

A Path For Mankind

There is a primary and simple fact about the religion of Islam and the manner of its operation in the life of mankind which, for all its simplicity, is frequently forgotten or initially misunderstood. From forgetting or failing to comprehend it, there arises a serious error in examining the religion, both its essential nature and its historic reality, its present and its future.

Some expect Islam, seeing that it is revealed by God, to operate in human life in a magical, extraordinary and incomprehensible manner. They expect it to operate without any regard for human nature, for the innate capacities and material realities of human life, in varying stages of human development and environments.

However, they see that it does not operate in this manner, that limited human abilities and the material realities of human existence interact with it. Sometimes, these two factors are clearly influenced by religion; whereas at other periods their influence is in a direction contrary to that of the faith: they strengthen the passions and desires of people, their weaknesses and shortcomings, thus preventing them from following the call of the faith and travelling along its path.

When they realize this, they encounter an unexpected disappointment, and their trust in the seriousness and reality of the religious way of life is damaged. They may even be afflicted by doubt concerning religion as such.

Hence a whole series of errors arises from a single, fundamental error: misunderstanding this faith of Islam and its path, or neglect of this primary, simple truth.

The faith of Islam is a divinely—ordained path for human life. Its realization in the life of mankind depends on the exertions of men themselves, within the limits of their human capacities and the material realities of human existence in a given environment. Working for this aim starts at the point where mankind finds itself on being given the necessary equipment, and it continues to the end of the path within the bounds of human capacities, insofar as these are put to work.

A basic characteristic of Islam is this: that it never forgets for an instant, at any time or place, the nature of man and the limits of his capacities, nor does it neglect the material realities of his existence. Yet, at the same time, it causes him to attain – as has happened at various periods in the past and can always happen, if the necessary efforts are made – a higher point than that reached by any man-made system whatsoever. This is accomplished with ease, comfort, security and moderation.

All error arises from misunderstanding or neglecting the nature of this faith, from expecting the occurrence of miracles of hidden origin, miracles which will transform the nature of man, pay no attention to his limited capacities, and have no regard for the material realities of his environment.

Is Islam not revealed by God? And is not God omnipotent? Why, then, does this faith operate only within the boundaries of restricted human abilities? Why should the results of its operation be affected by human weakness? Why is it not always triumphant, why are its adherents not always victorious? Why should its purity, its elan, on occasion be overcome by weakness, by the passions, by material realities? Why do the wrong sometimes triumph over the righteous, the adherents of this faith?

All these represent questions and doubts, and all arise in the first place from misunderstanding or neglect of the primary nature of this faith and its mode of operation.

Naturally God is capable of transforming human nature, by means of the religion of Islam or any other method. But – may He be exalted! – He has chosen to create man with his present nature in accordance with His own wisdom. He has chosen to make divine guidance the fruit of exertion and desire for it:

“Those who strive on our account, them will We guide to our paths.”

He chose too to make human nature operate constantly, without being effaced or put out of action.

“The soul and that which regulates it. He inspired it with knowledge of its corruption and its piety. He who purifies it, prospers; and he who corrupts it, loses thereby”.

He chose that His divinely ordained path for human life should be realized through human exertions, within the limits of human capacities:

“Truly God does not change the state of a people until they change that which is within themselves”.

“Were God not to repel some people by means of others, truly the earth would be corrupted”.

He has chosen thereby to raise men to a point of excellence corresponding to the exertions he has made, the abilities he has applied, and the patience with which he has met misfortune for the sake of realizing this divinely ordained path, of removing evil from himself and from life around him:

“Did the people imagine that they would say: we have believed, and they would not be tested? We have tested those before them, and surely God knows the truthful and God knows the liars”.

None of God’s creation has the right to ask Him — may He be exalted! – why He has chosen all this and willed it to be. None of His creation – may He be exalted! – has the right – since he is not a god, has no knowledge nor the possibility of knowledge – to ask concerning the general system of creation, that system whose results are in the nature of every created being.

‘Why’, in this connection, is a question asked neither by a serious believer nor by a serious atheist. The serious believer will not ask it because he is too polite towards God — Whose essence, attributes and qualities he knows – and too well aware of the limited nature of his human perception which is not equipped to operate in this realm. The serious atheist will not ask for he does not recognise the existence of God at all. Were he to recognise His divinity, he would know too His glory and the implications of His divinity. “He is not asked concerning what he does, yet they are so asked.” For He alone is omniscient, aware of what He does.

