cases where circumstances leave no choice. But for general day-to-day existence it gives the same peaceful commands as derived from it by Mahatma Gandhi.

Similarly, Jesus Christ said: "Do not think that I came to bring peace on Earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword." (Matthew, Chapter 10)

It would not be right to conclude that the religion preached by Christ was one of war and violence, for such utterances relate purely to particular occasions. So far as general life is concerned, Christ taught peaceful values, such as the building up of a good character, loving each other, helping the poor and needy, etc.

The same is true of the Quran. When the Prophet of Islam emigrated from Makkah to Madinah, the idolatrous tribes were aggressive towards him. But the Prophet always averted their attacks by the exercise of patience and the strategy of avoidance. However on certain occasions no other options existed, save that of retaliation. Therefore, he had to do battle on certain occasions. It was these circumstances which occasioned those revelations relating to war. These commands, being specific to certain circumstances, had no general application and were meant to be followed only in the short term. They were not meant to be valid for all time to come. That is why, the permanent status of the Prophet has been termed a Mercy for all mankind.' (21:107)

Prophetic Vision

The Prophet Muhammad, may peace be upon him, was born in 570 A.D. in Makkah, the power centre of Arabia, and died in Madinah in 632. His father Abdullah, died prior to his birth. His mother, Amina, also died soon after his birth. There was nothing extraordinary in his external circumstances. But, from his very childhood, his personality reflected extraordinary character. On seeing him, his grandfather, Abdul Muttalib, used to remark that this grandson of his would reach a high place in life.

Chapters 93 and 94 of the Qur' an briefly describe the circumstances of his early years, and assert that, God took special care of him. In his youth when he went in search of truth, God gave him guidance through revelation. His livelihood was provided for when one of the wealthy ladies of Makkah, having become impressed by his extraordinary personality and character, desired to marry him. Besides, the Prophet was specially gifted with a vision that would enable him to recognise favourable opportunities, and turn every disadvantage to advantage.

The well known German psychologist Alfred Adler in his book, *The Individual Psychology* has written that, after studying human beings all his life, the greatest potential he found in them was "their power to turn a minus into a plus."

Throughout human history, the greatest example of this human potential coupled with vision is to be found in the Prophet Muhammad. This unique quality in him has been acknowledged by historians in diverse ways. For instance, British writer, Mr. E.E. Kellert writes: "Muhammad faced adversity with the determination to wring success out of failure."

The Prophet's vision was on a totally different plane from that possessed by the common man. It would be true to say that such extraordinary vision has never been found in a person who is not a Prophet. The extraordinary nature of this vision is a proof in itself that it was not a human quality in the simple sense, but that he had received it, in a special sense, from the Almighty whose knowledge encompasses past, present and future.

As an illustration of this, we mention some incidents from the life of the Prophet. These events are not just proofs of his personal superiority but, in their essence,

they also provide proof of the fact that the Prophet was an inspired person, who had received knowledge directly from God—a knowledge, the acquisition of which is not possible for an ordinary man.

Envisioning the future

How great was this vision of the Prophet can be judged by an incident in the early period of his prophethood in Makkah. It should first be explained that the Makkans regarded him as being so insignificant that instead of calling him Muhammad, son of Abdullah, they ridiculed him by calling him Muhammad the son of Abu Kabsha.’ (Abu Kabsha was a shepherd in Makkah, whose wife had been Muhammad’s may peace be upon him, wet nurse.) In these apparently ordinary and unpropitious. circumstances, his vision was nevertheless on so high a plane that, when in the early years of his prophethood, the Makkan leaders gathered at the house of Abu Talib, the Prophet’s uncle, to ask the Prophet what it was that he aspired to, he replied with complete determination: I want only one word from you, if you are willing to give that, you will come to possess the whole of Arabia and all the other parts of the world will surrender before you. (*Hayat As Sahaba*, 1/56).

