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## War and Peace in Islam

What is the position of Islam on war and peace?

The Quran is very specific on this question. Addressing the Prophet of Islam, it gives a general command: "And, O Muhammad, strive hard with this, (the Quran) the great striving." (52:52)

The Quran is a book. It is not a gun or a sword. This being so, striving "with the Quran" clearly means engaging in a peaceful struggle, rather than an armed one.

The Quran is an ideological book. Striving peacefully with it alone can bring about a transformation in the minds of the people. Only then can the spirit be moulded in the Quranic way. That is to say, the Quran's mission is not to capture a piece of land but to capture the minds of the people. The goal of Islam is to bring about an intellectual revolution, not to destroy people physically.

If, by studying the Quran, we try to find out how the Prophet of Islam set about his task, we find that the specific goal of his entire mission were the changing of people's hearts and minds.

The Quran tells us that God sent His revelation to the Prophet in order that people's thinking be brought from darkness to light. (57:9)

According to a tradition, the Prophet of Islam said, "As regards the reformation of human beings, there is only one really important thing and that is, the reformation of the heart. Change people's hearts and their whole life will be changed. When the Prophet of Islam received his first revelation, he gathered people at the hill of Safa and addressed them thus: "O people, I have been sent in order to inform you about what is going to take place after death."

In a similar way even when the Prophet gained supremacy in Madinah, he again addressed its inhabitants thus: "O people, save yourselves from the fire, even if it is by a piece of date."

A study of the Quran and *Seerah* tells us that the actual goal of Islam has been, from beginning to end, to change people's hearts.

But in accordance with the creation plan, everyone – and there are all kinds of people in this world – has been given total freedom.

It was as a result of this freedom that certain people turned against the Prophet of Islam; some of them even went to the extent of taking up arms in order to put an end to his mission by force. It was in situations such as these that the Prophet and his companions had to resort to arms, temporarily, in self-defence. In this context, it would be correct to say that peace in Islam is the rule, rather than the exception.

Muhammad (may peace be upon him) lived on this earth for 23 years after receiving prophethood. During these 23 years, the Quran was revealed at intervals and according to the circumstances. If this period is divided up under the headings of war and peace, we will find that one part of the Quran, covering a span of twenty years, relates to peaceful teachings on the subjects of faith, worship, ethics, justice, humanity, etc., whereas the verses relating to war were revealed during a period of only 3 years, when the believers were faced with armed aggression.

There are 114 chapters in the Quran, containing 6,666 verses in all. There are hardly 40 verses, which relate directly or indirectly to war. This means that the verses dealing with war represent barely 0.6 percent of the entire text.

This kind of difference can be found in the constitutions of every country as well as in all religious books. For instance, while the Bible enshrines many teachings on the subject of peace, it also includes this saying of Jesus Christ:

“I did not come to bring peace but a sword.”

Similarly, while the Bhagavad Gita holds forth at length on wisdom and ethics, it also contains passages where Krishna insists that Arjun should go ahead and fight. Moreover, it is obvious that these injunctions in the Bible and the Gita are intended to cover only exceptional cases.

One important aspect of Islam as regards its peace-loving policy is that it differentiates between the enemy and the aggressor.

According to the teachings of Islam, if a group unilaterally attacks,

thus opening hostilities, war can, as a matter of necessity, be waged in self-defence. The Quran states: "Permission to fight is given to those who are attacked."

But so far as engaging in combat with the enemy is concerned, the Quran does not allow military action just on account of enmity. There is a verse in the Quran which gives clear guidance in this regard: "And good and evil are not alike. Requite evil with what is best. Then truly he, between whom and you there was enmity, will become your dearest friend." (41:34)

These verses teach us not to regard our enemies as objects of everlasting hostility, for a potential friend could be hiding in the guise of an enemy. Discover this friend and turn the potential into the actual. Then you will have no cause for complaint.

There is a tradition which throws greater light on this. Aisha, the Prophet's wife, speaking of the Prophet's general policy, said: "Whenever the Prophet had to choose between two courses of action, he always opted for the easier one."

It is clear that there are two ways of settling an issue – one violent and one peaceful. When we compare the two, we find that in any controversial matter, opting for violence is the harder course, while opting for non-violence is the easier. The general rule in Islam is that, whenever there is any controversy, we have to choose to tread the path of peace rather than that of violence. In present times, when freedom has been accepted as an irrevocable right of man, peaceful methods should invariably be adopted.

For, according to the established principles of our times, although there are certainly many obstacles to opting for violent methods, there is no bar whatsoever to adopting peaceful methods.

It would be appropriate to add here that, during the life of the Prophet, if certain wars of a limited duration took place, such engagement only reflected the conditions of those times. The wars that took place in the first half of the seventh century are explainable in terms of it being an age of religious coercion and religious persecution. The atmosphere of religious tolerance that prevails today was not to be found in those times, so that the

opponents of monotheism, by initiating hostilities, forced the Prophet to fight. Today, religious tolerance has become an established right of every individual and every group. That is why the question of going to war to secure religious rights should simply never arise.

Constructive Islamic activities are possible only in a peaceful and normal atmosphere. The importance of peace in Islam is, therefore, so great that we are commanded to ensure peace by bearing with all kinds of unpleasant situations. Even when countering persecution by opponents, the ways of peace and avoidance must be adopted, and peace must at all costs be unilaterally maintained: that is an important principle of Islam. There is only one exception to this rule, and that is in the case of physical aggression by opponents.