This is a question asked only by the frivolous, neither a serious believer nor a serious atheist. Therefore, no attention is to be paid to it, and it is not to be taken seriously. It is asked by one ignorant of the nature of divinity and its attributes. The only way to instruct the ignorant is not by direct answer, but by expounding to them the nature and attributes

of divinity. Then they will either recognize and accept them, becoming believers, or they will deny and reject them and become atheists. The controversy is thereby concluded, unless dispute arises. And if controversy turns into dispute, the Muslim is not permitted to continue with it.

The conclusion we arrive at in this respect is the following that none of God's creation – may He be exalted! – has the right to ask why He has chosen to create man with the nature he has; why He has chosen to make the operation of this nature permanent and uninterrupted; and why He has chosen to make the divinely ordained path for human life be realized through human existence, rather than enforcing it miraculously, through obscure, hidden means.

It is however the duty of every single one of His creation to perceive and take notice of these facts, and to observe them in operation in human life. He should interpret the facts of human history in their light, understanding their historical line of development on the one hand and knowing how to confront and influence that line of development on the other. Further, he should live with the wisdom and power of God, and have the correct attitude towards them.

This divine path, represented in its final stage by Islam, as entrusted to Muhammad – may the peace and blessings of God be upon him! – is not brought into being in the world, in the realm of humanity, simply by virtue of its revelation by God. It is not brought into being by being preached and proclaimed to the people. It is not brought into being by divine enforcement, in the same way that God enforces His will in the ordering of the firmament and the revolution of the planets. It is brought into being by a group of people undertaking the task, believing in it completely and conforming to it as closely as possible, trying to bring it into being in the hearts and lives of others too; striving to this end with all, they possess. They struggle against human weakness and human passion within themselves, they struggle against those whom weakness and passion impel to resist divine guidance. They attain thereby, in the realization of the divine path, a point made possible by human nature and permitted material realities. They begin with man as he stands and do not neglect his actual state and demands as he passes through and traverses the stages of the divinely ordained path. This group will triumph over their own souls and those of others at times, and at other times will be routed by their own souls and those of others, in accordance with the efforts they expend and the means they choose for the battle, suitable for the circumstances and the needs of the age. More important in determining victory or defeat is however the degree to which they truly, in themselves, represent this path, and are able to give it practical expression in their personal conduct and behavior.

This is the nature of the faith of Islam and the mode of its operation. This is its plan for action and its method. This is the truth that God wished to teach the Muslim community when He said: 'truly God does not change the state of a people until they change that which is within themselves'; 'were God not to repel some people by means of others, truly the earth would be corrupted'; and "those who strive on Our account, them will We guide to our paths".

This is the truth that God wished to teach the Muslim community at the battle of Uhud when it failed to represent the true nature of the faith in its own self at certain stages in the battle. It neglected or forgot the primary truth, imagining that inevitable victory was a

consequence of their being Muslim. God — may He be exalted! – said to them: “And when you were afflicted with a calamity similar to one already experienced, you said. How is this? Say: it is from yourselves”. He also said to them: “God made true His promise that you might test them with His permission. Yet you failed and disputed concerning the matter. You rebelled after He had shown you what you love. There are those among you who desire the world, and those too who desire the hereafter. Then He turned you away from them that He might test you”.

The Muslim community learned this truth at the battle of Uhud, not by words of reproach, but through blood and suffering. It paid a high price: defeat after victory; loss instead of booty; a wound that left none unaffected; noble martyrs including Hamza, the foremost of all martyrs — may God be pleased with him! – and worse and more serious than this for the whole Muslim community, the wounding of the Prophet of God – the blessings and peace of God be upon him! – the blow struck at his noble head, the fracture of a tooth in his mouth. He fell on his side in the pit which had been dug by Abu Amr, the evil ally of the Quraysh, as an ambush for the Muslims, while the polytheists were chasing him. He was alone with a few of his companions who were martyred one after the other while defending him. One of them, Abu Dajana, shielded him with his back against the arrows of the polytheists. An arrow hit him in the back but he did not move until the believers returned from their route, to receive the hard and bitter lesson!

It is thus clear that the realization of the divine path has been left to human exertions. The fact that it is brought into being within the limits of human capacities rectifies the human soul and reforms human life. We say this not in order to supply a cause for God’s will in determining the matter as He has, but only in order to point out a practical observation of the effects of this working of His will in the life of His worshippers.

The truth of the faith is not fully established until a struggle is undertaken on its behalf among people. A struggle against their unwillingness and their reluctance, a struggle to remove them from this state to that of Islam and truth. A struggle by word of mouth, by propagation, by exposition, by refuting the false and baseless with a statement of the truth proclaimed by Islam. A struggle too physically to remove obstacles from the path of right guidance when it is infested by brute force and open violence. In this struggle misfortune and suffering will be encountered, and patience will be necessary. In times of victory too patience is needed: it is then perhaps more difficult. Then one becomes steadfast and unwavering, pursuing the path of the faith righteously and unswervingly.