The day the Prophet made this pronouncement, he was all alone in the world, without a single soul to support him. To those who lacked insight he had no future, yet he could visualize something which appeared inconceivable to others. Today we all know that these words uttered by him became a part of history. Within barely twenty three years of the commencement of his mission, the whole of Arabia was brought into the fold of Islam, while in the next two decades the Roman and the Sassanid empires,— the two great empires of the world, — had surrendered before his followers. These events were so astonishing that historians have called them the greatest miracle of human history. In the words of historian M.N. Roy:

Every Prophet established his pretension by the performance of miracles. By that token Muhammad must be recognized as by far the greatest of all Prophets, before or after him. The expansion of Islam is the most miraculous of all miracles. (*Historical Role of Islam*, p.4)

Seeing an advantage amidst disadvantages

After attaining to prophethood, the Prophet Muhammad, may peace be upon him, lived in Makkah for thirteen years. This was the most difficult period of his

life: only a few of the Makkans believed in him. While the majority – especially the leaders – put up stiff opposition to his ideas. They created all kinds of hardship for him and his companions, even killing some of them; placed a total boycott on him along with his family; deprived him of tribal protection, and resolved to kill the Prophet himself, in order to wipe out Islam forever etc.

In those days the circumstances appeared to be extremely disadvantageous. It was a tribal age. It was held that the actual power of an individual lay in his male child, and since the Prophet had no son, his opponents used to call him ‘*abtar*’ (rootless), that is, he had no future. In these apparently desperate circumstances, the Prophet replied: “God has promised me a town which will swallow up all other towns, people call it Yathrib, but it is Madinah.” (*Muwatta* Imam Malik, 641)

What in essence he was saying was that God had decreed that he leave Makkah for another town, a town which would form the centre of his mission and which would then become so powerful as to “swallow up” all other towns. This was a figurative way of saying that all the nations of the world would surrender to it. This observation appeared strange, coming as it did from one who had become *persona non grata* in his own home town, Makkah, and who was now apparently living in the most straitened circumstances.

When the Prophet migrated from Makkah to Madinah, he did not even have a pair of shoes on his feet; hiding himself in this state from the Makkan leaders he reached Madinah. Called Yathrib in those days, was a town attached with no importance. However in that same Arabia where Makkah had become so inhospitable to him, Madinah proved to be quite the reverse. Almost all its inhabitants entered the fold of Islam, and moreover, the Muslims scattered outside the periphery began to settle within the town. In this way, Madinah became a powerful centre of Islam. Within the space of a few years, his mission flourished there, then it spread to all the other towns in Arabia. Ultimately, the whole of Arabia entered the fold of Islam.

Given the distressing nature of the circumstances in Makkah, it took great insight on the part of the Prophet to see what the future held for him in Madinah, which was situated at a distance of 300 miles from Makkah. The fact that he foresaw a great future there, is proof of his quite remarkable vision.

Apparently, the inhabitants of both the towns, Makkah and Madinah, were idolators, yet there was a basic difference between the two: in Makkah, people’s material interests were linked with idolatry, whereas, for the Madinans,

idolatry was only an ancestral heritage; it had no other significance.

Due to the shortage of water in Makkah, agriculture and horticulture did not exist there. Idolatry, however, provided one of the greatest sources of the townspeople's livelihood. The Makkans had placed in the Kabah idols numbering 360, belonging to all the Arabian tribes. These Arabian tribes used to visit Kabah to worship their idols where they also offered devotional presents. Due to their visit in great numbers the business in Makkah prospered. By the visit of these devotees Makkans benefited in almost the same manner as countries benefit nowadays from the visit of tourists on a large scale. Furthermore, since the Makkans were the custodians of this idolatrous system, they had come to acquire the position of political leadership of the whole of Arabia. Abandoning idolatry, therefore, appeared to them to be synonymous with the collapse of their politics and economics.

Whereas the situation in Madinah was quite different. There was water and fertile soil. By means of agriculture and horticulture, its inhabitants easily managed to secure their livelihood. Therefore, they were not afraid that if they abandoned idolatry for monotheism, their economy would be ruined. That explains the difference in the response from the people belonging to the two cities. Where the Makkans vigorously opposed the call of monotheism given by the Prophet Muhammad, may peace be upon him, the Madinans, soon after their first introduction to the religion of monotheism, abandoned idol worship and accepted Islam without any hesitation.

To understand this difference between Makkah and Madinah and to judge that Madinah rather than Makkah would provide the strongest ladder to progress called for keen perception. This assessment made by the Prophet Muhammad, may peace be upon him, is a living proof of the profundity of his vision, and is literally testified to by history.

