



Al-Risala 1989

April

Hearsay Not History!

Salman Rushdie's 547-page novel The Satanic Verses is generally believed to be based on history. A case in point is the review on this book in TIME magazine of Feb 13, 1989. Reviewer Mr. Paul Gray held the view that Muslim outcry against the book was unnecessary, and uncalled for. I, too, consider protests and furore of this nature unnecessary. If a dog barks at an elephant, the elephant need not to return it. The dignified silence of the elephant is by itself and answer to the bark. When silence is sufficient, where is the need to use the language.

I, however, do not agree on several counts with Mr. Gray. He writes that the book is nothing but a "rumination on history." That is to say, when the book is based on historical events then why the protest against it. But this supposition that the contents of the book are based on a few historical events is in itself not based on fact. The truth is that this book is a fiction not only in its literary genre but also from historical base.

Mr. Gray writes:

The Gibreel-Mahound exchanges are based, in an obviously distorted and hallucinatory manner, on an episode in the life of Muhammad: the Prophet's early willingness to include in the Quran an acknowledgment of three female deities and his later repudiation of these verses as satanically inspired. If Muhammad himself was willing to admit that he had been deceived, it is, difficult to see why a tangential, fictional version of this long ago event should cause such contemporary furore (p. 42).

The "episode" in this quotation pertains to the chapter of the Qur'an, 'The Star'. Here are the relevant verses from the Qur'an:

Have you considered al-Lat and al-Uzzah, and, another, the third goddess Manat? Is He to have daughters and you sons? This is indeed an unfair division (53:19-22).

There were three imposing idols in ancient Arabia – Lat, Uzzah, and Manat. These idols were significant. The Arabs coined a number of phrases in their praise. Yaqut al-Hamavi, a noted historian of seventh century, writes in his *Majma al-Buldan* that while going round the Kabah the Quraysh used to say: "By Lat and Uzzah and the third one Manat. These are all of high rank. Their recommendation does matter." When the verse 'The Star' was revealed to the Prophet, he read them aloud. There were idolaters in the crowd. When they heard these words from the Prophet "Have you considered al-Lat and al-Uzzah, and, another, the third goddess Manat" then some of the idolaters immediately recited aloud the prevalent phrases about the idols. These phrases were: "By Lat and Uzzah and third one Manat. They are big ones. Their recommendation is surely expected to work." These phrases had nothing to do with the Prophet. The Prophet had said only the words mentioned above. The post-script was added by the idolaters.

This incident is not a solitary one. Such things happen in one form or the other with every individual. For instance, once a leader of a ruling party was making a speech. The gathering comprises people belonging to both ruling and rival parties. The leader of the ruling party criticized an opposition statement. No sooner the rival party heard the name of their leader they began shouting “*zindabad, zindabad*” (long live, long live!). It would be wrong to say that the ruling party’s leader spoke the words *zindabad* for his rival. The ruling party’s leader had mentioned his name simply in a critical manner. It was actually the rival party who had chorused *zindabad*.

The simple form of the happening has been described above. But opponents of Islam concocted the story, distorted the happening which were far-fetched from reality. They attributed the verbal additions by the idolater, to the Prophet and, said that when the chapter ‘The Star’ was being revealed to him and the revelation had reached till this verse “... and, another the third goddess Manat” then Satan put into the Prophet’s mouth these words. The Prophet himself read out these ‘Satanic’ verses along with the Quranic verses. And alleged that later the Prophet realized his error and announced that the said verses were not from the revelation. That these were Satanic verses and these verses were eliminated from the Qur’an.

This story is absurd. And what adds to the absurdity is to hold it as having been based on history, whole fiction be built around it and then an attempt be made to show that the Qur’an was the word of Satan instead of being a divine revelation.

Since the detractors of Islam fail to find a fault in Qur’an, they are left with no option but to put forward perverse arguments. This fact brings to the fore the Qur’anic truth. And no detractor can sully or soil it.

To satisfy their animosity they can do no more but fabricate stories and then attribute these to the Qur’an. It is a vain bid to vilify the Qur’an.

