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## The Preservation of Culture

The Modern world places utmost importance to the historical monuments, regardless of the countries to which they belong. From the local point of view these historical monuments are known as the cultural heritage of a nation. The Islamic tradition, no less than other traditions and disciplines attaches great importance to cultural heritage or, historical monuments. The preservation of cultural heritage, in fact, is related to the general matters of humanity, where there is no difference between the secular and the Islamic point of view. According to Islam, historical monuments are indeed worthy of being preserved, as being indispensable records of the past. If these records were not to be maintained, future generations would lose authentic sources of knowledge. It would be an irremediable loss.

Islam is a religion of Nature. Everything which is in accordance with nature and reason is regarded as important in Islam. One important and accepted principle of the Islamic *shariah* holds that 'all things, in essence, are lawful, when not forbidden.' Looked at in the light of this *shariah* principle, the preserving of a cultural heritage is certainly lawful in Islam: nowhere in the Qur'an or *sunnah*, are we commanded not to preserve our cultural heritage. Since we are not forbidden to do so, such action becomes lawful *per se*. No other proof is required for this.

Moreover, when we study the Qur'an, we find references regarding the importance of cultural inheritance. We reproduce below certain relevant passages from the Qur'an and hadith, the sacred texts of Islam, which validate the argument for its preservation.

One such verse in the Qur'an says:

"Bring me a scripture revealed before this, or any other remnant of knowledge you may have, if you are telling the truth!" (46:4)

In my opinion, what is meant by 'remnant of knowledge' is what, in today's jargon, we would call an archaeological or historical record. Such records serve as vital sources from which to learn about past events, therefore it becomes essential to preserve them, both from the academic and the Islamic point of view.

One significant example of the importance of preserving a cultural or historical record is found in the Qur'an in relation to Pharaoh, the Egyptian King and Moses' contemporary, who died by drowning. The Qur'an makes this statement about him:

"This day shall we save you in your body, so that you may be a sign to those who come after you!" (10:92)

The body of this Pharaoh was embalmed according to Egyptian custom and entombed in a pyramid. This embalmed body, a part of the Egyptian culture, remained preserved for posterity by the will of God Himself. At the end of the 19th century, the mummy was removed from its tomb and, by applying the modern method of carbon dating, was proved to be the earthly remains of the same Pharaoh who had been drowned during the times of the Prophet Moses. The preserved mummy of this Pharaoh, still in existence in the museum at Cairo, bears witness to the veracity of the above Quranic verse. Despite Pharaoh being an idolatrous king, God willed that his mummified body be preserved. This clearly shows us that not only common things pertaining to cultural history but also the body of an idolatrous king can also be preserved! We can therefore safely infer that the preservation of the Buddha statues in Afghanistan, which date back 2000 years, is as desirable in Islam as it is in other traditions and disciplines.

In the context of the history of the Israelites, the Qur'an tells us that they possessed a sacred relic (the Ark of the Covenant), a part of their heritage which they preserved for generations as a source of peace and security. This relic, or cultural legacy, was first preserved by the generations of Moses and Aaron. We learn from the Qur'an that such great importance was attached to this inherited Ark that, on one occasion, it was borne aloft by the angels from one place to another! (2:248)

This incident is a direct illustration of the preservation of cultural heritage. This underscores the importance of cultural heritage as well as the fact that such preservation for the benefit of coming generations does not run counter to the spirit of the divine shariah.

An important attribute of a believer, as described in the Qur'an, is that of a 'traveller' (9:112). That is, one who travels in the land from one place to another, in order to take lessons from these historical places left for us by former generations. As the Qur'an in another verse says:

"And how many towns have We destroyed, which exalted in their wanton life of ease and plenty! Now their dwellings are deserted – all but a few! And We are their heirs!" (28:58)

It also says: "Say: Roam the earth and see what was the end of those who rejected faith." (6:11)

According to this verse, it is desirable in Islam to preserve cultural heritage of the past in order that the coming generations may derive lessons from them. In the absence of such historical relics, the very purpose of travelling would be rendered meaningless!

Every group or community has its own particular culture. And they possess the absolute right to safeguard it. In matters relating to culture, the question of whether it is against or in favour of Islam should not arise. Indeed, any community that wants to protect its culture should be given the right to do so. Just as this has been endorsed by secularism, so also has it been accepted by Islam.

There is an event in Islamic history which very aptly illustrates this point. Jerusalem was conquered during the Caliphate of Umar, the second Caliph of Islam. Caliph Umar went to Jerusalem from Makkah, and signed an agreement with the Christians. This agreement contained, among other things, the guarantee that all the relics in the Christian churches, – for instance, the statues of Mary and Jesus, and the Holy Cross, believed to be the one on which Christ was nailed would be left intact. All these objects were part of the Christian culture, and it was specified in the agreement that the Christian community had the right to preserve and maintain them.

*(Tarikh Tabari)*

This act on the part of the second Caliph of Islam shows that it is the right of every community to safeguard its culture, whether under Muslim rule or not. No government is vested with the right to interfere in the cultural affairs of another community. The issue of the preservation of culture must remain independent of government intervention. One important point to be borne in mind is that, as far as international matters are concerned, the Islamic norm would be the same as the agreed norms of other nations. This principle of Islam can be inferred from certain incidents in the life of the Prophet.