The Prophet of Islam began his prophetic mission in ancient Makkah, where he lived for a period of thirteen years after receiving his prophethood. During this period the Makkan opponents repeatedly indulged in acts of persecution and violence. But the Prophet of Islam and his companions unilaterally tolerated all such acts of gross injustice. The emigration from Makkah to Madinah was also a form of tolerance and avoidance, resorted to by the Prophet, in order to avoid clashing with his opponents.

Even after the Prophet's migration, his opponents were not content, but set out to attack him, notwithstanding the distance of three hundred miles separating Makkah and Madinah. In the books of hadith these attacks are called *ghazwah* (battles). Eighty three *ghazwahs* are recorded in the hadith. However, only three all-out battles took place between the Prophet and his opponents. This was because, on all the other occasions, by means of avoidance and timely strategy, the Prophet managed to avert confrontation between the two sides: eighty *ghazwahs* were, therefore, cases of avoidance and only on three occasions (Badr, Uhud, Hunain), was he forced to take up arms, there being no other option.

One example of this avoidance of armed confrontation is that of the signing of the Hudaibiya peace treaty. When a pitched battle seemed imminent between the Prophet of Islam and his opponents, the Prophet successfully defused the situation by the initiation of

peace negotiations which continued for two weeks. During these negotiations, which took place at Hudaibiya near Makkah, the Prophet of Islam found the other party clinging obstinately to its demands.

Therefore, the Prophet unilaterally accepted all the conditions of the enemy in order to arrive at a peaceful conclusion.

The purpose of this pact was to end tensions between the two parties and to maintain a normal atmosphere in order that the work of *dawah* and reconstruction might be performed – the actual goal of the mission of Islam. Immediately after the conclusion of the Hudaibiya peace treaty, the atmosphere did come back to normal and all the constructive activities of Islam were resumed in full force. This finally resulted in the spread of Islam throughout the whole of Arabia.

According to the teachings of Islam, waging war is the prerogative of an established government alone, and does not fall within the province of non-government organizations or institutions. If non-government organizations feel the need of reform, any movements they launch to that end must remain strictly within a peaceful sphere. Entering the arena of violence is in no way permissible in Islam.

Two extremely important points should be noted in this regard. One is that the launching of aggressive movements by NGO's, on any pretext, is unlawful. The second point is that, although an established government is allowed to fight a defensive war, it is still bound by the condition of prior declaration. An undeclared war is totally unlawful in Islam. A guerrilla war is unlawful because it is waged by NGOs, while a proxy war is unlawful because, although a government may be instrumental in waging it, it is without a proper declaration. There is no justification for any such war. The Quran states that before going into battle you have to "throw back their covenant to them." (8:58)

The present world is so structured that conflicts inevitably take place between individuals. On such occasions, Islam tells us not to allow the conflict to escalate to the point of a violent confrontation. The Quran calls this a policy of patience and avoidance. As a permanent principle, it says: 'Reconciliation is best.' (4:128) That is, at

the time of mutual conflict, reconciliation should be resorted to, in order to end the conflict, which is far better in its result. This is for the simple reason that, by adopting the path of conciliation we can find opportunities to prevent our energy from being wasted in confrontational actions and to devote all this energy to constructive activities. It is this advantage of conciliatory course that, the Prophet of Islam addressed his followers thus: "You should not desire confrontation with the enemy, you should ask God for peace."

There is a verse in the Quran that says:

"Whenever they kindle the fire of war, Allah puts it out." This verse shows us clearly the actual spirit of Islam regarding war and peace. For various reasons people enter the arena of battle. This is an exigency of the system prevailing in the world based on the principle of competition. It is the task of the believers, that when others ignite the flame of war, they should cool the fire by adopting the strategy of unilateral goodness. That is to say, the strategy of the believers should not be that of war, but of avoidance. What one has to do, on the one hand, is to safeguard one's interests without going so far as to wage war; on the other hand, there is the responsibility of being the messengers of peace. We should be traders of peace and not traders of war.

It was in this spirit of Islam that, when the Prophet came into power in Madinah, he did not start waging war in order to force people to surrender to him. Instead, he negotiated with tribes all over Arabia and ultimately brought about unity among them with a series of peace treaties.

If we make an in-depth study of the teachings of Islam, we find that Islam wants to root out all those factors which lead to war. Why is a war waged? There are two main causes. One, to attempt to annihilate the enemy. Second, to attempt to gain political power. In the achievement of either of these goals, there is no justification in Islam for war.

So far as enemies are concerned, there is a verse in the Quran which is applicable at all times:

"And good and evil are not alike. Return good for evil and behold, he who is your enemy will become your dearest friend." (41:34)

This shows that with regard to the enemy, Islam teaches us to try to eliminate enmity – and not the enemy himself.

According to the Quran, no enemy is everlastingly hostile. For in every enemy there lies a potential friend. Therefore, what the believer ought to do is to reach out to the man hidden within through unilateral good behaviour. By requiting good for evil he should convert this enemy into a friend.

A study of the Quran tells us that it differentiates between the enemy and the aggressor. We are commanded not to nurture hatred for the enemy, but rather, with the help of good behaviour and wise strategy, try to turn the enemy into a friend. However, in the case of unprovoked aggression, a defensive war is permitted under certain conditions. The Quran says:

“And fight in the way of Allah with those who fight you, but do not be aggressive.” (2:192)

This verse tells us that permission to wage war is given only when a party has already initiated hostilities against Islam, unilaterally. There is no permission for war in Islam without such actual aggression.