Introducing Peace as the Most Powerful Weapon

The period in which the Prophet Muhammad, may peace be upon him, was born was one of war and conflict. Throughout the world the sword was regarded as the sign of power. The Arabs had a saying: The greatest check of war is war. In this connection the Prophet observed: "God grants to non-violence what he does not grant to violence." (*Al-Tirmidhi*)

In the conditions prevailing fifteen hundred years ago such observations seemed extraordinary. Such sentiments were so highly at odds with the times

that words of this nature could be uttered only by one whose mind had not been moulded by his immediate circumstances, but had been inspired rather by some higher source of knowledge. Both the initial as well as the later period of Islam testify completely to the principle of inspiration.

During the life of the Prophet Muhammad, may peace be upon him, the Quraysh, who enjoyed the leadership of Arabia, turned so hostile to him that they went to the extent of waging war against him. According to the books of *seerah*, the Quraysh wanted to embroil him in minor or major battles on more than eighty occasions. But the Prophet did his best not to engage in hostilities by adopting a peaceful policy. For instance, on the occasion of the Ahzab encounter, the Prophet set up a buffer in the form of a trench between him and his enemies. Then on the occasion of Hudaibiya, when it came to making a peace treaty with the enemy, the Prophet, accepted all the conditions set by them.

During the 23 year period of his prophethood, the Prophet, physically encountered his antagonists only on three occasions – at Badr, Uhud and Hunayn, where conflict had become totally unavoidable. Each of these three engagements lasted for only half a day. This means that the Prophet fought for only one and a half days throughout his life, with the total casualties amounting to not more than 130 from both sides. The winning over of such an aggressive and belligerent people with so little bloodshed had been possible only because the Prophet always used to lay stress on the power of peace.

Arabia had been conquered during the lifetime of the Prophet. The wars that took place in this process took a toll of less than one hundred and fifty people. This revolution brought about by the Prophet Muhammad, may peace be upon him, was indeed a bloodless revolution. And this bloodless revolution became possible only because he acted on his belief in the power of peace.

In the later centuries of Islam, too, this peace formula was followed. That is why Islam achieved such great successes. One prominent example of this matter is provided by an event which took place in the thirteenth century. During this period the barbaric Mongol tribes rose from Turkistan and devastated the entire Muslim empire right from Samarqand to Aleppo. The grand Abbasid caliphate vanished altogether.

In those days the Muslims' political and military power had so greatly weakened that the saying spread among them that if you were told that the Mongols had been defeated, you should not believe it. It was in this situation that the Islamic

policy of peace performed a miracle. Muslim men and Muslim women rose to the occasion, engaging themselves in peaceful *da'wah* work. The result was miraculous, within a period of 50 years the scene was completely changed. In the words of the Qur'an (41:34), the enemies had been turned into close friends. The majority of the Mongols had been brought into the fold of Islam.

The Religion of Muslims had conquered where their arms had failed." (*The Preaching of Islam*, by T.W. Arnold) As another historian has put it: "The conquerors had accepted the religion of the conquered."

The Prophet Muhammad, may peace be upon him, held that the power of peace was far greater than the power of violence, and on many occasions, he and his followers successfully put this into practice. As a result this concept of peace, as opposed to violence, influenced the course of events at the time and continued to have an impact on later generations. In present times this thinking has assumed the status of a permanent social philosophy. Many prominent thinkers are its advocates. For instance, it was this principle of peaceful activism on which Mahatma Gandhi based his movement of non-violence and with this power of non-violence the freedom movement successfully achieved its target. Then it was this same principle by which the South African leader Nelson Mandela became successful in his political movement in support of the blacks against the whites.

The Prophet Muhammad, may peace be upon him, was born in the second half of the sixth century AD. It was an age of constant skirmishing. In those days people resorted to violence, regardless of the issue, for they knew of no other solution to their problems. In such an atmosphere the Prophet Muhammad, may peace be upon him, declared that the power of peace was far greater than the power of violence. This peaceful activism could have been understood only by one whose vision was so profound as to enable him to penetrate appearances in order to see reality, one of rare insight, able to penetrate the present and see the future. As we know in present times the invention and use of the latest weapons of war have only increased the destructiveness of war or violence. In no way do they herald success or victory for anyone. On the other hand, advances in modern science and technology, e.g. today's communications systems, have to a hitherto unimaginable extent, proved strongly supportive of the peaceful method.