For instance, during the last days of the Prophet of Islam, a Yemenite called Musailima claimed prophethood. He sent two envoys to the Prophet of Islam to ask him to accept his claim. The Prophet asked the two men what their views were regarding Musailima, and they replied that they believed in his claim. At this, the Prophet replied that, since it was the prevailing custom not to kill any messengers, he would refrain from doing so. Otherwise he would have done so. (*Seerat Ibn Hisham*).

This tradition of the Prophet clearly shows us that, if any principle has been accepted at the international level, it has to be followed. This being so, the preservation of cultural heritage will be considered as important by Islam as it is by other nations. In the modern world, great stress indeed is laid upon the preservation of cultural legacies or historical monuments and Islam has no quarrel with this. It will certainly never follow a divergent course on matters of common consent.

The Prophet of Islam was born in Makkah where there were no date palms. When he migrated to Madinah, he found date-orchards in abundance. One day, as the Prophet was passing by an orchard, he saw some men high up in the palm-trees, pollinating them with their hands. The Prophet said that he did not think there was any particular advantage in doing this and advised them to leave off this practice. That year, the yield of dates was very low. When the Prophet asked why this was so, he was told that since he had discouraged the owners of the trees from pollinating them, the yield of dates had fallen. At this, the Prophet said, "Continue to do what you have been doing, for you know your worldly matters better."

This advice given by the Prophet points to a very important principle. It is the necessity to differentiate between matters of creed and practicalities. According to Islam, practical matters, which are of a purely worldly nature, will not be subordinated to religion. They will instead be subjected to academic research and be judged by experience. Those which satisfy academic criteria will gain general acceptance as standard concepts and practices. This will include the various disciplines ranging from agriculture to horticulture, as well as all the departments of engineering and history. The preservation of historical legacies will fall within the province of academic research rather than that of religion.

Supposing that a non-Muslim cultural heritage, considered at variance with Islamic interests, exists in some Muslim country, the people of that country are not authorized to destroy it, simply by virtue of their being in political control. They should rather hand over the concrete Symbols to whichever countries that wish to preserve them. The demolition of the Buddhist statues in Bamiyan in Afghanistan was totally against Islam. It was an act of extremism, and according to both the Qur'an and the Hadith, extremism has neither basis nor sanction in Islam. To sum up, the principles of Islam and their practical applications both demonstrate that, in matters regarding the preservation of cultural or historical heritage, the stance adopted by Islam is the same as that of other traditions and disciplines.

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## **Conversing with God More and with men less**

Thaur ibn Yazid tells of how in the course of his reading, he came across an interesting dialogue between Jesus and his disciples. "Converse with God more and with people less" admonished Jesus. "How can we converse with God more? His disciples asked him, "By prayer and supplication to Him in private" answered Jesus.

*(Abu Nuaym)*

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## Who Should Preach?

A sage once said that the desire to preach should have the same compulsive quality about it as the desire to satisfy any other normal human urge. Preaching is not like playing a record; nor should it be aimed at eliciting applause from an appreciative audience. Preaching is an externalisation of inner conviction. It is communication to others of a discovered reality; to be a living witness to a truth long hidden from people's eyes. This does not mean just putting a few words together; it is an extremely difficult task. One can only accomplish this task when one feels so desperate an urge to convey one's message that one is ready in the process to face unpopularity and self-sacrifice.

The same applies to writing. Before putting pen to paper, one should study so much that knowledge of itself starts overflowing from one's mind. It is only after sifting through all the available material on any relevant topic, and feeling an irresistible urge to add something of one's own, that one should begin to write. Those who write without experience or inspiration are only defacing the paper on which they write, and those who speak without feeling the compulsion to do so are only adding to noise pollution.

Preaching is not a game: it is representation of God on earth; it is only those who have effaced themselves before God who qualify for this privilege. Those who try to preach without such qualifications do greater harm than good.

## **Conversion: An Intellectual Transformation**

*(continued from previous issue)*

### **Conversion a universal principle**

Another aspect of conversion, pointed out repeatedly in the Qur'an, is that it is not confined solely to religion. It is rather a universal principle, by which all kinds of progress have been set in motion. The present universe was originally composed of condensed matter, then it underwent a process of internal change, by which it began expanding until this vast universe, with which we are now familiar, was formed. (21:30). Similarly, the earth lies dry and barren, then it is transformed by the rain so that, "it begins to stir and swell, putting forth every kind of radiant bloom." (22:5)

Again, some apparently unformed matter passes through well-defined stages in the womb, until it assumes the form of a complete living creature – this goes for both humans as well as animals. Then grass and grains enter the cow's belly and, by a certain natural system undergo a transformation, until grass and grains are converted into milk, a very precious food for man (16:66).

By citing such natural phenomena, the Qur'an demonstrates how this world has been established on the universal principle of conversion. Here all kinds of progress are instigated through the process of transformation. For instance, the combination of two gases resulting in water, iron being transformed into steel, chemical combinations of various kinds producing useful metals, etc.