The basic principle of Islam as regards war and peace can be found in these words of the Quran.

“So long as they go straight with you, do you go straight with them.” (9:7).

This Quranic injunction shows that the principle governing mutual relations between nations is that, if one of them adheres to the policy of peace, the other must do likewise. Believers are not permitted to start military engagements on one pretext or the other, if their antagonists show no intention of going to war. Therefore, there is no excuse for war except in response to actual aggression.

As we know, the Prophet of Islam was born in Makkah in 570 A.D. He received the prophethood in 610 and lived as a prophet in this world for 23 years. During this 23 year period, he spent the first 13 years in Makkah and the last 10 years in Madinah. Some verses of the Quran were revealed in Makkah and some verses were revealed in Madinah. Now, what were his activities during this prophetic period?

He taught people by reciting verses of the Qur'an which said: 'Read in the name of your Lord ...' and other such verses, which were peaceful teachings, being non-militant in nature, and ethical in value. He taught people how to pray, and to practice patience and tolerance, even in the face of oppression, and thus avoid conflict.

He introduced the Qur'an to the people, as a main source of *dawah* and reform. He set the example of striving to secure not one's seat in Dar-al Nadwah (Makkah's parliament) but a seat in paradise. His own life was a living example to others, and he showed that even with the 360 idols set up in a place as holy as the Kabah, one could still carry out one's mission peacefully, without opting for the way of confrontation.

He was a role model, in that he showed that it was possible for a human being to work for the well-being of others, without any ill-feeling, despite the circumstances being highly provocative.

All the tasks performed by the Prophet throughout his life were marked by the greatness which comes from always choosing a non-violent course of action. Setting this kind of example formed the greater part of the Prophet's actual mission. And so far as war and violence are concerned, the jurists have characterized them as not being for the sake of Islam, but as being contingent upon exceptional circumstances.

## Islam in History

*(continued from previous issue)*

### The Peaceful Propagation of Islam

Referring to Christ and his followers, the Qur'an tells us:

When Isa (Christ) observed their refusal he asked:

Who will be my supporters in the cause of God? The disciples replied: We are the supporters of God. We believe in Him. Bear witness that we have surrendered ourselves to Him. (3:52)

The response given by the disciples to the call of Jesus was so appropriate that the same response was likewise demanded by the Muslims. Therefore the Qur'an says:

O Believers, be God's helpers. When Christ the son of Mary said to the disciples, 'Who will come with me to the help of God?' They replied: 'We are God's helpers.' Some of the children of Israel believed in Him, while others did not. We aided the believers against their enemies and they triumphed over them. (61:14)

On deeper reflection we find that this verse is of relevance to the history of the second stage of Islam, that is, the second period of the Muslim *ummah* (community). That was when *fitna* had ceased and religious freedom had been introduced into the world. Then the Muslims had to adopt the same course as that adopted by the followers of Christ under his guidance. Of course, there was no question of adopting the additions and innovations in their religious beliefs; these were to be rejected. Therefore, leaving aside the system of their beliefs, the practical pattern adopted by them in *da'wah* was without doubt a prophetic pattern. And it was as worth adopting for the Muslims as it was for the Christians.

The question arises as to what kind of "help" Christ had asked his followers to give. We find the answer in the traditions. Ibn Hisham,

the Prophet's biographer of the first phase, writes: "I have received it from reliable sources that Abu Bakr al-Huzali narrated that, one day, after the peace treaty of Hudaibiya, the Prophet came to his companions and said, 'O people, God has sent me as a mercy to all the nations of the world, therefore, do not differ as the disciples of Christ differed with Christ.' The Prophet's companions asked: 'O Messenger of God, how did the disciples of Christ differ from their Prophet?' The Prophet replied: 'Christ invited the disciples to what I have invited you. So those who were sent to nearby places, happily accepted it, but those who were sent to distant places were reluctant to go. Then Christ complained to God about it, so God's special succour descended upon them and these disciples began speaking the language of the community to which they were being sent.'" (*Seerat an-Nabi*, Ibn Hisham, vol 4/279).

This incident has been recorded in the present Bible.

Here are some excerpts in brief:

Go ye therefore and make disciples of all the nations.  
(Matthew, 28:19).

And the gospel must first be preached among all the nations.  
(Mark, 13:10).

Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. (Mark, 16:15).

In obedience to these injunctions of Christ, his followers left Palestine. After Christ had left the world, they spread over different cities and countries. They propagated their religion peacefully and those who embraced their faith also adopted the path of peace in propagating the divine message. In this way, the spread of Christianity continued from generation to generation.

As a result of this non-aggressive activity on the part of the followers of Christ, within a period of two hundred years after the advent of Christianity, it spread to many eastern countries. Subsequently, these Christians entered Europe. Here they were initially faced with great difficulties. However, they quietly began propagating Christianity until the time came when the European Emperor Constantine the Great came under its influence, converted to Christianity in 337 and

proclaimed it to be the official religion of his empire. Subsequently, the majority of Europeans entered the Christian fold.

The Qur'an tells us that during the life of Christ, God decreed that the followers of Christ should prevail over their enemies.

In the third chapter of the Qur'an, addressing Christ, God said: "I shall .... Exalt your followers above them (the disbelievers) till the Day of Resurrection." (3:55). Similarly, in chapter 61, the Qur'an has this to say:

We aided the believers (in Christ) against their enemies, and they triumphed over them. (61:14).

