



Al-Risala 1989

September

Divine Symbolism

The wonders of the world are there for everyone to see. It is just a question of keeping one's mind open to their inner reality. One who is alive to the symbolism in the universe will find God's radiance in everything that he beholds. He will see that every object of creation is a vehicle for God's wisdom.

There are many verses in the Quran which tell us that, for men of keen awareness and understanding, there are signs in the universe which point to certain hidden realities. God requires man to believe in them and that is why verses such as the following were revealed:

Surely in the heavens and the earth there are signs for the faithful; in your own creation, and in the beasts that are scattered far and near, are signs for true believers; in the alternation of night and day, in the sustenance God sends down from heaven with which He revives the earth after its death, and in the marshalling of the winds, are signs for men for men of understanding (45:3-5).

It was to make the understanding of divine realities as simple as possible for mankind that God created material symbols of them in the external world. The sun and the moon, for example, show us that God Himself is the source of all radiance. The birds and the beasts demonstrate the innocence of life in the animal kingdom, thus acting as God's representatives on this planet. The might and the greatness of God are suggested by the vastness of the sky. His mercy is brought to us by the winds and the water, and his transcendent beauty, immanent in the trees and the mountains is a marvel for all to see.

The wonders of the world are there for everyone to see. It is just a question of keeping one's mind open to their inner reality. One who is alive to the symbolism in the universe will find God's radiance in everything that he beholds. He will see that every object of creation is a vehicle for God's wisdom. While the earth and the heaven are manifestations of God's splendour, the cosmos in its limitless immensity serves as a constant reminder of divine infinitude.

The Real Task Facing Us

A community, once vanquished, can rise again only through self-reform and self-rectification. Demand and protest movements, – no matter if they are legion – can ever come to its rescue.

Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), an Arab philosopher of history, historian, and sociologist, was the greatest social scientist of Islam and indeed the outstanding figure in the social sciences between Aristotle and Machiavelli. He developed one of the world's most significant philosophies of history and wrote a definitive history of Muslim North Africa. The 20th-century English historian Arnold Toynbee has, described his philosophy as "a philosophy of history which is undoubtedly the greatest work of its kind that has ever yet been created by any mind in any time or place." (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 9:148).

In his introduction to his famous work in history, Ibn Khaldun discussed the philosophy of history at great length. This preface became very popular and was published separately in several languages. Many of the points it makes are of relevance even today, particularly its reference to Chapter 23, which "discusses how a vanquished people are always strongly predisposed towards imitating the victors in all matters, in their way of living, dress, religion, habits, etc."

Whenever a community is vanquished, the conqueror's influence upon it is a self-instigating process, requiring little or no direct effort on the part of the conqueror himself. If, on seeing such influence at work, the leaders of the defeated community held the dominant nation responsible, and started protesting against it, they would simply be squandering precious time and energy. According to Ibn Khaldun, this process takes place on its own, and is far from being the result of enemy plotting or oppression.

In truth, when such a situation prevails, the real task for the subjugated nation is to raise itself once again: little is to be gained from registering protests against the victor. The life of the dominant nation means the death of the vanquished nation. The rise of one means the eclipse of the other. This being so, making efforts to reveal the plotting and evil intentions of others only serves to show how much the situation is out of one's control. The truly capable leader is one who, ignoring all designs on the part of the enemy, gives his entire attention to the internal reconstruction of his community. Only in this way, will its problems be solved, enabling it to rise once again.

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4 September 1989

It is hypocrisy to join a movement because of its worldly success

When the Prophet emigrated to Medina, Abdullah ibn Ubayy and his followers put all kinds of obstacles in the Prophet's path, doing all they could to sabotage his mission. Then came the Battle of Badr, when the great leaders of the Quraysh were slain. "There is no stopping Islam now," agreed Abdullah ibn Ubayy and his companions. They then put up a facade of entering Islam, but, insincere in their path, they soon took to plotting against Islam.

(Ibn Kathir, *Tafseer*)

4 September 1989

By Performing small tasks a man does not demean himself

The Caliph of Islam, Umer ibn Abdul Aziz, was talking to someone late one night when the lamp started flickering. "I will wake up the servant," ventured his companion. "He can put some oil in the lamp." Umer told him not to do so. Then he got up and put the oil in the lamp himself. "I was Umer ibn Abdul Aziz before I put oil in the lamp, and I am still Umer ibn Abdul Aziz," said the Caliph.

(Umer ibn Abdul Aziz, *Seerah*)

The Quran and Arabic

“At the time of Muhammad there was no work of the first order in Arabic prose. The Koran was therefore the earliest, and has ever since remained the model prose work. Its language is rhythmical and rhetorical, but not poetical. Its rhymed prose has set the standard which almost every conservative Arabic writer of today consciously strives to imitate.”