All these are examples of conversion in its broader sense. The same kind of conversion is at work in the world of human thought. There is an ongoing interchange of ideas in this world. Through this process one school of thought gives way to another, better school of thought. For instance, for several hundred years the geo-centric theory of the solar system dominated world thought. Then as a result of intellectual advances it began to erode, until finally it was rejected by the academic world, being replaced by the

heliocentric theory, this having stood the test of observation. Conversion in the world of thought is called religious conversion, which is only a small part of the vaster scheme of nature.

The truth is that conversion is a universal law established by nature itself, on the basis of which all the material progress of the modern world has been taking place. Just as the physical growth of living beings (humans and animals) has depended wholly on this principle of conversion, so also has all the progress made in the world of thought over thousands of years. That is, theories have become established truths when proven by available facts. In this world no meaningful development can take shape without going through this process of conversion. This is especially true of the acceptance of religion, which is another name for recognition of spiritual truth. Only that religion can become one's own which has been discovered as a result of personal struggle. Religion is deeply related to conviction and conviction in turn is related to discovery. There is no conviction without discovery and there is no religion without conviction.

The true follower of a religion is not one who is simply born into it. Finding religion must be a matter of conviction and is possible only after a long period of self-analysis. Then the would-be adherent should feel that he is rediscovering something of which he is already in possession.

## **The reality of Conversion**

Conversion does not mean just saying some formal words, changing one's name and leaving one's cultural group to join another. It entails not just an outward change of religion, but a profound alteration of the mindset after passing through many stages of soul-searching and self-analysis. Conversion, in essence, is the emergence of a new individual – one of the most significant events of human history, for it is only with the proliferation of such spiritually reformed personalities that any given society will attain true moral uplift, and reach the highest levels of achievement.

Conversion, in reality, is an event resulting from a sense of discovery. After making a great discovery, one does not remain as before. One becomes a new man. Only a truly revolutionary change of this kind

merits the name of conversion. When it does take place, it stems from personal decision-making, and not from greed or external pressures. It causes those lacking in awareness to become intellectually receptive; the dormant come fully alive in all their senses; the morally "blind" gain a code of ethics; the incurious develop a questing spirit; those living in a circumscribed environment suddenly enter a world without limits, where they can breathe freely; creatures existing at the purely physical level rise above it and begin really to live on a higher conceptual plane; the aimless wanderer, becoming spiritually focussed, learns the secret of leading a purposeful life.

## **Conversion – A Healthy Historical Process**

A few years ago I went through a book by an Indian writer called *The Politics of Conversion*. I found that there was only one point on which I differed from the author and that was the choice of title for the book. I felt that it might more justifiably have been called *The Politicisation of Conversion*. This would have underscored the necessity to avoid the sensationalism of giving a political hue to something which was, after all, a natural reality.

What is conversion? Usually conversion is equated with proselytism. But conversion, in its broadest sense, is much further-reaching, in that it is a universal principle of nature. It is a historical process – healthy and inexorable – and attempting to put a stop to it would be like trying to put a stop to history itself. And who in this world has the power to do so? Conversion, in reality, is the birth of an entirely new entity resulting from the encounter between old and new schools of thought. This is a universal law established by nature itself.

The study of human history reveals that a certain process is always at work, which Carl Marx had wrongly called dialectical materialism. More rightly this is a dialogue-conversion process. That is, when two systems of thought clash with each other, an intellectual revolution ensues.

This dialogue-conversion process is the only ladder to all kinds of human progress. That is, whenever any revolution of civilization has been produced or a human group has succeeded in performing

some great creative role, it has always come in the wake of this same dialogue-conversion process.

There is no single form of this process. It can be religious or non-religious in nature. In the history of the last fifteen hundred years we find two major examples – one of religious conversion and the other of secular conversion.

The history of the Arabs provides the example of religious conversion. Up to the sixth century A.D., the Arabs led a confined tribal life under the idolatrous system. Then at the beginning of the seventh century, there appeared the religion of monotheism, Islam. In consequence, intensive dialogue began between the monotheists and idolators. This dialogue assumed such an aggressive character that it came to the point of collision. As a result a new way of thinking was born among the Arabs, which went on growing till it took the form of a great intellectual revolution.

This intellectual revolution, or this discovery of a new idea, resulted in the emergence of a new personality among the Arabs. In the words of a European historian, every one of them acquired such a revolutionary personality that their entire people became a nation of heroes. Within just fifty years they brought about that historical event which is called by a historian “the miracle of all miracles.” Briffault puts this in a nutshell: “But for the Arabs, western civilization would never have arisen at all.”

Another example is that of the European Christian nations. After the crusades – a historical process extending over several hundred years – these nations too went through a conversion process. This conversion was secular rather than religious. Intense conflict took place between science and religion. This is elucidated in the book: *Conflict Between Science and Religion.*”

This encounter continued for several hundred years in the form of dialogue and conflict, until a new intellectual revolution was produced within the European nations and they finally bade good-bye to the old and opted for the new.

This revolution is known as the Renaissance.

It was this revolution which enabled the European nations to perform the greatest feat of history, i.e. emerging from the traditional age into the age of science. The truth is that the human mind is a treasure-house of unlimited power. In normal situations the human brain remains in a dormant state. It is only external shocks which awaken it, and the greater they are the greater the intellectual revolution within man. This shock treatment produces in man what psychologists call brain storming. This brings about a fresh intellectual outlook, a transformation which elevates a normal man to the level of a superman, who is then able to perform great feats.