These extraordinary possibilities which lay hidden in the darkness of the future fifteen hundred years ago required an exceptional vision. This observation of

the Prophet serves, undoubtedly, as a vital proof of this vision.

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Overcoming Handicaps

A dancer from South India, Sudha Chandran, was only sixteen years old when she broke her right leg in an accident on May 2, 1981. She was immediately taken to a local hospital. Without taking the necessary preliminary precautions, such as cleaning her wound and administering anti-tetanus injections, the doctors put her leg in plaster from thigh to toe. As the pain increased, her parents shifted her to a hospital in Madras. When the plaster was stripped off, it transpired that her leg had begun to blacken – a clear indication that infection had reached the bone and gangrene had set in. The doctors did all that they could, but her leg could not be saved. On June 6, 1981, it was amputated three inches below the knee.

Sudha's unbounded love for dancing had not abated. "I want to dance," she used to cry in anguish. "Will I ever dance again?"

She was fitted with a modern artificial leg, known as the "Jaipur foot". The inventor of this foot, Dr P.K. Sethi, happened to meet Sudha's teacher, who told the doctor of his pupil's ardent and undying passion for dancing. The doctor replied: "Sudha will be able to dance like anyone with normal limbs. Only she shall have to be tough enough to put in the extra effort and bear initial pain."

When Sudha learnt of this, she immediately readied herself for the initial pain. She resumed her pursuit in earnest, and by putting in extra effort, she once again perfected her performance. Her first post-accident appearance was in Bombay on April 1, 1984. Dance critics, who had seen her perform before the amputation, said that she was dancing better now than before, and that it was difficult to tell which leg was artificial.

One may be beset by the most grievous handicaps in life, but, it is always possible to rise above them, as Sudha Chandran did. However, one must be willing to endure some "initial pain"; and put in some "extra effort" to achieve one's goal.

Islamic Activism

Addressing the Prophet Muhammad, may peace be upon him, the Qur'an enjoins: "Therefore, bear up patiently as did the steadfast apostles before you. Bear up with patience and do not seek to hurry on their doom." (46:35)

That is, showing restraint in adverse situations and refraining from negative reaction from the basic principles of Islamic activism. This means that, in unfavourable situations, no emotional move is made; rather, by avoiding the path of reaction and retaliation, actions are planned on the basis of realism.

This principle can briefly be called positive activism. That is, without interfering with the prevailing state of affairs, one should try to discover opportunities as they occur and avail of them. To initiate one's actions by challenging the status quo amounts to choosing a negative starting point. On the other hand, maintaining the status quo and availing of all opportunities which present themselves amounts to taking a positive course of action. This method can briefly be called positive status quoism, for which a complete scheme can be chalked out in the light of the Seerah (biography) of the Prophet.

1. Positive Status Quoism in Religious Affairs

The Prophet Muhammad, may peace be upon him, received his first prophetic call in 610 A.D. in Makkah. This city was dominated by idolaters, who had placed in the Kabah 360 idols belonging to various Arabian tribes. The Kabah had, therefore, become a religious centre for all these tribes. The presence of these idols in the Kabah was totally against the beliefs of the Prophet, an upholder of monotheism in the true sense of the word. Yet rather than make efforts to upset the status quo in Makkah, he fully engaged himself in his task of spreading the word of God, availing of whatever opportunities were available – despite the presence of the idols.

In those days the Kabah was the gathering point of the inhabitants of Makkah, and meetings were held there almost daily. The Prophet began to make use of these gatherings for the purposes of *da'wah*. On his visit to the Kabah, instead of interfering with the idols, he would go to the people and recite the verses of the Qur'an to them. This policy of avoiding the idols and availing of *da'wah* opportunities proved to be a wise one: many people, profoundly influenced by

the holy Qur'an, embraced Islam, and this without there having been any disruption of Makkah's peaceful atmosphere. This gave an added impetus to the Prophet's missionary endeavours.