Here the question arises as to how the followers of Christ came to dominate them. Surely this did not come about as a result of war and violence. For neither by the Qur'an, nor by historical records can it be established that the Christians engaged in armed confrontations with their religious opponents.

According to historical records, the number of Christ's followers continued increasing until a time came when, by the sheer ratio of their numbers, they came to enjoy a position of dominance. This leads us to ask what feature of the propagation of their mission was so especially effective as to cause their numbers to increase so rapidly. The Qur'an states that this came about with the special succour of God: "We gave Christ the gospel and put compassion and mercy in the hearts of his followers." (57:27) We find the same sentiments expressed in the Bible in the words uttered by Christ:

But I say to you who hear: love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you. To him who strikes you on the one cheek, offer the other also. And from him who takes away your cloak, do not withhold your tunic either. Give to everyone who asks of you. And from him who takes away your goods, do not ask them back. And just as you want men to do to you, also do to them likewise. But if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you?

For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive back, what credit is that to you? For even sinners lend to sinners to receive as much back. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High. For He is kind to the unthankful and evil. Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful. Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you. (Luke 6:27-38)

This utterance of Christ indicates what kind of character a man with a mission should have. Normal human relations between the *da'i* and the *madu'* (the person addressed) are essential for the success of any *da'wah* mission. The only way to establish a favourable atmosphere is for the *da'i* to adopt the ethics of unilateralism, that is to behave well consistently and unconditionally, even if his hearers (the *madu'*) do not behave well towards him. In refusing to copy the attitude and conduct of the *madu'*, the *da'i* adheres to the highest code of ethics based on Islamic principles.

“And from him who takes away your cloak, do not withhold your tunic either.” (Luke, 6:29) We are told here in symbolic language what our behaviour should be. The *da'i* does all he can so that no controversy is created between himself and the *madu'*; all he does is convey the message of *da'wah*. That is why the *da'i* takes sole responsibility for the maintaining of a propitious atmosphere for *da'wah* by unilaterally bringing all controversies to an end. Such an approach was not peculiar to Christianity; it was a feature common to the missions of all of the prophets. This principle of unilateral accommodation is a *sine qua non* for success in the task of *da'wah*.

The followers of Christ wholeheartedly adopted this teaching of their Prophet. This special feature of their missionary character contributed extraordinarily to the spread of the Christian religion.

They made such headway, that they gave new meaning to the principle of peaceful proselytism. And then, along with their teaching, they engaged in such social service as proved an effective means of bringing the *madu'* closer to them. It was the result of this particular *da'wah* style that Christianity spread all over, becoming the greatest world religion.

There is a tradition recorded in *Sahih Muslim* which foretells us this rapid spread of the Christian religion:

Mustaurid Qarashi related that he heard the Prophet say that Doomsday would not come until the Christians were the greatest in number. When these words of the Prophet were conveyed to Amr ibn al-As (a senior companion of the Prophet and the conqueror and governor of Egypt) he asked Mustaurid: 'What is the nature of these traditions you are narrating?' Mustaurid replied: 'I narrate only what I have heard from the Prophet.' Amr ibn al-As said: 'If you say so (that is, if it is an authentic *hadith*) then the Christians are undoubtedly the most forbearing in times of adversity, take no time in setting themselves in order after a calamity and are better than others in caring for their weak and deprived.'

*(Sahih Muslim, Kitab al-Fitan).*

From these details we find that a major aim of the revolution brought about by the Prophet and his companions was to remove all obstacles in the path of *da'wah*, so that such conducive conditions would prevail as would encourage people to practice God's religion and invite others to the same path. This process had to be continued from generation to generation.

The first stage of this revolution was marked by the coercive system being brought to an end, ushering in the dawn of religious freedom in the world. The second stage was embarked upon, when, by availing of the advantages of this freedom, Muslims disseminated Islam at the universal level. Now the Muslims are in the third and final stage of their history, when the progress of religious freedom has reached its zenith. Now Muslims have to continue the task of conveying the truth to people and it is imperative that they do so by

adherence to peaceful methods. The truly shining example of religious achievement, according to the testimony of the Qur'an, is that of the followers of Christ.

Judging by the above-quoted words of Abdullah ibn Umar, the obstacles in the path of *da'wah* work have been removed forever. If obstacles reappear, this will surely be as a result of some ill-considered policy pursued by the Muslims themselves. If the Muslims are able to refrain from adopting any erroneous course, no real obstacle should ever come in the way of the call of the truth until the advent of Doomsday.

## **Conversion: An Intellectual Transformation**

When an individual belonging to one religious group joins another religious group after converting to that religion, that, in religious terminology, is called proselytism. But this is a limited concept of conversion, which needs to be viewed in a more scientific light.

The religious view of conversion relates only to religious tradition. In this respect it is relatively limited in its spectrum. The scientific outlook, on the contrary, is much broader in scope, being based on the eternal principles of nature itself. Although it would be proper to say that, in the religious context conversion for human beings is a matter of choice, in the scientific sense, this is not so. It is an eternal principle of life, in exactly the same way as the laws of nature have the status of being immutable. We are compelled to accept the principle of conversion, just as we are compelled to accept the morning following the evening, or one season coming after another.