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Passing on the Islamic Legacy

The principal object of the divine message is to save man from eternal doom by showing him the straight path which will make him worthy of paradise. A truly divine mission covers all communities, deriving its inspiration from God and not just from the community of its origin. But in this day and age, Islamic movements and institutions tend to derive their inspiration not from the Almighty, but from the immediate issues confronting the Muslim world. This being so, their outlook and activities have severe limitations, one of them being their remissness in passing on the message of Islam to non-Muslims. This neglect of their bounden duty is all the more damaging to the cause of Islam because Muhammad, may peace be upon him, was the last of the prophets, so that it is only the succeeding generations of Muslims who can continue to convey God's message to mankind. Muslims must see themselves, not just as individuals living for their own satisfaction, but as trustees of the divine mission. It is for them to perform the task for which God sent the prophets to the world. Failure to perform this task is certain to incur the wrath of God.

The Inner Reality of Fasting

“In the month of Ramadhan the Quran was revealed, a book of guidance with proofs of guidance distinguishing right from wrong. Therefore, whoever of you is present in that month let him fast. But he who is ill or on a journey shall fast a similar number of days later on.

“God desires your well-being, not your discomfort. He desires you to fast the whole month so that you may magnify Him and render thanks to Him for giving you His guidance.” (Quran, 2:185)

The above verse explains not only the importance of the month of Ramadhan as being the period during which the Quran was revealed, but also the significance of fasting during that month in terms of giving thanks to God. The Prophet is recorded as having said that God rewards good deeds from ten fold to 700 fold. His reward for fasting, which is undertaken especially for Him, will be infinite.

Food and drink are man's most basic necessities. When he is consumed by hunger and thirst, he understands how weak he really is; he realizes how much he is in need of God's succour. In the evenings, after a whole day of fasting, people eat and drink their fill: that is when their hearts are flooded with a sense of gratitude to God for His having made complete provision for their needs. That is when they praise God and offer up their thanks to Him. This feeling of dependence on God's bounty also makes them adopt a properly cautious attitude to life. Verse 183, Chapter 2, states that “fasting is decreed for you as it was decreed for those before you,” goes on to say, “perchance you will guard yourselves against evil.”

But there is much more to fasting than the caution and gratitude induced by the purely outward, physical forms of abstention. Its greater significance lies in its symbolism of an inner, spiritual eagerness to make all kinds of sacrifices: as such, must be fully understood and appreciated. Obviously, one who refrains from taking food and water on specific days, but who goes throughout his life without a qualm about telling lies, persecuting his fellow men, thwarting justice, and so on, has missed the whole point of the fast of Ramadhan. He has concerned himself all along with outward forms and not with inner realities. Such a man cannot expect to find favour in the eyes of his fellow man and will certainly incur the wrath of God, his Maker.

One who fasts in all sincerity takes care to cast his entire life in the one consistent mould. In all of his affairs, he applies the constraints laid down by God. He checks himself from abusing others, stays his hand from persecution and halts in his steps towards injustice. As the Prophet said, “Such a man can be likened to a tied-up horse which can go only as far as its rope permits: in that way, he cannot transgress.”

Eternal Punishment

God in His wisdom created a divine scheme for the universe and for every object, animate or inanimate, within it. Man, with the freedom of will conferred upon him by the Almighty, may conform to his pattern, or he may not. This is where people fall into two quite distinct categories – the believers and the unbelievers. The former certainly conform to God's scheme while the latter ignore, flout or reject it. In disassociating themselves from a pattern which is meant to produce harmony in both the human and celestial spheres, the unbelievers spread evil in the world. In going their own way, satisfying their own base desires, they cause corruption to take root everywhere.

God brings the sun every morning to give its warmth and light to the world, but man enshrouds his less fortunate brothers in a pall of darkness. God, in his munificence, gives food to the hungry, water to the thirsty and many other blessings to boot. But man rejoices when his brothers die of hunger and thirst, and exults in snatching away the blessings given to others. God gives people wonderful opportunities to be successful in life, but human jealousy thwarts all endeavours made in that direction. Those honoured by God, in short, are dishonoured by the less worthy. In this way, man nullifies God's scheme of life: it is a blatant rebellion against the Creator and Sustainer. No greater crime could be committed, but, regrettably; it is being committed today on an enormous scale. The irony of it is that those who are the greatest offenders are those who put up the greatest facade of piety. But the front they put up will not save them from God's vengeance: His punishment will be eternal.