2. Positive Status Quoism in Social Affairs:

In Makkah, there was a public place known as Dar Al-Nadwah, which served as a political centre. This was dominated by the idolaters. When their opposition to the Prophet Muhammad, may peace be upon him, intensified, they took a unanimous decision to boycott the Prophet, his family and his followers. When the boycott too failed to inflict any harm on his mission, his opponents issued a death warrant from this same Dar Al-Nadwa.

When the Prophet heard of this, although his situation was now extremely serious, he did not attempt either to revoke the decision of Dar al-Nadwa or to launch a protest campaign supported by his followers. On the contrary, what the Prophet did was quietly leave the city for Madinah, a town 300 miles away from Makkah. Even after reaching Madinah, he did not devote any time to planning counter moves, but gave his full attention to the task of *da'wah*. This was also an example of positive status quoism. In this way, the Prophet, by avoiding direct confrontation with the situation at hand, found another vast field in which to continue his peaceful activities.

3. Positive Status Quoism in Political Affairs:

When the Prophet migrated to Madinah, after thirteen years of his prophethood, the existing society of Madinah was composed of three groups – Muslims, idolaters, and Jews. Accepting that social set-up as it was, the Prophet established a system based on plurality. The status of Madinah under this system was that of a city state, the Prophet being the head of state. Within this framework other social groups were granted the right to lead their lives as they wished and resolve their issues in accordance with their respective religions and cultures.

This set-up provided another example of status quoism. It was by accepting the prevailing situation there, that the Prophet began his peaceful *da'wah* mission. The result was miraculous. The multi-cultural society of the first phase was gradually transformed into a unicultural society in the second phase.

4. Positive Status Quoism in Matters Relating to Prestige:

Even after the Prophet's departure from Makkah—his homeland—for Madinah, the Makkans, unflagging in their enmity, decided to launch an armed onslaught against him. Apart from several minor skirmishes, two major battles, Badr and Uhud, took place. These wars again disturbed the peaceful atmosphere required to carry out *da'wah* activities. Therefore the Prophet negotiated with the Makkans and, accepting all their demands unilaterally, entered into a 10-year no-war pact, known as the Hudaibiyyah treaty. This was yet another example of positive status quoism. By the terms of this treaty the Prophet accepted the Makkan position exactly in accordance with their demands. By his acceding to their position, the Prophet was able to utilize all the opportunities for *da'wah* work offered by the situation. This resulted in what the Qur'an called an 'open victory.' (48:24)

5. Positive Status Quoism in Post Related Affairs:

Throughout a significant part of his life, Muhammad, may peace be upon him, was a messenger of God as well as the head of state. After his death the question arose as to who should be chosen to fill the latter position. This issue was settled by following the guideline given by the Prophet: "The head of state will be selected from amongst the Quraysh."

Ostensibly, it was an unusual injunction, for, according to the teachings of Islam, all human beings are equal. None enjoys any superiority over another. As such this advice to select the leader from amongst the Quraysh was a form of discrimination. But it was realistic rather than discriminatory. This was another example of positive status quoism. In fact, over the centuries, in line with ancient traditions, the Quraysh had acquired the position of leadership in Arabia. A sudden change in this status quo would therefore have created insurmountable problems. That was why the Prophet advised the Muslims to accept the existing political system. As a result of this wise policy, Arab unity remained intact and the furtherance of the Islamic mission continued unhampered, even after the death of the Prophet.

6. Positive Status Quoism in State Affairs:

Even after the demise of the Prophet Muhammad, may peace be upon him, this practice of positive status quoism continued in the early phase of Islam. One outstanding example is the policy adopted by the religious scholars during the latter half of the Umayyad period and the entire Abbasid era. The political

system had been corrupted during this period. Yet almost all the great Muslim scholars of those times (*ulama*, traditionists, jurists) avoided setting themselves on a collision course with those in authority. The religious scholars were thus saved from the backlash of the Muslim rulers; while those who opted for the course of confrontation with the rulers were removed from the scene.

This policy of non-interference in the political system left scholars free to produce that great treasure known as the library of Islam. It is a historical fact that almost the entire classical Islamic literature was prepared during this period. The development of the Arabic language, its grammar, its calligraphy, the exegesis of the Qur'an, the collection and editing of the *hadith*, the formulation of civil and religious laws (*fiqh*), the preparation of the literature of *kalam* (theology), etc., – all were developed during this period.