### **Islam and Conversion**

Conversion in Islamic thought is not synonymous with proselytism in the formal sense. It is an event which takes place in a person's life as a result of intellectual revolution or spiritual transformation. It is not simply leaving one religious tradition for another. The Islamic ideal of conversion is for the individual to discover the truth after an exhaustive search for it and then by his own choice, abandon one religion for another.

During his final phase in 6 AH, the Prophet Muhammad, may peace be upon him, sent letters to the neighbouring rulers of his time, by which they were directly invited to accept the message of Islam. For instance, in his letter to the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius I, the Prophet wrote these words: "Accept Islam and you will be blessed with peace." Similarly at any gatherings which took place in Makkah the Prophet would make a point of going to that place and address the assembled people thus: "O people, say there is no god but God and you will attain God's grace."

At first glance this was an invitation to people to change their religion. But the study of the Qur'an tells us that it was in actual fact an invitation to a transformation in thinking, and not a change of religion in the simple sense. In the first phase of Islam, some Arab Bedouins had accepted Islam just by reciting the *kalima*, the creed of Islam, while they had not undergone any change in character at a deeper level. The Qur'an admonished them in strong terms:

The Arabs of the desert say 'We believe.' Say. "You have not believed yet; but rather say, 'We have accepted Islam, for the true faith has not yet entered into your hearts.'" (49:14).

From this we learn that conversion according to Islam means a thorough transformation of the person and not just a change of religion in the everyday sense.

There is a formal method of religious conversion prevalent among the Jews and Christians known as baptism. In this ritual ceremony the convert is dipped in water. The hue of water considered a symbol of purity, and their priests believe that dipping someone in pure clean water purifies him, and he is thus converted to a new religion. But pouring water outwardly does not purify a person, for the attainment of purity necessitates a transformation of the total human personality. The convert is suffused with the hue of God and he adopts God's ways in thought, word and deed.

As the Qur'an puts it:

We take on God's own dye – and who has a better dye than God's? And we are His worshippers. (2:138).

The Qur'an refuses to give its seal of approval to conversions which are mere formalities. In ancient Madinah there was the case of about three hundred people having become Muslims by reciting the Islamic creed. To all intents and purposes they even said their prayers, and fasted, but they did all this in a hypocritical manner, paying only lip service: their inner state did not correspond to their outward pronouncements. They claimed allegiance to Islam by word of mouth but, as regards the state of their hearts, the Islamic spirit was lacking. The Qur'an branded the 'Islam' of such people as a falsity:

When the hypocrites come to you, they say:

‘We bear witness that you are God’s apostle.’ God knows that you are indeed His Messenger, and God bears witness that the hypocrites are lying. (63:1)

What is meant by true religious conversion is illustrated by an incident in which some verses from the Qur’an were read to a gathering of Christians. About seventy of them were so deeply moved that they abandoned their ancestral religion and converted to Islam. As the Qur’an puts it: When they listen to that which was revealed to the Messenger, you will see their eyes filled with tears as they recognize its truth. They say: ‘Lord, we believe. Count us among Your witnesses. Why should we not believe in God and in the truth that has come down to us? Why should we not hope for admission among the righteous?’ (5:83-84)

Similarly, the Qur’an speaks of true believers “as those whose hearts are filled with awe at the mention of God, and whose faith grows stronger as they listen to His revelations. They are those who put their trust in their Lord, pray steadfastly, and spend of that which We have given them. Such are the true believers. They shall have degrees with their Lord and shall be forgiven by Him, and a generous provision shall be made for them. (6:2-4)

This shows that religious conversion in actual fact is the result of a realization. When the individual’s search for truth finds a convincing answer, this is such a profound experience that his heart is intensely moved. His eyes are filled with tears. His whole existence is moulded in the cast of truth. It is then that he emerges a new and altogether different person, having undergone a transformation.

That is why the Qur’an uses no synonym for conversion. To express the act of conversion, other more meaningful words have been used, for instance, the *da’wah* mission (the communication of the message to others) of Islam finds mention in the Qur’an in these words:

A light has come to you from God and a glorious Book with which He will guide to the paths of peace those that seek to please Him. He will lead them by His will from darkness to the light; He will guide them to a straight path. (5:15-16)

Those who enter the fold of Islam after being influenced by their study of the Qur'an, have been thus described in the Qur'an:

Shall he then who knows that what has been revealed to you by your Lord is the truth be like him who is blind? But it is only the men of understanding that pay heed. (13:19)

According to this verse, the real conversion is one which has taken place when the convert is aware that he has entered the phase of gnosis and has left behind the phase of ignorance. That is why a tradition of the Prophet speaks of the period prior to Islam as a period of ignorance.

Similarly, the difference between a believer and a non-believer has been alluded to in the Qur'an in the context of life after death: 'Can the dead man whom We have raised to life and given a light with which he may be guided among men, be compared to him who blunders about in a darkness from which he will never emerge?' (6:123)

This same reality has been expressed in different ways in the Qur'an, for instance, by the simile of the earth. When the rains come, the fertile earth blooms, becoming green with vegetation. 'Good soil yields fruit by God's leave. But poor and scant are the fruits which spring from barren soil. Thus we show our signs to those who render thanks.' (7:58)

Then there is the parable of the tree:

Do you not see how God compares a good word to a good tree whose root is firm with its branches in the sky, yielding its fruit every season by God's leave? God gives parables to men so that they may become mindful. But an evil word is like an evil tree torn out of the earth, and has no stability. God will strengthen the faithful with His steadfast word, both in this life and in the Hereafter. He leaves the wrongdoers in error. God accomplishes what He pleases. (14:24-27)

These verses from the Qur'an tell us the difference between one who has found the truth and one who has failed to do so. The latter is like the shrub growing on the upper surface of the soil: it is short-lived, either vanishing on its own or being pulled out, and is of no use

to mankind. The former resembles a profitable, fruitful tree putting its roots deep down into the earth. It seems that it is for the earth and the earth is for it. Receiving sustenance from the earth as well as the atmosphere, it benefits people in many ways. Rooted as it is in the earth, it has a desirable and meaningful existence.