Islam in Faith and Practice

It is reported by Abu'l-Aaliyah that the Companions of the Prophet were of the opinion that no sin would harm them, so long as they testified that there is no God along with Allah, in the same way as no good deed would benefit one who associated partners with God. Then a verse of the Quran was revealed, in which it was said:

“Obey God and obey the Apostle and never let your labours go in vain” (47:33).

After this, the Companions were fearful that their actions would be annulled on account of sin.

Faith is to be looked at as a kind of contract. When a person utters the testimony of faith, it is as though he is entering into an agreement with God. He is promising God: “I will take you as my Lord and Master. I will follow, both in word and deed, the path you have revealed through Your Apostle!”

Now what conclusion is to be drawn if a person utters the words of this contract, but in practice contradicts its terms? In this case, the contract will be worthless in the sight of God. If a person does not adhere to the terms of a contract, he cannot expect to receive the benefits that should accrue from it.

Faith is only valid when it takes a grip on a person, so that when he speaks, it is in accordance with the demands of his faith and when he acts, his actions are dyed in the hue of his faith. Unless faith becomes the guiding light of one's life, it is no faith at all.

The validity of every contract in this world is dependent upon whether the contract is adhered to or not. If both parties keep to its terms, the contract will remain valid; otherwise, it will be considered null and void. In like manner, the contract of faith is to be judged on the basis of how far it has been put into practice. Should a person act in accordance with his faith, the contract will remain valid in the sight of God. If its terms are broken, however, then God will render the contract null and void.

Savouring the Essence of Religion

“Islam began as a stranger and it will return to the state in which it began. Glad tidings, then, to the strangers.”

There is a famous *hadith*, transmitted by Imam Muslim, according to which the Prophet said:

“Islam began as a stranger and it will return to the state in which it began. Glad tidings, then, to the strangers.”

According to Imam Tirmidhi’s version, the Prophet went on to specify who these “strangers” would be: “They will be the ones who rectify those aspects of my *Sunnah* which have been corrupted after my passing.”

The savouring of the true essence of religion very much depends on the intellectual apparatus of the individuals concerned and the degree of prior familiarity with the subject. It is rather like savouring food. One cannot appreciate its true flavour unless one’s taste buds (sensitive parts of the tongue which convey information about taste to the brain) are healthy, that is, they are unimpaired by ill-health or old age. Sometimes when a new food is tried out for the first time, the taste buds become disoriented, and the true flavour is not registered by the brain. Sometimes it takes time to ‘acquire a taste’, i.e. the taste buds have to be allowed to recover from their temporary disorientation. Similarly, in the ‘savouring’ of a new religion, one’s mental apparatus may be temporarily thrown out of gear due to the unfamiliar ‘flavour’ of the subject; the ‘brain may thus register a false impression, or even no impression at all. This is what happened in the beginning with Islam. Even after a religion has gained acceptance, it may fall into a state of degradation or distortion, because the quality of the intellect applied to it is sadly inferior, or in some way wrongly oriented. It is again like offering gourmet food to insensitive or atrophied taste buds.

When the human approach is wrong, the religion revealed by God and taught by the Prophet, loses its distinctive essence, and its place is taken by other forms of ‘religion’ such as nationalism or ancestor worship. Sometimes it is reduced to being a mere collection of customs and ceremonies, and sometimes it becomes hidden behind a veil of mystery, with all sorts of unlikely things and people being viewed as possessing supernatural qualities and sacred powers of benediction. It is only the high calibre mentality which realizes that these forms of religion are the concoctions of mere human beings, and have nothing divinely inspired about them.

When a man rejects God’s religion out of hand, it is generally because it is a ‘stranger’ to him, just as Islam was in the beginning to early Arab society, but it should only be a question of time and patience on the part of himself and the already converted for this new ‘flavour’ to become familiar to a palate which was only momentarily misled.

9 April 1989

God Protects the Caller

The Prophet was resolved to communicate the word of God to mankind – come what may – and it was this determination on his part which elicited God’s protection at every stage in his life. He followed to the letter the Quranic injunction: “Apostle, proclaim what is revealed to you from your Lord: if you do not you will surely fail to convey His message. God will protect you from all men” (5:67).