It is a fact that had the Muslim scholars and *ulama* of the age risen against a political system which they held to be corrupt, all this precious literature would never have come into existence, and the major part of the *hadith*, which enjoys the status of the second source in Islam, would not have been safely transferred to succeeding generations. The age of the press had not yet dawned, and the sole repositories of all Islam's spiritual riches were the memories of the surviving scholars. Had these scholars engaged themselves in political confrontations with the rulers, all the treasures of Islamic thought and practice would have been buried along with them.

In social matters, positive status quoism is thus an unalterable policy of Islam. It was by opting for this policy that the Prophet and his companions forged the great history of Islam which heralded a new era in all the religious and secular fields of human civilization.

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The Virtues of Dependability

During a recent visit to Europe, Habib Bhai from Hyderabad purchased a camera from a shop at Lausanne in Switzerland, at a cost of about Indian rupees 5000. Before long he realized he had made a mistake. He could have bought it in Saudi Arabia much cheaper – for about Rs. 3000, and he had been planning to visit Saudi Arabia on his way back to India. He decided to return the camera, but was at a loss to know what he should say to the shopkeeper. Still, he could not resist the idea of going to the shop and trying his luck. He went up to the saleswoman at the counter and asked her for a refund on the camera. Much to his astonishment, the lady did not even ask him why he wanted to return it. All she asked was: “Do you want the money in Indian or American currency?” She handed him a slip to take over to another counter where he would receive his money back. The money was immediately refunded as if it made no difference to the shopkeepers whether they had money or goods.

The reason that the camera was taken back without demur was that the shopkeepers were sure that before long another customer would come along and buy it. Their article was of dependable quality: If one person did not require it, another would.

The Islamic Concept of History

According to the Qur'an, God has created the universe with a certain purpose, and all its parts which are strictly under His control, are carrying out His divine scheme without the slightest deviation. Similarly, man too has been created with a certain purpose. Yet man, on the contrary, is totally free. He can do what he wants by his own decision. However, in spite of this freedom he is being watched constantly by God, for He does not allow any such deviation in human history over a long period as would nullify His very creation plan.

Creation Plan of God

The Universe made by God is so vast that, despite the enormous progress made by human beings in their attempts to fathom the universe, many of its secrets still remain unknown. The planet earth, made by God as part of the cosmos was and still is unique in the entire universe, in that it has been endowed with an atmosphere and all the other factors which are essential to make it habitable for man.

After bringing into existence a favourable world in the form of the earth, God created the first man Adam and his feminine counterpart, Eve. Although the precise date of this event is unknown, it is a fact that the first pair of human beings to set foot on earth was this very Adam and Eve.

Adam was the first man as well as the first Prophet. The way of God is to select a man as His messenger from amongst human beings themselves in order to send His revelations to mankind. Therefore, God revealed to Adam through an angel the purpose of man's inhabiting the earth. According to this plan, God created a creature in the form of man, upon whom He bestowed freedom. Where the rest of the universe had no choice but to submit to the will of God, it is desirable for man to opt for this divine plan of his own free will.

This plan of divine will is based on two basic principles – monotheism and justice. Monotheism holds man to worshipping one God alone, and not associating anyone or anything in this worship. Justice holds man to adhering completely to ethical principles in dealing with other human beings and refraining from all kinds of injustice and oppression.

Along with this, God informed man that, although he appeared to be free, he was fully accountable to Him. God had a complete record of man's actions. In the eternal life after death God would judge everyone according to this record. One who exercised his freedom wrongly would be thrown into eternal hellfire.

Adam prepared tablets of clay on which he engraved the basic divine teachings, then heated them in a fire, thus preserving this divine guidance for the coming generations. It is believed that these divine teachings were written by Adam in the Syriac language.

Adam died at a ripe old age. For a long period of time his people continued to adhere faithfully to the divine guidance. But later rot began to set in the people. Idolatry replaced monotheism. People began to adopt the ways of injustice and oppression instead of justice and rectitude. After about one thousand years the perversion became so all pervading that they were completely distanced from the path of the *Shariah* as shown by Adam.