This struggle is necessary on the part of the individual for he struggles against himself while struggling against other people, and thereby horizons are opened to him in the faith which would never be opened to him if he were to sit immobile and at rest. He perceives facts concerning people and life which he could not realize in any other way. His soul, his feelings, his imagination, his habits, his nature, his reactions and responses – all are brought to a point of development which he could not have attained without this hard and bitter experience.

This, among other matters, is implied in God’s saying “Were God not to repel some men by means of others, truly the earth would be corrupted”. The first to be corrupted are human souls, by means of stagnation overtaking the spirit, weakening the will and paralyzing it.

Then the whale of life is subject to stagnation, or is able to operate only within the sphere of the passions, as happens to nations afflicted with luxury.

This too is part of the nature in which God created man. He caused the well-being of this nature to reside in struggling for the establishment of the divine path for human life, by means of human exertion and within the bounds of human capacities.

Moreover, this struggle and its accompanying trials is the practical means for purifying the ranks of the community – after the initial purification of the individual soul – of ridding it of the idle and the hypocrites, of those of weak heart and weak character, of tricksters and deceivers.

This is the truth God wishes to teach the Muslim community when He exposes it to trial and testing. It is then that the recesses of souls become known, and the ranks become clarified, beneath the hammer of trial, the hardship of experience and the bitterness of suffering.

This is the truth God wished to teach the Muslim community after the battle of Uhud, when he said in reply to the Muslims' question of 'How is this?' "Say: this is from yourselves". He then continues: "That which befell you on the day the two groups met was with the permission of God, that He might know the believers and know the hypocrites". "God did not place the believers in the state where you find yourselves for any purpose but this: that He might distinguish the evil from the good' ... "So that God might know the believers and take martyrs from among you – God does not love the wrongdoers – so that He might test those who have believed and annihilate the unbelievers". All this becomes rooted in their minds, while at the same time their calamity was caused by shortcomings in applying the complete meaning of the

faith in their thoughts and actions during the battle. In the end, it was of benefit for them, through God's grace and forgiveness of their fault, and because its consequences were a lesson for them, and a means of purifying themselves and their ranks.

With regard to the true nature of the faith and the mode of its operation, we must add to the remarks already made a supplementary observation.

The fact that the realization of this divinely ordained path is left to human efforts, within the limits of human capacities and of the material realities of human life at various stages of development and in various environments, does not imply the final and definite independence of man in this matter, or his isolation from the divine will and planning, the aid and assistance of God. To regard the matter in this manner would be in fundamental contradiction with the Islamic way of thought.

We have already remarked that God Almighty helps the one who struggles for the sake of right guidance: "And those who struggle for our sake, We guide them to Our paths". "God does not change the state of a people until they change that which is within them".

These two quotations indicate to us the relation between human exertions and the aid dispensed by God to humanity; by means of this aid, men will attain the good, the right guidance and the virtue for which they strive.

It is ultimately God's will which is decisive, and without which man by himself will attain nothing. However this will aid those who know its method of operation, request its help and seek to attain the pleasure of God.

Despite all this, it is divine predestination which encompasses human beings and events, and trials, together with their benefit for the righteous, take place in accordance with it.

Thus, after the battle of Uhud God Almighty expounds to the Muslim community the causes of victory and defeat, indicating too the divine wisdom behind trials and both victory and defeat. "God made true His promise that you test them with His permission. Yet you failed and disputed concerning the matter. You rebelled after He had shown you what you love. There are those among you who desire the world and those too who desire the hereafter. Then He turned you away from them that He might test you". His purpose too was to demonstrate to them His comprehensive path, and His absolute will and irresistible power behind all causes and events. "If a wound afflicts you, then people have been afflicted with a wound like it; we cause such fortune to rotate among the people. It is too so that God may know those who believe and take from among you martyrs – God does not love the wrongdoers – and to purify the believers and to annihilate the unbelievers".

It is, then, in the last analysis, the plan, the will, the decree of God, for the accomplishment of what He intends beyond causes and events. This is the matter concerning which none may ask God Almighty, and the greatest truth of the faith. Unless it be firmly established in a soul, the faith of that soul is not complete. This is the supplementary remark we felt it necessary to add to this chapter.

The Muslim whose heart knows instinctively the nature of the faith will find here no contradiction, nor is there any with the contents of the Book of God.