Throughout the Roman empire, the common language was Latin. But with the passage of time, particularly in those parts furthest from Rome, changes in accent and usage produced several variants of the original language which became quite distinct from each other, first of all as dialects, then as national languages, the most important of these (known as the Romance group) being French, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian. Also belonging to this group is Romansch, which is spoken in parts of Switzerland. In addition to these national languages, there are the regional languages of Occitan, Catalan, Sardinian and Rhaetian, as well as the Creole languages which have developed in various colonized parts of the world. In this way, a single dominant language developed into over a dozen fully-fledged languages in a matter of a few centuries. This happened in the absence of any strong uniting factor such as a powerful literary masterpiece.

If Arabic did not change and developed in the same way into many dialects and languages, it was because of the great unifying and standardizing influence of the Quran. After all, in ancient times, marked differences could be heard in the accents and pronunciation of the various Arab tribes, just as had happened in Europe with the different Latin-speaking peoples. Even today these divergences continue to exist to a point where dialects become mutually unintelligible to their different speakers. Yet, despite these regional differences, the written language of all Arab countries has remained unaltered. This is something of a miracle and it has been entirely wrought by the Quran. It is true that people used the dialect of their own particular tribe when speaking, but whenever communication took a written form, it had to be in the language of the Quran. The powerful style of the Quran so dominated their respective dialects, that it prevented them from becoming too widely divergent from the original and ultimately becoming independent languages.

In pre-Quranic times, Arabs used to express themselves in poetry. For Arabs, the Quran was the first important work ever written in prose. Prof. Philip K. Hitti puts it in his *The History of the Arabs*, “Its literary influence may be appreciated when we realize that it was due to it alone that the various dialects of the Arabic-speaking peoples have not fallen apart into distinct languages, as have the Romance languages. While today an Iraqi may find it a little difficult fully to understand the speech of a Moroccan, yet he would have no difficulty in understanding his written language, since in both al Iraq and Morocco – as well as in Syria, Arabia, Egypt – the classical language modeled by the Koran is followed closely

everywhere. "At the time of Muhammad there was no work of the first order in Arabic prose. The Koran was therefore the earliest, and has ever since remained the model prose work. Its language is rhythmical and rhetorical, but not poetical. Its rhymed prose has set the standard which almost every conservative Arabic writer of today consciously strives to imitate." (p. 127)

6 September 1989

Have trust in God right up till the end

When the Prophet left Mecca on his emigration to Medina, he spent the first three days in the Cave of Thru. The Quraysh, who were searching for him, eventually arrived at this cave. Abu Bakr, who was in hiding with the Prophet, said, "Prophet of God, look now close the enemy has come. If they were just to look at their feet, they would see us beneath them." "Abu Bakr," the Prophet replied, "What do you think of those two who have God as a third?"

(Al-Bid ayah wa al-Isaiah)

Courage

Late at night on December 15, 1988, three thieves broke into a house in Vasant Vihar (a New Delhi colony) through a rear entrance, and, in spite of the householders having wakened up at that time, they managed to make off with cash and goods to the value of about ten thousand rupees. But the truly tragic part of the story concerns the eldest occupant, Mrs. Kamla Devi Agarwal, aged 99, who lived there with her son and grandson. As the Times of India report put it the next day, "She took one look at the robbers and died of shock."

The thieves did not attempt to do anything to her, yet she was found dead after their departure. Why was it that her son and grandson survived and she did not? What was the factor which made this vital difference? The answer is courage and fortitude. These were qualities of which the old lady had been deprived of by age and infirmity (she was confined to bed most of the time) so that in a moment of crisis she did not have the wherewithal to stand up to the shock. The moment she had a glimpse of the robbers, she collapsed.

In the world of today, the frequency with which grave misdeeds are committed and adverse circumstances arise calls for great courage and fortitude on the part of individuals in all walks of life. Those who do not possess these qualities are likely, at some unforeseen moment, to suffer a fate similar to that of old Mrs. Agarwal. It should be remembered that even a physically weak person may win through in times of adversity, provided that he faces his problems valiantly and with endurance.

7 September 1989

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)

Islam and Peace

In the tenth chapter of the Qur'an, there is a verse which says, "And God calls you to the home of peace and guides whosoever He wills to the straight path (10:25)."

This and other similar verses tell us that the final goal of Islam is peace in this world as well as in the next. Those who continue to strive for peace, along with those who finally attain it, are of the elect, and will be welcomed in the perfect 'home of peace' that is the world to come.