Religious conversion is only a small part of this whole process. When the dialogue-conversion process is set in motion, it cannot have limits set to it. It is not possible to allow one kind of conversion and to prohibit another. Being a stormy process, it is boundless.

It must be appreciated that there are two major kinds of religious conversion – inner faith conversion and inter faith conversion. Now let us take an example of inter faith conversion. There was a multi-lingual Bengali Doctor of Philosophy, Nishi Kant Chattopadhyay, who, having first studied philosophy, then all major religions, faced intellectual confrontation with different faiths. Finally he made an intellectual discovery in consequence of which he left his ancestral religion, Hinduism, in favour of Islam. His Muslim name was Azizuddin. He delivered a lecture, published later under the title, *Why I Have Embraced Islam*, which describes in detail the story of his intellectual development. This lecture has been reproduced in one of the chapters of this book.

There have also been instances of men and women who were born in Muslim families, who later cast off their family religion in order to turn into secularists, or even atheists in some cases. However, sooner or later they reached a turning point in their lives when they came back to Islam as sincere practising Muslims.

The author of this book is an example of this kind of inner faith conversion. He was born in a Muslim family and until 1942, kept on performing all religious duties and rituals under the influence of the family. Then, an intellectual revolt took place in his mind against

Islam and consequently he became a totally irreligious person for many years to come. It was not until 1948, after five years of systematic analytical study of modern philosophy, science and religion, that the author was fully convinced of the continuing relevance and credibility of Islam and decided to return to it again. But, this time it was a return, or conversion, to a consciously chosen and rediscovered Islam, not to the traditionally inherited one.

To sum up, conversion is a universal and inescapable law of nature. A study of psychology and history tells us that, in order to give a new impetus to an individual or a group and to bring about a moral and intellectual revolution, what is most effective is the sense of discovery. This feeling of having discovered some truth which was as yet unknown, awakens all the dormant powers of the individual. This feeling turns an ordinary man into a superman. It is such supermen who cross the ocean, who scale mountains, and who by their heroic character cause history to enter a new age. Today, human history is once again facing a deadlock. History is once again in need of people who pass through this experience of a discovery. For it is such people, charged with new spiritual power, who will give a strong push to human history to enter a new and a better age.

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## A Case of Discovery

*(continued from previous issue)*

The next reason that has induced me to accept Islam is, that it is so eminently reasonable. In Islam, we haven't got to believe in Thirty-nine Articles bristling with dogmas that are either unintelligible to our ordinary reason or inconsistent with our common sense. All that we have to do, is to declare our sincere faith in one simple formula called *kalima: La ilaha illallah, Muhammadur rasullullah*, that is to say, "There is no diety save Allah, and Muhammad is His Prophet." Nay, there is a well-known *Hadith* which distinctly says that even "he who believes only in one God will go to heaven," or in other words is a Muslim (*Man Qala la ilaha illallah fa dakhala jannah!*). And is there any human being, from the poorest beggar to the most highly exalted Prince, from the most ignorant poor to the most highly cultured philosopher, who can refuse his sincere adherence to the Unity of God? Every sound and normal man with his human institutions not perverted either by false philosophy or gross depravity, every man, I say, who is not a hopeless atheist or an inveterate agnostic, must readily give his assent to that simple and sublime truth: The Unity of God. All the greatest philosophers of ancient as well as modern times have enunciated it in some shape or other, while saints, apostles and prophets, whose names are so deeply enshrined in the sacred altars of collective humanity, have lived and died for it. What is the verdict of our modern Science on the Unity of Being?, that is to say, the Unity of both force and of matter which compose that Being. Dr. J.C. Bose's recent researches have only scientifically demonstrated what apostles and prophets have invariably and persistently proclaimed ever since the days of Adam and Noah, Abraham and Moses. In Islam, we are not asked to believe in three gods – in One as in the Athanasian creed, or in thirty millions of gods and goddesses as in popular Hinduism, but only in that one great Being who is the Creator of the Universe, who is all-knowing and all-wise and who is, at the same time, also the most merciful and the most compassionate: "Your God is one God; there

is no God but He, the Most Merciful. In the creation of the Heavens and Earth, and the alternation of night and day, and in the ships that sail the ocean, laden with what is profitable to mankind, and in the rain and the water which God sends from Heaven, quickening again dead earth, and the animals of all sorts which cover its surface, and in the movements of winds and the clouds balanced between heaven and earth are signs to people of understanding; Yet there are some who worship other objects besides Allah, bestowing on them the adoration due to Allah." (2: 164-65).