For example, in the twelfth year of his prophethood, the antagonism of the people of Mecca became so intense that it seemed as if the history of Islam was doomed to end where it had started – in Mecca. Then, when all appeared to be lost, new avenues opened to the Prophet’s mission in Medina, whereupon he emigrated to that town and set about establishing a new religious base there. Such was the power of *dawah*, that, within a very short time, “there was not a house belonging to the Ansar (inhabitants of Medina) in which there were not Muslim men and women.”

God: The Saviour of His Servants

Lord, I have settled some of my offspring in a barren valley near Your Sacred House, so that they may observe the prayer. Put in the hearts of men kindness towards them, and provide them with the earth's fruits, so that they may give thanks. Lord, You have knowledge of all that we hide and all that we reveal: nothing in heaven or earth is hidden from God. (Quran, 14:38).

When the Prophet Abraham felt inspired to preach the message of truth in all its purity, the results for him were cataclysmic, for, having run counter to the conventions of his country, he was forced by powerful antagonists to flee from his native land. The moment at which he left his birthplace, the town of Ur in southern Iraq, is one of the most crucial in world religion: commanded by God to betake himself to the desert of Arabia, he set up, in the barren and, as yet, unpeopled valley of Mecca, the sacred House of God.

On this momentous occasion, one of the prayers which he uttered was:

Lord, I have settled some of my offspring in a barren valley near Your Sacred House, so that they may observe the prayer. Put in the hearts of men kindness towards them, and provide them with the earth's fruits, so that they may give thanks. Lord, You have knowledge of all that we hide and all that we reveal: nothing in heaven or earth is hidden from God. (Quran, 14:38).

There is great symbolic importance attached to this event in the life of Abraham. Here history speaks, telling us what happens to God's servant who arises to preach the message of truth in all its purity: he is rejected by the conventional order; religious institutions refuse to acknowledge him; he even becomes unappealing to friends and relatives.

The cultivated valleys of the world, despite all their fertility, become dry for him. He is forced to take his wife and family to live in a barren land. There, he calls upon his Lord: "Lord," he says, "they have no one to help them but You. The world of man has refused to support them; now You make springs gush forth beneath their feet."

This is extremely delicate moment in the history of men. The pulse of the universe stops beating at such a time. The earth, and all heavenly bodies, await new instructions before continuing their course. Man sees a new and unfamiliar happening. "Springs" gush forth in the desert. The blessings of God start descending from above. Winds scatter the words of the preacher among mankind. God, in all His might, comes to the assistance of His servants – the ones who were scorned and deprived of all assistance by people of the world. To preach the pure truth is the most difficult task beneath the heavens; but it is this

task that draws God's succour more than any other. This succour only comes, however, when the preacher of God's word has fully communicated his message, and people's persecution of him as a result has reached its climax.

The story implicit in this prayer has repeated itself throughout world history. Whenever servants of God have arisen to communicate the divine message, they have had to pray to God to "put in the hearts of men kindness" because, like Abraham, they have been rejected by the conventional order, have received no acknowledgement from existing religious institutions and have had little or no support from friends and relatives. When they have been driven away from their homelands, even the most fertile valleys of the world have dried up at their feet. But when their persecution has reached a climax, their invocations of God have caused springs to gush forth from the desert, and the winds to scatter the divine message to mankind, for that is the awesome moment that God comes with all His might to the assistance of His servants; that is the moment that the universe, as it were, stands still, awaiting new, divine edicts before proceeding on its course.

The preaching of the truth is the most difficult task in the world. But it is the sincere effort to do so which, more than any other human action, elicits the blessed succour of the Almighty.

The Ultimate Discovery

The joy experienced on making a scientific discovery is no doubt very great. But the greatest feelings of exaltation and sheer bliss are to be experienced only on discovering the Almighty. Anyone who claims to have found God, but evinces no such feelings, is clearly mistaken in what it is he has discovered. Without these signs of intense joy, there has been no real discovery of God.

Because of the sun's relative proximity to the earth, it seems much larger to us than any of the other heavenly bodies. True, it is 1,200,000 times the size of our globe, but by cosmic standards the sun is a relatively small star. Again we feel that the sun is the brightest object in the firmament, and must, therefore, be emitting the greatest amounts of energy, but this is not so, for astronomers tell us that most stars, as well as being bigger than the sun, are more radiant. Vast orbs of heat and light, they are scattered in enormous numbers throughout the universe and, although they have been shining for billions and billions of years, their reserves of thermal energy show no signs of being exhausted.