*(continued on next issue)*

22-23 May-June 2002

## **Accepting Defeat**

In 1831, an American citizen went into business. In 1832 his business failed, so he entered the field of politics, but was no more successful in that sphere. He reverted to business in 1834, and was again a failure.

In 1841, he had a nervous breakdown. Once recovered, he again entered the political arena, in the hope that his party would nominate him as a candidate for Congress. His hopes were dashed, however, when his name failed to appear in the list of candidates. The first chance he had to run for the Senate was in 1855, but he was defeated in the election. In 1858, he once again stood in the congressional elections, and once again lost.

The name of this repeatedly unsuccessful person was Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865). So great were his services to his country that he is now known as the architect of modern America.

How did Abraham Lincoln manage to gain such a great reputation in American political and national history? How did he win his way to such a high position? According to Dr. Norman Vincent Peal, the secret behind his success was that "he knew how to accept defeat."

The great secret of life is realism, and there is no form of realism greater than accepting defeat. To do so is to acknowledge the fact that, far from being ahead of others, one is behind them. In other words, it is to know where one stands in life. Once defeat is accepted, one is immediately in a position to start life's journey afresh, for such a journey can only commence from where one

actually is; it cannot start from a point that one has not yet reached.

23 May-June 2002

## **Of all actions, the most sublime is remembrance of God**

Abu Darda reports the Prophet as asking his companions: "Should I not tell you of the action that is best and most pure in the presence of your Lord; the action which will raise you up in the sight of God, and is better for you than great expenditure of gold and silver; better too than that you should meet your enemies in battle, striking their necks and they striking yours?" "Do tell us," the Companions replied, "It is remembrance of God," said the Prophet.

*(Tirmidhi)*

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## A Case of Discovery

It is a true saying, that the present can be fully grasped and appreciated only by a due reference to the past. In order, therefore, to set before you dearly the reasons that have induced me to accept Islam in preference to the other great religions of the world, it is necessary that I should give you a short sketch of the various phases of doubt and faith through which I have passed from my boyhood upwards to the present day.

Having early lost faith in that strange and heterogeneous medley of animism, fetishism, polytheism and pantheism, known as popular Hinduism, I have been in search of a truer faith from my very boyhood. Naturally enough, I soon came in contact with the Brahmo Somaj and Christianity, then engaged in an apparently bitter conflict for obtaining mastery over the minds of the young Bengal. The star of Babu Keshab Chandra Sen was in the ascendant, and I still recollect the thrill of fervour and enthusiasm with which I used to pour over some of his eloquent sermons and discourses. The Brahmo Somaj introduced me to some of the great Unitarians of England and of America, notably to Theodore Parker of Boston, whom I began to regard as a prophet and an apostle of God. I became so exceedingly fond of his works that it was my habit in those days always to carry a volume or two of Theodore Parker's books with me wherever I happened to go, and to quietly read them over as others do the Bible or the Quran. In this state of mind, I shipped myself off to Europe for the sake of my education. Arrived in Scotland, I soon got into the society of some good Christian men and women of an orthodox type, who began to take great interest in me, and to express great concern for the salvation of my soul. I used to visit their houses and join in their prayer-meetings. Once or twice I even attended some of the revivalistic meetings then in vogue, and was greatly surprised to see strong, bearded men bitterly weeping for their sins, while scores of delicately-framed old spinsters were carried away in fainting fits. The emotional side of the Scotch character of which we see so little in India, now stood

revealed before me in a most unequivocal manner. But however deep and genuine my love and reverence for Christ was, however sincere my admiration for the general drift of his essential teachings, I could by no means reconcile myself to two items of the orthodox creed: (1) Atonement, and (2) Eternal Damnation. There was also a Unitarian chapel in Edinburgh that I occasionally attended, and though their religious views and mine were very similar in some respects, yet the general tone of the sermons delivered there was somewhat too cold and sometimes too rationalistic for my warm, oriental blood. In Edinburgh, I fell in with the writings of Thomas Carlyle, who inspired me not only with a genuine love for German literature but also with a real admiration for Luther, Goethe and Schiller. I began to study German in right earnest, and quietly made up my mind to visit that great country which had produced such a grand literature and given birth to such truly heroic souls as mentioned above. The east winds of Edinburgh which ill-suited my naturally delicate constitution, gave me a further plea, and I soon transhipped myself over to Leipzig with a determination to study science, literature and philosophy in the academic halls of that world-renowned University where Lessing and Goethe had finished their studies a century ago. As I was interested in biology and was soon greatly attracted by the Darwinian Theory of Evolution, which was then creating a tremendous ferment all over the German Fatherland, I soon read most of the writings of Buchner and Hackel, of Darwin and of Huxley and above all, of Herbert Spencer. Herbert Spencer had made a practical application of the Evolution Theory to religion and politics, art and society; in other words, to all the multifarious branches of human thought and feelings, and had done so with such a rare vigour of intellect and such an exuberant wealth of illustrations, that I began to consider him as the greatest philosopher that the world had ever produced since Plato and Aristotle, and his Evolution Theory in its practical bearings as the Gospel of the future church of mankind. This Theory of Evolution had, after all, solved all difficulties and set all doubts at rest!