As to the second part of the *kalima*, it is not a "necessary fiction" as Gibbon chooses to call it, but a very necessary and highly valuable truth consistent with reason, and appealing to the highest aspirations of our spiritual life. Whenever the fundamental truths, on which our moral and religious life is based, are either obscured or forgotten, whenever men become too worldly and avaricious, too immoral and materialistic, there appear, in the history of races and nations, men so highly spiritualised by birth and breeding as to be called prophets and apostles of God, and whose sole mission in life is to remind men of what they have forgotten and to revive what they have lost. "I am no more than a public preacher. I preach nothing new. I only try to bring home to you certain eternal truths proclaimed by all true prophets of God which you have evidently forgotten." This is being constantly repeated in the Quran. And that the Prophet Muhammad, may peace be upon him, was all that he claimed to be, namely a Prophet of God in the highest sense of that word, will be evident to all fair-minded men, unbiased by missionary or sectarian prejudices, who take the trouble to study his life and teachings and particularly the Quran which has been called the "autobiography of Muhammad." All the Traditions represent him as uncommonly true and just, liberal and generous, good and pure. He has been the beau ideal of a Perfect Man to one-third of our race for the last 13 centuries. It is absurd to suppose, that "a wicked impostor" as Christian writers commonly represent him to be, should have had that immense and abiding influence on such vast masses of men for such a long time as Muhammad. After all, Carlyle's dictum, contained in his lecture on "Heroes and Hero-worship" which I have already referred to, will be found to be true:

"This deep-hearted son of the wilderness with his beaming black eyes, and open, social, deep soul had other thoughts in him than ambition. A silent, great soul, he was one of those who cannot but be in earnest; whom nature herself has appointed to be sincere. While others work in formulas and hearsays, contented enough to dwell therein, this man could not screen himself in formulas: he was alone with his whole soul and the reality of things. The great mystery of existence glared upon him with its terrors, with its splendours; no hearsays could hide that unspeakable fact, 'Here am I.' Such sincerity as we named it has, in truth, something of the divine. The word of such a man is a voice direct from nature's own heart. Men must listen to that, or to nothing else; all else is wind in comparison. From of old, a thousand thoughts in his pilgrimages and wanderings had been in this man 'What am I ?' 'What is Life?' 'What is Death?' 'What am I to believe?' 'What am I to do?' The grim rocks of Mount Hira, or Mount Sinai, the stern, sandy solitude answered not. The great Heaven rolling silently overhead with its blue glancing stars, answered not. There was no answer. The man's own soul and what of God's inspirations dwelt there, had to answer!"

These two fundamental principles, whose profession makes a man a Muslim, are thus based on the highest dictates of our intuitive reason. This has been admitted even by Christian writers such as Edward Montet who, in his book called *"La propaganda chretienne et ses adversaires Mussalmans"* has written the following: "Islam is a religion that is essentially rationalistic in the widest sense of this term, considered etymologically and historically. The definition of rationalism as a system that bases religious beliefs on principles furnished by the reason, applies to it exactly. To believers, the Muslim creed is summed up in belief in the Unity of God and in the mission of His Prophet, statements that, to the religious man rest on the firm basis of reason. This fidelity to the fundamental dogma of the religion that has been proclaimed with a grandeur, majesty, and an invariable purity and with a note of sure conviction which it is hard to find surpassed outside the pale of Islam, the elemental simplicity of the formula in which it is enunciated, the proof that it gains from the fervid conviction of the missionaries who propagate it, are so many causes to explain the success of Muslim missionary efforts. A

creed so precise, so stripped of all theological complexities and, consequently, so accessible to the ordinary understanding, might be expected to possess and does indeed possess a marvellous power of winning its way into the consciences of men." (pp. 17-18)

The third reason why I have accepted Islam is, that it is so thoroughly practical. Its ethical code is based on the actual needs of human nature, and not on some imaginary or exaggerated standard of virtue which is unattainable. The standard set up by other religions, for example, by Buddhism and Christianity might, in a certain sense, be called loftier or more transcendental; but is it possible to realise it in actual life? The test by which an ethical code is to be judged is not its poetical beauty, but its practical utility, by its complete adaptation to the needs and requirements of our human nature as it is. As Emerson has beautifully put it: "Sirius may be loftier than the Sun, but it does not ripen my grapes!" We may admire Quixotic perfections in novels and romances, but they are utterly useless in the struggles of our everyday life. We may admire, for example, the poetic excellence of the precept: "When thy brother smites thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the left also," but does any Christian, good, bad or indifferent, ever practise it? Take again the doctrines of celibacy and marriage. Both Buddhism and Christianity, though they tolerate marriage, yet exalt celibacy as a higher virtue. Islam does not tolerate celibacy at all, but, on the contrary, enjoins matrimony as a religious duty binding on every true Muslim.

This system of universal matrimony, joined to occasional polygamy amongst the wealthier classes, makes it, that there is almost a total dearth in Muslim countries of those professional out-castes such as you invariably come across in such shockingly large figures in the streets of London and Paris, Vienna and St. Petersburg. Canon Isaac Taylor, a dignitary of the Anglican Church, had the courage to deliver himself in the following manner before a Church Congress held at Wolverhampton on the 7th October 1887: "Muhammad limited the unbounded license of polygamy; it is the exception rather than the rule in the most civilized Muslim lands-European Turkey, Algiers and Egypt. Polygamy, with all its evils, has its counterbalancing advantages. It has abolished female infanticide and gives every woman a legal protector. Owing to polygamy,