The Age of Perversion

God subsequently sent Noah as His messenger. He was granted an exceptionally long life of nine hundred and fifty years. During this extended period, he continued to show people the right path, generation after generation. But only a few people heeded his words. The rest persisted in their sinful ways. Then, in accordance with the ways of God, a huge flood engulfed them by way of punishment. Noah and his small band of followers were saved in a boat, while all the rest were drowned.

At that time, human population was probably concentrated only in the region of Asia known as Mesopotamia. The men and women saved in the wake of this flood settled afterwards in other parts of the world. Their race multiplied until it spread over the three continents of Asia, Africa and Europe.

After the death of Noah, his people continued for a considerable time to adhere to the divine path shown by him. But again rot set in later generations and they again deviated from the path of monotheism as well as of justice. God's messengers – the Qur'an has mentioned twenty six by name – continued to come for several thousand years. The Hadith tell us that about one hundred thousand messengers came to the world. In this way a long period elapsed between Adam and Messiah, when God's messengers continued to come to the world in almost every generation. But each time only a few individuals believed in them. The majority rejected these prophets in every age.

The Reasons for Perversion

What were the reasons for this continued transgression? There were two main reasons; one, political absolutism; another, ignorance about the world of nature.

In ancient times the system of monarchy prevailed everywhere. The kings of those days had adopted an easy strategy for the consolidation of their empire, and that was to apply a complete curb on intellectual freedom. As a result, science could not make any progress in the days of old.

The same was the case with religion. The policy adopted by these kings was not to allow their subjects to follow any religion other than that approved of, by the king. Superstitious religion served their purpose only too well. Therefore, not only did they themselves embrace superstitious religion but they also compelled their subjects to adhere to it. People were denied the right to think freely and opt for any religion other than the official one. This policy of the kings produced the evil of religious persecution. History shows that religious persecution has continued from time immemorial in one form or another.

The other main factor in this connection was ignorance. In ancient times man knew too little about the world and its phenomena. Political absolutism had placed an almost total ban on scientific research. Therefore, all kinds of superstitions regarding natural phenomena made inroads unchecked. It was generally held that the sun, the moon and the stars etc. possessed supernatural powers. Similarly it was believed that the sea, the mountains and other such natural phenomena were endowed with some extraordinary, mysterious power and exercised decisive control over human destiny.

The Problem of Evil

Those who want to interpret human history in the light of predetermined law as is done in the physical world, cannot but meet with failure. While the physical world may be explainable within the framework of predeterminism, the events of the human world are simply not amenable to interpretation in terms of any such law.

Others want to interpret the events of the human world in the context of freedom. But they are not satisfied either, with their interpretation. This is because in the case of human freedom, the suffering experienced in this world has no valid understandable explanation. The failure of both these

interpretations is due to the fact that they attempt to explain the whole in the light of a part – which is not at all possible.

The truth is that the right principle by which to interpret human history is neither that of pre determinism nor of freedom. According to Islam, there is only one correct principle to interpret human history and that is the principle of test. Man has been placed in the present world for the purpose of being tested. On the outcome of this test will depend the eternal future of all mankind.

Favourable circumstances were a sine qua non for this test in the world. Pre-determinism had to a certain extent to be a feature of these circumstances as a guarantee against any obstacle coming in the way of carrying out man's trial. On the other hand, the element of freedom was also essential in order that the intentions and actions of each individual could be properly judged. For man can be granted the credit for a good deed only on the condition that, despite having the opportunity to indulge in bad deeds, he chooses of his own free will to act virtuously.

If in this world everything had been totally predetermined, the element of trial would have been absent. However the granting of freedom did involve the risk of some people misusing their freedom and misuse it they did. This gave rise to the problem of human suffering which results from evil, yet this suffering, or evil, is a very small price to pay for a very precious thing. According to Islam that person is most precious who leads his life in this world in such a manner that despite facing all sorts of temptations he succeeds in overcoming them. Despite having the power to misuse his freedom, he refrains from doing so. Despite the possibility of leading an unprincipled life, he chooses of his own free will to be a man of principle. To identify such individuals, it is essential that an atmosphere of freedom prevail in the world. This is not possible under any other system.