How do stars continue to produce such colossal amounts of energy? Astrophysicist Hans Bethe spent years on the study of this question before he discovered that the secret lies in the carbon cycle – a piece of research which won him the Nobel Prize for physics in 1967. His wife, Rose, says that she was with him in the New Mexico desert when the moment of enlightenment came to him. When she exclaimed over the brightness of the stars, he said to her, "Do you realize, just now you are standing next to the only human being who knows why they shine at all?" Naturally this was a moment of great joy for him. But his joy would have been much greater if he had been able to penetrate to the ultimate truth: the reason for this carbon cycle coming into being and operating as it did in the stars. As it was, he had solved only a tiny portion of the problem. A physicist, in fact, can never get to the heart of the matter. It is the man of religion who will tell you, with certainty, that the prime mover in all questions of the functioning of the universe is God, its Creator and Sustainer.

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Remaining united and not initiating hostilities

In the year 10AH the prophet sent Khalid Ibn Walid to the Yemen.

Khalid preached Islam there and soon the tribe of Banu Harith Ibn Ka'ab accepted Islam and returned with him to Medina. "How was it," the Prophet asked them, "that you were always victorious in wars you fought before becoming Muslims?" "We never sought to overcome anybody," they replied. "True," the Prophet agreed, "but you always came out on top when others fought against you." "The reason for this," they explained, "was that we always remained united. We were never divided, nor did we wrongfully initiate hostilities. "True," the Prophet replied (*Seerat Ibn Hisham*, VOI II, p. 93).

13 April 1989

God will deal with men on the Day of Resurrection as they have dealt with others in the world

The Prophet said: "Whoever protects the honour of his fellow-man will be protected by God from the fire of hell on the Day of Resurrection."

Some Blessings cannot be Bought

People the world over tend to take for granted whatever benefit are provided by their environment. It is only when they are deprived of these thing that they suddenly recognize their true value. Sometimes it is only when death comes to calm them that they appreciate what blessings have been constantly showered upon them in this world. It is only at that point that the realization comes to them – too late – that if the good things of life had always come their way, it was because their Maker had so willed it.

The Ivory Coast, once known for its glittering array of shops and houses, was all of a sudden plunged in gloom in December 1983 when a severe drought brought the nation's hydroelectric stations to a standstill. When the turbines stopped running, electricity was in such short supply that sometimes there were power cuts of anything up to 18 hours. Industrial production was reduced by 65 % and houses and shops had to be lit by lanterns. Computers, electric typewriters, refrigerators and other gadgets simply ceased to operate. For fear of being caught in the lifts, many businessmen gave up going to their offices. A weary commuter, explaining his situation to a *New York Times* Correspondent, said "For years, I had gone from my air-conditioned villa in my air-conditioned car to my air-conditioned office. I never realized how hot it really is here." He had simply taken it for granted that the 92% of the natural electricity supplied by the Ivory Coasts power stations would always be available on a non-stop basis and that life would go on for ever and ever in the same comfortable, convenient, pleasurable way. His mind had never for a moment dwelt upon the artificiality of his life. It was only when he found himself in stifling heat and appalling darkness and bereft of all the other comforts and conveniences which are provided by a regular supply of electricity, that he realized that the world was a very different place from what he had imagined it to be.

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If the Cap Fits, Wear it

An ornament which appears to be made of gold gives general satisfaction until, applied to the touchstone, it is found to be a clever imitation. Then, although still pleasing to the eye, it is cast aside as a worthless trifle, not worthy of being kept, let alone cherished.

Human beings too can have this aura of genuineness about them – until they are put to the test. Then, all too often, these ‘worthies’ are found to be false friends, bad neighbours, dishonest businessmen, sham politicians, wolves in sheep’s clothing, not to speak of their being sanctimonious hypocrites in matters of religion. Why is it that, throughout their careers, such people are trusted so implicitly? It is because they take care to show the same pleasing exterior as imitation gold, the same outer coating which is impenetrable to the honest gaze, and the same honeyed lustre that bedazzles the innocent and the unwary.