Muslim countries are free from professional outcasts, a greater reproach to Christendom than polygamy to Islam. The strictly regulated polygamy of the Muslim is infinitely less degrading to women and less injurious to men than the promiscuous polyandry which is the course of Christian cities and which is absolutely unknown in Islam. The polyandrous English are not entitled to cast stones at polygamous Muslims. Let us first pluck out the beam from our own eye, before we meddle with the mote in our brother's eye." Now, which matrimonial code, do you think, is more practical, more consonant to the actual needs of human society and more conducive to its highest development from a moral and spiritual point of view? I could bring forward other moral precepts of Islam and, contrasting them with those of other great religions of the world, point out how in each case there is in Islam a far more harmonious blending of practical wisdom and spiritual insight than anywhere else. But that would lead me too far and demand a separate lecture by itself. For this occasion I shall only content myself by quoting the following passage from Amir Ali's famous book, *The Spirit of Islam*: "The practical character of a religion, its abiding influence on the common relations of mankind, in the affairs of everyday life, its power on masses, are the true criteria for judging of its universality ..... In Islam is joined a lofty idealism with the most rationalistic practicality. It did not ignore human nature, it never entangled itself in the tortuous pathways which lie outside the domain of the actual and the real. Its object, like that of other systems, was the elevation of humanity towards the absolute ideal of perfection, but it attained or tries to attain this object by grasping the truth, that the nature of man is, in this existence, imperfect." (p. 278).

These are some of the chief reasons, practical and speculative, that have induced me to accept Islam in preference to the other great religions of the world. There are also the reasons which have always appealed strongly in favour of Islam to some of the greatest minds of Europe in the past as well as in the present. It would be quite out of place here to allude even en passant to what Voltaire, Goethe, Gibbon in the 18th, and a host of great men in the 19th century have said about Islam. All that is possible to do in a lecture like this is

to make a passing allusion to a few Europeans of the present day, who have expressed their sympathy and admiration for the faith of Islam.

Not long ago, we all read of a distinguished English nobleman (Lord Stanley of Alderley) who is reputed to have declared before his death that he had all his life been a Muslim! I can assure you, that there are hundreds and thousand all over Europe and America, who would do exactly the same, if they had the requisite moral courage to brave the social and other disadvantages attending on such a step. It was not less a man and a savant than Ernst Renan who has said the following in his famous lecture on "*L' Islamisme and la science*" (p.19):- "*Je ne suis jamais entre dans une mosquee sans une vive emotion, le dirai-je? sans un certain regret de n'etre pas un Mussulman!*" that is to say, "I have never been inside a mosque without feeling a strong emotion, shall I confess it? Without a certain amount of regret that I am not a Muslim"! When a great scholar and great sceptic like Ernst Renan could make a declaration like that, what of humbler persons and individuals – what about the ordinary unlettered people of the world? Since it is well-known that Islam, owing to its simplicity intelligibility and practicality, is specially suited for the masses of mankind and that it is with the masses that it always had its most signal success and achieved its greatest triumphs, the Rev. Marcus Dodd, D.D. in his book on "Muhammad, Buddha and Christ" has stated the following about the same: "The extreme simplicity of the creed of Islam greatly favoured its rapid propagation. No elaborate explanations were required to teach the ignorant....The rude Negro could understand it on its first recital....It demanded no long novitiate.... it was a creed for which the human mind has an instinctive affinity, and which has never roused abhorrence even in the mind of a polytheist. To men who had begun to despair of finding the truth amidst the bewildering subtleties of a metaphysical theology, it was a relief to find themselves face to face with a simple creed and to be compelled to believe it." (pp. 100-7)

Hence, I feel sure, that if a comprehensive Islamic mission were started in Hyderabad (or any other central place) to preach the simple and sublime truths of Islam to the people of Europe, America

and Japan, there would be such a rapid and enormous accession to its ranks as had not been witnessed again ever since the first centuries of the Hijra. You all know the good work which Abdulla W.H. Quilliam has been doing for several years in Liverpool. Besides winning actual converts whose number runs up to some two hundred in all, he has rendered valuable service to the Muslim world by his books and pamphlets which have dissipated prejudices and awakened a lively interest in Islam all over the civilised world. Some of his pamphlets are widely read all over India and Burma, and have, I believe, been translated into Burmese, Hindustani, Persian and Arabic. Don't you feel that it is your bounden duty to strengthen his hands as much you are able to do, and to help him to disseminate the faith of Islam in Europe as he has been doing with such signal success for so many years? Will you, therefore, organise a grand central Islamic Mission here in Hyderabad and open branches in Europe, America and in Japan? God's choicest blessings will descend on Hyderabad, and especially on the Head of its beloved and beneficent Ruler: Mir Mahboob Ali Khan, His Highness the Nizam of Hyderabad!

It has been well said, that our choice even in the most exalted matters often proceeds from mixed motives. Shall I tell you what further subconscious motive or reason has had its influence in deciding my choice of Islam? It is this: *To consecrate for the remainder of my earthly days what gifts God has given me and what knowledge and capacity I have acquired, either in Europe or in Asia, from books as well as from travels, to the service of that great community to which I have now the privilege to belong.* Will you then accept me as a brother, as a friend and as a servant? Allow me now to finish this lecture of mine that has already taxed your patience longer than I had intended, with the following verse from the Holy Quran:

Say: "My Lord has guided me to a straight path, to an upright religion, to the faith of the upright Abraham; for he was not one of those who join gods with God. Say: Verily, my prayers, and my worship, and my life and my death are unto God, Lord of the Worlds. He has no associate, and this

I am commanded; and I am the first of those who submit to His will." (6: 161-162)

25-26 July-August 2002

## Message Without Words

A certain student from Rajasthan had failed in his high school examinations. He appeared again the following year, but failed again. After having failed for the third time the next year he was so ashamed of his performance that he left his home, unable to show his face to his family.