Here was an indisputable *terra firma* on which to build the future superstructure of all human thought and speculation! Did it not account for so many things that were otherwise quite mysterious!

True: but it left very little room for the existence of an Almighty, all-knowing and all-good, personal God, for the need of prayer, or for the "hypothesis" of a life after Death where men are to be held responsible for their thoughts, words and deeds. In this manner, I became a Positivist of the schools of Auguste Comte and an Agnostic of the school of Huxley, both at the same time, and was in a very suitable frame of mind to intensely enjoy reading books like Strauss's "The Old and the New Faith" and John Stuart Mill's "Three Essays on Religion" and particularly his charming "Autobiography." Studying some of the German philosophers and especially Arthur Schopenhauer, who was then the *philosophe a la mode* in the student circles of Germany, I soon became a convert to Buddhism which, in its earliest scriptures, inculcates a lofty ethical code minus supernatural sanctions, and a Religion of Humanity minus distinctions of caste, creed and country; Halloo! I had after much wandering found the very religion I was in need of quite close to my own native land, since Buddha had chiefly lived and worked at Gaya and Rajagriha which were anciently included in Bengal and are just now situated on the very borders of the same. I got so exceedingly fascinated with the creed of Lord Buddha that I not only read all the books on Buddhism in English and German that I could lay my hands on, but even learnt Pali to be able to translate a portion of the *Milinda Prasana* in vindication of the right meaning of the *Nirvana* as I then conceived it to be. Professor Max Muller's interpretation, which amounted to the same things, was subsequent to mine. Within a short time I was asked by my German friend to deliver a few lectures on Buddhism, which created quite a flutter in all the clerical and orthodox circles of Germany, as much as in comparing my ideal Buddhism with a very orthodox form of Christianity then in vogue, I had given an unquestionably higher place to Buddhism. These two lectures on "Buddhism and Christianity" were printed, read and criticized all over the country and I had even the gratification of seeing one of them (The Second *Karma*) translated into English and published by the Free Thought Society of London then under the high auspices of Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant. When after some 12 years I met Mrs. Besant in Hyderabad for the first time, we were both Theosophists. But the inherent pessimism of Buddhism did not appeal to me at all and I soon grew tired of it.

Every limb of my body and every faculty of my soul was quivering and aching, as it were, for work and enjoyment, and here was a system of philosophy enjoining on me to deny some and to entirely suppress others of the most natural instincts and emotions of my youth and adolescence. There must be something morbid and radically wrong in a system and a creed that goes against our Human Nature.

When I was passing through this phase of my spiritual life, I had to go, in the first place, to Paris and then a year later on to St. Petersburg. In Paris I soon became quite familiar with the French language which I had already begun to study in Leipzig. French opened, altogether, a new world to me. It gave me, so to say, a new soul. I began to study and take delight in the works of Moliere and Racine, Voltaire and Victor Hugo, Renan and Taine. And quite particularly Voltaire, who appeared and still appears to me the greatest literary genius that the world has ever produced. But the works of Voltaire, though they immensely tickled and amused me, served only to make me a more confirmed sceptic than ever. The forty volumes of his *Oeuvres completes* which range over almost all subjects of human thought and feeling had, however, the effect of laughing me, for good, out of my German gaucherie and Buddhistic pessimism. The influence of Renan, though sceptical, was far more ethical and artistic. His "La Vie de Jesus" (Life of Jesus) is one of the best books I have ever read, deeply impressing me with its poetical style and moral earnestness. Renan led me to take an interest in Semitic religions and in Semitic languages. The works of Max Muller, with which I had been very familiar for several years, had already taught me how to study languages and religions from a scientific standpoint. Renan only continued what Max Muller had already begun, and I threw myself, heart and soul, into the comparative study of all the great religions of the world, to wit: Judaism, Zoroastrianism and Brahaminism on the one hand, and Buddhism, Christianity and Islam on the other. Christianity for some time appeared to me as the culminating point and the true reconciliation of the Semitic and the Aryan; and I might have become a convert to Roman Catholicism some years ago but for the dogmas of papal infallibility, transubstantiation and so on, which