This feat of dissimulation is achieved by the glibness with which they proclaim themselves the benefactors of the public and the servants of God, while indulging in blatant injustice, cruel exploitation and Unmerciful oppression. Fine words and the adoption of saintly attitudes conceal their ravening greed, unbridled selfishness and the most unscrupulous rapacity in attaining their worldly ambitions. When, for example they are at prayers, they are the very picture of piety and humility, but the moment they step out of the house of worship, their thoughts and actions are once again dominated by pride and malice. When they fast, they take care to be seen to abstain from food and drink, but let them find themselves in a situation where it is to their advantage to lie, cheat and steal, and they will behave as if they do not know the meaning of self-restraint.

Religion, for them has become a mere topic of discussion or dispute; it is no longer something to be practised with sincerity and zeal. And what, after all, is their ‘religion’? It is lipservice to a set of lifeless dogmas and the mechanical performance of empty rituals. If their dogmas are ‘lifeless’ and their rituals ‘empty’, it is because they themselves have no inkling of how to breathe life into them. Religion, for them, is a man made creed, and not the inspired guidelines revealed by God to urge man on to nobler thoughts and deeds.

They have even invented a “God” – one that they need not fear, and their choice of a prophet is one who will successfully intercede for them in the divine court so that they need not have a bad conscience about their misdemeanours here in this world. They even have the effrontery to talk about their *dawah* work, when all they seek to do is consolidate their own worldly power and prestige.

Getting to know the real man is like biting through the sugar coating to the very bitter pill inside.

Fearing God In one's dealings with men

The Prophet once saw Abu Masood Ansari beating his slave. "Be in no doubt, Abu Masood," he said, "God has more power over you than you have over this slave." Abu Masood was filled with trepidation when he heard the Prophet's words. "Messenger of God," he said, "I am freeing this slave for the sake of God." "If you had not acted thus," the Prophet told him, "the fire of hell would have enveloped you" (Abu Dawood).

Islam in its True Light

A man imbued with the true spirit of modern science will in the last analysis reject all else and accept Islam as the ultimate truth, for it is the only religion in the world which can pass muster in an objective investigation.

To make a scientific study of something means to examine it objectively and to accept nothing less than the truth about it. This is not a process which is confined to the laboratory or the workshop. It is rather a method to be adopted in one's approach to all subjects. This is equally true of our study and acceptance of the religions of the world. A man imbued with the true spirit of modern science will in the last analysis reject all else and accept Islam as the ultimate truth, for it is the only religion in the world which can pass muster in an objective investigation.

The scientific revolution which began in the eighteenth century and which has been so accelerated in recent years, has actually been a blessing to Islam, for it has endowed millions of otherwise unenlightened people with the objectivity to see Islam as the only authentic religion and has enabled them to convert their hidden Islamic potential into skill which are of value both to themselves and to society as a whole.

This cast of mind was particularly evident in one of the delegates to the International Islamic Conference held in Tripoli in December, 1982. He was a Japanese civil servant, by the name of Ali Abe, who lived in Tokyo. He had converted to Islam because it had appealed to the scientific side of his personality. He pointed out that the Japanese were straightforward, unbiased people and, therefore, potentially Muslims. He was certain that if the Japanese were to come into contact with true Islam, its simplicity and spontaneity would appeal to them and many would accept it as their faith.

This is not a purely Japanese outlook on life. Many nations have benefited from the scientific revolution and are, therefore potential Muslims. It is a question of believers exerting themselves to present Islam to them in its true light.

The Handicap that Helped

Mahatma Gandhi's world renown as a spiritual leader tends to obscure the fact that he was by nature a very shy person. Those who are unacquainted with the details of his rise to leadership are generally surprised to learn that in his early career he had often been reduced to silence by sheer nervousness.

Once when he was a student in London, he was asked to make a speech at a meeting of a vegetarian society which he had joined. He stood up to speak, but was unable to express himself. Finally, he muttered a few words of thanks and sat down. On another occasion, when he was invited to speak on vegetarianism, he set his thoughts down on paper, but was not even able to read out what he had written. It was left to someone else to perform that service for him.

After passing his law examinations in London, he started his practice in Bombay, but on his very first appearance in court, he was so nervous that he could not plead his client's case and had to ask his client to choose another lawyer.