He just kept walking about aimlessly. After a long time he stopped at a well to quench his thirst. Women and children had gathered around it, filling their pots by turns. There he caught sight of something. Something small, but of great significance. He was deeply moved, and his thirst was gone. All of a sudden he felt as though he had found something far greater than the water he had come for. What happened was quite simple. The villagers who visited the well for water, usually brought two earthen pots. They would place one pot on a stone near the well while letting the other down on a rope inside the well to draw water. To his astonishment, the part of the stone on which the pot was placed had rubbed away and there was a hollow there. The pot was made of earth, he thought, but when it was placed on the same spot over and over again, it had worn away the stone which was a far harder a substance. The strong element had given way to the weak, just through constant action. "Then why should I not succeed in my examinations if I too persevere? I can surely overcome my shortcomings by putting greater effort into my studies!"

Such thoughts brought him to a halt. He immediately decided to go back home and start working hard on his studies once again. The following year he appeared for the fourth time in his high school examinations. This time the result, astonishingly, was the opposite of the previous one.

He had done his papers so well this time that he had first class marks. After having failed three times he had finally distinguished himself. The lesson of the stone had worked like a miracle and this had altered his attitude altogether. The same student who had run away

from home, unable to face defeat, had come to stand first in all the examinations he took. When he topped in his M.A. examinations, he was given a scholarship to study abroad and from there he took his doctorate.

This may be a solitary instance that occurred in an isolated village, but, indeed, in every place there exists such a "stone" which, by pointing out man's shortcomings and failures, can teach him a lesson provided he shows sufficient receptiveness to the message it conveys. If he only cares to look, he will find around him some such "stone" which will set him on the right course again.

26-28 July-August 2002

## Keeping Calm in the Face of Adversity

When Napoleon Buonaparte (1769-1821) escaped from the Island of Elba after his first term of imprisonment, he was accompanied only by a small group of loyal soldiers. Once dethroned, he now again aspired to the throne of France. But in the very first encounter, he found himself face to face with 20,000 French soldiers.

Napoleon, although considered one of the most courageous leaders the world has known, avoided a direct confrontation with his opponents. He did not make the mistake of foolishly ignoring his own military weakness. At the crucial moment, when he and his little band of men stood face to face with this enormous army, he stepped forward, completely unarmed and stood calmly before his enemies. Then with great composure he unbuttoned his coat and bared his chest. In a voice now charged with emotion he addressed the great throng of soldiers – many of whom had served under him in the past: “Which one of you is willing to fire at the naked chest of his father?” The battlefield rang with shouts of ‘No one! Almost all of the soldiers belonging to the enemy camp rushed to the side of Napoleon, who emerged victorious and once more ascended the throne of France. If, in the destitute state he was in at that time, he had attempted to do battle with the French army, he would surely have been slaughtered on that very battlefield.

Whatever a man’s resources, if he has to deal effectively with a situation, he must be able to make a proper assessment of it. And this he will not be able to do if he panics in the face of danger. It is only if he does not lose his nerve and keeps his mind open to what is practical that he will be able to overcome the obstacles in his path. Inevitably, his success depends upon his being able to make a well-considered choice of whatever material and mental resources are available to him and then putting them to proper use. History abounds in instances of the weak overcoming the strong, simply by strategic deployments of resources. The reason for such success is not far to seek: often the enemy is not as strong as he appears to

be. Everyone has his Achilles' heel. It is just a question of finding it and then ruthlessly exploiting it. Just as Napoleon exploited the French troops' old and sentimental loyalty to himself – that being his only mainstay – so can ordinary individuals take advantage of their enemies' vulnerability in order to gain their point without the kind of confrontation which could be disastrous to both sides.

28 July-August 2002

## The Reward of God

Closeness to God should mean that He is ever in one's thoughts. Awareness of God's greatness should reduce one's own being to insignificance. Heaven and hell should be so much a part of faith, that one should be more concerned with well-being (or affliction) in the after-life than one's condition in the present world. On so high a spiritual plain should one be that one's faults should begin to appear in the same light as an enemy's. Personal prejudice should play no part in decision-making and even those with whom one disagrees, or against whom one bears some grudge, should be prayed for from the heart. Denial of truth should be seen as self-destruction and destroying another's home should be regarded as tantamount to setting one's own home ablaze. Such is the God-fearing life and only those who lead it will be given a place in God's paradise.

To His true servants in this world, God has promised supremacy. But this is not the real reward for their piety; it is merely a forerunner of the true recompense which will await them in eternity. It is then that they will be honoured with everlasting supremacy. God will rid them of their fear and grief, and accord to them His everlasting beneficence.