my German university education had rendered untenable. Nevertheless, I was greatly impressed by Roman Catholicism on its artistic and archaeological side and I am still of the opinion, that there is no form of Christianity that affords greater consolation or offers a surer haven to a weary soul tossed for years on the tempestuous seas of modern scepticism, than the Church dedicated to St. Peter in Rome. In this frame of mind I returned to India, and was soon confronted with Theosophy as one of the leading movements of the day. When I was in the service of the late Nawab Sir Viqarul Umamah Bahadur, I was once agreeably surprised to receive through the Nawab Saheb himself the following three books as gifts: (1) Arnold's "Light of Asia." (2) Sinnet's "Occult World" and (3) "Esoteric Buddhism." Who the donor actually was, whether a Tibetan Mahatma or a friendly English bookseller, whence the books really came, whether from the monasteries of Lhasa or from the bookstalls of London I have not yet been able to discover, but the books were very useful and interesting reading for some months to come. I soon came in contact with some of the leading apostles of Theosophy and read all their books and pamphlets with great zeal. Theosophy soon revived my old interest in the comparative study of religion, and I now threw myself with special earnestness into the study of Islam and of Zoroastrianism which I had somewhat neglected before. My studies in the old Parsee religion culminated in a lecture on "Zoroastrianism" which was so well appreciated by those for whom it had been intended, that it was printed in a nice pamphlet form under the auspices of the Parsee Panchyat of Bombay. My Islamic studies, for which besides the particular environment of Hyderabad, I had ample resources placed at my disposal in the library of the late Maulvi Cheragh Ali, and that of Mr. Syed Ali Bilgrami now in England, brought me into contact with a religion so simple and intelligible, so reasonable and practical, that I should have taken the step I have lately taken some 10 years ago, had not an untoward incident forced me to publish a contradiction in the public journals and to leave Hyderabad altogether for some years. But it was evidently not in the counsels of that all-wise and all-merciful Providence who guides and controls everything, that I should have made this public profession of Islam earlier than I have done. Otherwise I should certainly have done so: He whom Allah

guides is rightly guided; but he whom He leaves in error shall find no friend to guide him. (18:17) However, it is better late than never. God is my witness, I have accepted Islam in all sincerity and earnestness, and the first reason that has moved me to do so is *its solid, historical groundwork*. After wandering helplessly for several years in the marshy bogs of divergent creeds and conflicting systems of philosophy, with only the will-of-the-wisp of speculative reason to serve me as a guide, my weary soul has at last found refuge and consolation in a religion based on a Revelation that has remained unaltered ever since its first compilation under the first Caliph, and in a creed that acknowledges as its Prophet of God, one whose historical personality is not only unquestionable but about whose youth, appearance, daily habits and even personal characteristics we know almost as much as we do about those of Oliver Cromwell or of Napoleon Bonaparte. You may slander or revile him if you choose, as so many Christian and other writers have done for centuries, but you can't throw even the least shadow of doubt on the historical basis of that immense personality that has stamped itself so deep on the rolls of Time as to make Christendom grow pale before that august and illustrious name even to this day. But Christendom need not grow pale at all. If it only knew his life and character as it really was—so noble, so genuine and withal, so loveable, Christendom would admire, honour and love him as all Muslims do. In the Prophet Muhammad, may peace be upon him, there is nothing vague and shadowy, mythical or mysterious, as, for instance, in Zoroaster and Sreekrishna, or even in Buddha and Christ. The very existence of those Prophets has been seriously doubted and even totally denied; but nobody, as far as I am aware, has ever ventured to reduce the Prophet Muhammad, may peace be upon him, either into a "Solar Myth" or into a "fairy tale" as some eminent savants of Europe have done with Buddha and Christ. Oh! What a relief to find, after all, a truly historical Prophet to believe in!

As for the Quran, it is not a mere heterogeneous compilation of a wilderness of stories and chronicles, of Prophetic rhapsodies and of poetical biographies, produced at widely different periods and by widely divergent men, and thrown into one single mould nobody exactly knows when and how; but it is, on the contrary, one single

Book bearing the indelible impress of one great Soul to whom God in His mercy has chosen to reveal it. There is such a marvelous continuity and uniformity running throughout the whole Book, that no impartial critic or fair-minded reader can ever doubt either its sincerity or authenticity. You may call it tedious or monotonous, if you like, you may even point out some of its apparent discrepancies, but you cannot deny its being exactly the same book as that which was revealed to the Holy Prophet during his lifetime at different periods and on different occasions ever since that memorable night of the 27th Ramadan (*Lailatul Qadr*) when the angel Gabriel stood before him and said:

Read, in the name of your Lord, who created, created man from clots of congealed blood. Read! Your Lord is the Most Bountiful One, Who taught man by the Pen, Who taught man what he knew not! Indeed, man transgresses in thinking himself self-sufficient. Verily to your Lord is the return. (96: 1-8)

This historical groundwork of Islam has struck even such a sceptic as Ernest Renan who in his "Etudes d' Histoire Religieu" (pp.220,230) makes some very pertinent remarks about it. Professor Bosworth Smith holds similar views and expresses himself in the following terms in his famous lectures on "Muhammad and Islam." "We know indeed, some fragments of a fragment of Christ's life; but who can lift the veil of thirty years that prepared the way for the three? ... But in Islam everything is different; here, instead of the shadowy and the mysterious, we have history. We know as much of Muhammad as we do even of Luther and Milton. The mythical, the legendary, the supernatural is almost wanting in the original Arab authorities, or at all events, can easily be distinguished from what is historical. Nobody here is the dupe of himself, or of others; there is the full light of day upon all that light can ever reach at all...In the Quran, we have beyond all reasonable doubt the exact words of Muhammad without subtraction and without addition. We see with our own eyes the birth and adolescence of a religion." (pp.17,18,22) And the last but not the least, Carlyle in his famous book: "Heroes and Hero Worship" has stated the following about the Quran: "When once you get this Quran fairly off, the essential type of it begins to disclose

itself: and in this there is merit quite other than the literary one. If a book came from the heart, it will contrive to reach the hearts: all art and authorcraft are of small amount to that. One would say, the primary character of the Quran is that of its genuineness, of its being a bona-fide book. Sincerity in all senses seems to me the merit of the Quran."

*(continued on next issue)*