But, as Gandhiji writes, this apparent disadvantage turned to his advantage:

"My hesitancy in speech, which was once an annoyance, is now a pleasure. Its greatest benefit has been that it has taught me the economy of words. I have naturally formed the habit of restraining my thoughts. And I can now give myself a certificate that a thoughtless word hardly ever escaped my tongue or pen."

Mahatma Gandhi was well-known for his thoughtful and economical manner of speech. But this outstanding trait only came from another trait which few would consider outstanding. Initially his shyness prevented him from speaking in public later on it made him thoughtful and economical when he spoke.

Mahatma Gandhi was well-known for his economy of words and well thought-out speeches. There were few, however, who realized that this very positive virtue had been derived from what had once been a serious handicap.

Truth Does Not Change

Islam is not in any sense a new religion. It is simply the authentic version of the same divine truths as have been revealed throughout the centuries to the precursors of the Prophet Mohammad.

Talking to newsmen in New Delhi Mr. Pechnikov, Director of the Children's Theatre, Moscow, said that the Ramayana and the Mahabharata belonged to the whole of humanity. "The Ramayana is much more than a religious book. It reflects man's eternal quest for truth."

(Patriot, November.24, 1984).

The above statement shows how the concept of religion has become distorted in modern times, for the above-mentioned epics are known to be a composite of time-honoured traditions of a particular nation and are not, as stated by Mr. Pechnikov, exclusively concerned with universal truths. A religion which relies heavily on tradition can be of great significance for the nation to which it belongs, *but* it is not necessarily of spiritual value to the whole of mankind. Religion should never be equated in this way with stagnant tradition, but rather with the ongoing quest for the ultimate truth.

Religion gives man what, ironically, he persists in seeking outside its folds. The true, divine path, to which religion points, is as universal as the sun. Religion's truth is in no way different from other scientific truths, it is that same truth which has been brought to mankind throughout the ages by successive Prophets of God.

In the intervening periods, however, God's true religion underwent distortion and interpolation at the hands of misguided followers. That is why God felt it imperative to reveal once again the true form of His religion through His messenger, the Prophet Mohammad. God's message, according to His promise, is enshrined in the Quran and, in its pages it has been preserved for all eternity.

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Unity is Strength

There is no greater source of strength in the world than unity and no great source of weakness than disunity. That is why Islam teaches us to maintain unity at all costs, no matter how much one has to sacrifice in the process.

When Moses was rescued from the Pharaoh, he went away for forty days to Mount Sinai. In his absence, the Israelites were lured by Samiri into worshipping a golden calf. Moses' brother Aaron, who had been left in charge of the people during his absence, did his utmost to discourage them from worshipping the calf, but his efforts were of no avail. When Moses returned to find his people worshipping an idol, he admonished Aaron severely, demanding to know why he could not have set the people right when he saw them go astray. When Moses wanted to know why Aaron had disobeyed him, the latter said, by way of excuse, "Son of my mother. Do not seize my beard or the hair of my head. I was afraid that you might say: "You have sown discord among the Children of Israel and did not wait for my orders." (Quran, 20: 92:93)

The fact that Aaron acted in the way he did, and Moses accepted his reasoning, shows the great importance attached to unity by both of these great prophets. Solidarity in a community is so precious that it must be maintained at all costs. It must be given top priority. There is no point in bringing in other reforms if unity is sacrificed in the process. There is no greater source of strength in the world than unity and no great source of weakness than disunity. That is why Islam teaches us to maintain unity at all costs, no matter how much one has to sacrifice in the process.

Putting Science in its Place

Today, there are millions of people in the world who regard themselves as religious, yet religion does not play an active role in their lives. It is not the focal point of their thoughts as it ought to be. Such people cannot, therefore, be enthusiastic in bringing the message of religion to others. This is mainly because religion has come to them as an inheritance and not as a great discovery. If they had made the discovery of their religion as the Prophet's contemporaries did, they would be spending their lives proclaiming it to the world. As it is, they take it for granted and allow other areas of discovery to become their major preoccupations.

The field of modern science is one in which important discoveries are being made one after another. Breakthroughs in science, technology and medicine are constantly being brought to the attention of the public by the media. In many cases, our very lives seem to depend on the new discoveries which are being made and many wait with bated breath to see it, for example, new drugs will be produced to cure the ancient killer cancer, and the modern killer AIDS. Many others scan the newspapers anxiously to know whether death will come from outer space, either as an offshoot of the 'Star Wars' programme or in the wake of an attack by alien space marauders. They then devote their energies to making preparations to prevent or ward off such attacks, and, in the process, they lose sight of the fact that it is not any human or outer space agency which is going to determine where, when and how they die, but the Being who created them – Almighty God.