29 July-August 2002

## The Islamic Life

Islam can be summed up very briefly: fear of God and benevolence towards others. A Muslim is one who realizes God's omnipotence and man's utter helplessness in comparison. The power which man apparently wields has been given to him only so that he may be tested by it. When his trials are at an end, God will reveal to him a hitherto unseen world. Then, astoundingly, God's divinity on the one hand and man's total helplessness on the other, will become as plain as daylight. There will be such revelations of reality on that day as man will have no choice but to accept.

The Muslim is fully able to anticipate the advent of this day before its actual arrival. He lives as if he is actually seeing God watching over him. When he speaks, his faith holds his tongue in check, constraining him to speak the truth or else remain silent. When he walks, it is as if God were in front of him, forcing him to proceed and he would never dare incur his Lord's displeasure.

Such a person bears nothing but goodwill towards God's servants. He regards them with compassion, for that is the way God looks upon them. When he has dealings with others, he judges himself by the same just criteria and values as the Creator and Master of the universe will eventually apply to all beings.

26-28 July-August 2002

## **It is wrong even to hint at partnership with God**

"That which God wishes, and you wish, will come to pass," said a certain individual to the Prophet. The latter showed his intense displeasure at this remark. "Have you set me up as a compeer with God?" he asked. "Say, rather, that that which God alone wishes will come to pass."

## Social Behaviour

A certain Mr. Ajwani was appointed as a sales representative in a large pharmaceuticals firm in Calcutta in 1965. His predecessor had been engaged at a monthly salary of Rs 1,200 plus rail expenses. Mr. Ajwani made it clear that he would not accept less than Rs 3,000 per month and that he would only agree to travel by air when he had to visit other towns to take orders. The director who was interviewing him pointed out that, in terms of his total expenses, that was much too much. But Mr. Ajwani replied, "I will give you 'much too much' work in return. Just give me a chance and you will see". There was something very engaging about the way he put his arguments, and finally he was appointed as the firm's representative for the area of Gujarat.

In those days a certain famous lady doctor had a flourishing practice in one of the towns of Gujarat, but although her clinic required great quantities of medicines, she refused point blank to meet pharmaceuticals' agents if they were males. It had so happened that an agent had once used his knowledge of palmistry as a pretext to hold her hand and then kiss it. After this very disturbing affair, she had come to feel apprehensive about the behaviour of other agents, and refused to allow any of them even to enter her clinic.

When Mr. Ajwani was on the point of setting off on a business trip which was to take him to this very city, he told his director that he was confident that he would get orders from this lady doctor. The director told him not to be so naive, for everyone knew that this was a sheer impossibility. Her attitude was so well-known that none of the agents had the remotest hope of ever meeting her, far less of receiving orders from her.

Undaunted, Mr. Ajwani set off. In the plane, he found himself seated next to an elderly lady who was obviously of a good family. They had hardly taken off when the old lady had a sudden fit of coughing. Some sputum came into her mouth and she became

quite flustered. Mr. Ajwani, seeing how awkward she felt, quickly placed his handkerchief in front of her mouth so that she could spit into it. Then he went to the bathroom and disposed of it. His thoughtfulness impressed her greatly and they chatted amicably for the rest of the flight. When the plane landed, they disembarked together, he helping her with her hand luggage. On coming out of the 'arrivals' lounge, she was distressed to discover that no car had come to receive her. Mr. Ajwani once again offered to be of help, saying that he could easily drop her at her home by taxi before going on to his hotel. She gratefully agreed to this and, on reaching home, made a note of his name and address before saying goodbye to him.

Shortly afterwards, her daughter came back home and was surprised to find her mother there. She felt very sorry that the message about her arrival had never reached her, and that her mother had had no car to receive her and bring her home. "You must have had difficulty in coming home alone," she said to her mother. "Not at all," the old lady replied, and, her eyes shining with gratitude, she told her the whole story of the kind gentleman she had met on the plane. The daughter was very favourably impressed and immediately telephoned Mr. Ajwani at his hotel to thank him and invite him to dinner. Mr. Ajwani promptly accepted her invitation, and, when they were introduced to each other, he discovered, to his great surprise, that she was none other than the famous lady doctor who hated male agents. When she learnt that Mr. Ajwani represented a pharmaceuticals company, she lost no time in placing a sizeable order with him, and added that since she always needed large quantities of medicines in her clinic, he could take it that she would be a regular customer and that he could keep sending her supplies every month.

After dinner, he immediately trunk-called his boss from his hotel to give him the good news. His boss could hardly believe his ears and thought at first that he must be joking. But two days later, he thought quite differently when he received the cheque and the order signed by her.

On a subsequent occasion when I had occasion to meet Mr. Ajwani, I asked him, just by the way, to give me some good business

tips. He replied, "Polite conversation and gentlemanly behaviour." I added, "Yes, even when there appears to be no obvious advantage!"

Polite behaviour falls into two categories. One follows the conventional etiquette reserved for relatives, acquaintances and people with whom one's interests are associated. It is socially beneficial in that it makes relationships easier, smoother and more generally civilized. The other kind of good behaviour is completely natural, straight from the heart and based on genuine consideration for others. When it becomes a matter of habit with people from all walks of life, it is of inestimable value in all human relations. It is not, of course, something which one "switches on" in the hopes of immediate reward, but is something rather which eventually benefits one in innumerable, often intangible, ways, simply because it makes for social harmony at its best.