It is regrettable that in the annals of scientific history the great discoverers, such as Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727) and many other luminaries, are remembered only as men of science, and not as the staunch men of religion which they were to the very end – most of them being of Christian or Jewish families. What they presented to the world was their science, and not their religion, and now the time has come for us to put their greatness back into the context of the religions which inspired them. It is time for us to understand that their religion was the mainspring of the lives and the ultimate source of their scientific genius.

He Who Hesitates is Lost

Many people who profess themselves to be true in their faith and their worship show themselves in quite another light when it comes to dealing with others who are weak and helpless. They show them neither kindness nor forgiveness, they ignore or reject them, treat them with arrogance and injustice and never see any reason to extend a helping hand to them, because they see no possibility of gaining anything in return. Such people profess their religiosity in vain, for their behaviour exposes their appalling ignorance of what is meant by faith and worship. It shows that they have never taken to heart the message of countless verses of the Quran and saying of the Prophet which emphasize the importance of being charitable to those in need.

The reason that the giving of help to those in distress is so pleasing to God is that it is an indirect acknowledgement that mankind is inherently helpless before the Lord. It is not only the helpless who are in need of help, but also those who are strong and well-placed in life, for everything is in the hands of the Almighty. Failure and success, prosperity and indigence are all dependent upon God's will.

Those who help the indigent whether they are rich or poor themselves, will find a place in God's heart in this life and in the hereafter. Those who are indifferent to the sufferings of the underprivileged, will, on the contrary, forfeit their right to God's favour.

We all stand alone. We are all in need of God's assistance, whether our distress is of a spiritual or a material nature. If, then, we pray for God's mercy and succour, we should also be willing to be helpful and merciful to our fellow-men. He who desires God's assistance should not hesitate for one second in going to the assistance of others. He who hesitates is lost.

22 April 1989

Meeting in good grace and Speaking gently

Ibn Umer said that righteousness was something easy. It consisted of maintaining a gracious expression, and being gentle in one's speech.

A Battle of Wills

In the days of the Prophet, Medina was a natural fortress. To the south were densely clustered date-palm groves and to the east and west were high mountains which presented natural barriers to any would-be invader. There was, therefore, only one front on which it needed to be defended. When news reached the Prophet in 3 AH that the Quraysh were advancing in great strength on the city, he summoned his companions so that their immediate strategy could be discussed. Most of the companies favoured resistance to the attack from within the city, because of the obvious geographical advantages. But the younger members were of the view that if they did not rally forth to do battle outside the city, the enemy would interpret this as a sign of weakness and cowardice.

Although most of the leading companions, including Abdullah Ibn Ubayy, were in favour of meeting the attack from within the city, the Prophet decided to accede to the wishes of the younger Muslims. Accordingly, he set forth with an army of one thousand for Uhud. Abdullah Ibn Ubayy, who felt that the advice he had given was wise and proper, felt deeply offended that it had been summarily rejected, and it was with a heavy heart that he accompanied the Muslim army. However, before they reached Uhud, he turned back along with 300 followers on the grounds that since the Prophet had agreed with the others, and not with him, he saw no reason to go to his death on the field of battle. (*Seerat I Im Hisham*, Vol III, p. 8)

Subsequent events – heavy Muslim losses and ultimate defeat at Uhud – proved him correct, but his disobedience, a form of transgression, brought down the wrath of God upon his head, and earned him the ignominious title of ‘Leader of the Hypocrites.’

Although Islam attaches great importance to consultation, in the last analysis one course of action can be adopted at any given time, the simultaneous pursuance of several dissimilar courses of action being a logical impossibility. Everyone, of course, is considered to have the right to put forward his or her point of view, but since prolonged wrangling produces nothing but chaos, a stage should come when the path is cleared for action. The true Muslim should, therefore, state his views, but be prepared to follow the directives of those at the helm of affairs, whether or not they are in consonance with his own opinions. He must bear it ever in mind that no strong society has ever grown out of sedition and disunity.