The real basis of that peace, which Islam is so anxious to foster, is monotheism. In the Islamic context, this concept emphasizes not only the singleness of the deity, but also God's central position as the Creator and Sustainer of mankind and the universe. Islam sees all human beings as the creatures of the Almighty – a concept which brings them all on to one level. It is only when we do not connect God with man's existence that some appear great and others small.

When God is given His rightful place in the world, people are at once divested of those features which distinguish one individual from another, placing them higher or lower in the human hierarchy. Then all greatness is God's and all human beings become His servants on a plane of equality.

In this, the concept of monotheism pulls out by the roots all human differences and discrepancies. In the absence of such a concept, the scheme of divine peace becomes impossible. There is, in fact, no other basis upon which it may be achieved.

Non-Interference

Another Islamic principle intended to promote peace is that of non-interference. This principle, if universally applied, can produce the same divine order as is evident in the furthest reaches of the universe, where the stars revolve eternally in their own orbits, no star ever encroaching upon the orbit of another. What holds good at the astronomical level also holds good at the level of human society. That is, order prevails when everyone functions within his own sphere, taking care never to trespass upon the domains of his fellow-men.

This, unfortunately, is a principle which is not sufficiently adhered to. A case in point is the behaviour of a newly liberated American who went out to celebrate his country's freedom from foreign domination in his own particular way. He strutted exuberantly down the street, swinging his arms in a carefree manner and totally ignoring all other pedestrians. Eventually, he hit a passer-by on the nose.

This paper was written by Maulana Wahiduddin Khan for the conference, "People of Prayer in Search of Peace" held in Rome from 27th - 29th October 1988.

The passer-by was enraged and said: "What is this foolhardiness? What makes you walk in this frivolous manner, swinging your hands about in this way?" "America is free," the man replied, "I'm free to do what I want and walk as I wish." "Well" replied the passer-by, "your freedom ends where my nose begins."

The passerby's response was, in fact, the voice of man's true nature, reasserting universal norms and calling out for an end to man's deviation from them. The law of nature is such that the universe has functioned impeccably for billions of years, no star or planet ever having left its orbit to enter that of another. It is man's instinctive wish that he should be guided by such a law. The remonstrance of the American passer-by was simply an expression of this desire.

In a universe which has been forcibly subjugated to the will of God, only man is privileged to have a will of his own. But while the entire universe conforms to God's will, each part functioning in exemplary harmony with all other parts, man misuses his freedom, straying from the path that God has laid down for him. The problems which he encounters in life are part of the price, in fact, which he has to pay for his God-given freedom. All his trials and tribulations are ultimately traceable to his own willful deviations.

Principle of Avoidance

One of Islam's most important principles is that of avoidance, that is, the keeping of oneself aloof from avoidable confrontations. A good analogy is our obedience to the traffic control system, which prevents accidents by ruling that vehicles must keep to their own side of the road, never speed head-on towards each other, nor suddenly cross the path of another, allowing him no time to brake. Even far off the ground, collisions could occur if the principle of avoidance were not invoked. Imagine two jet-airliners approaching each other at an altitude of 30,000 feet. Unless one of them received instructions to fly at, say, 35,000 feet, disaster would be inevitable.

The safety rules which apply to traffic embody the very principle which, if implemented, would relieve our everyday existence of so many unnecessary clashes. But before this can happen, this principle should have to be universally recognised and adopted.

There is no gainsaying the fact that our present world is one of competition, with everyone relentlessly pursuing his own ends. This being so, the only safe onward journey will be one on which people steer clear of one another whenever a clash of interests seems imminent. It is not in our hands to put an end to all such rivalry with its inevitable confrontations, for that is all part of the divine scheme of things. The sole remedy human beings themselves can offer is the scrupulous avoidance of path which is directly confrontational. That is the only way in which disaster may be averted.

In the life of the Prophet, we find a number of salutary examples, such as the decision he made when he learned that the great warrior Khalid was advancing upon him with his army. There seemed nothing for it

but a pitched battle, but the Prophet, who was at that point approaching Hudaibiyyah on his way to Mecca from Medina, promptly took his men by a different route, choosing an unfamiliar path well away from the main thoroughfare along which Khalid and his troops were advancing. By this simple stratagem, he avoided what would certainly have been a disastrous confrontation. We would do well, in the highly competitive world of today, to follow the Prophet's example, in order to secure a safe and peaceful existence for all mankind.

Conversion

In a certain verse of the Quran, true believers are stated to be willing to forgive when they are angered, or, to put it in another way, they convert their anger into forgiveness. This is an important part of the teachings of Islam, and it has been described in the Quran in different ways. For instance, at one place, it is stated that 'good and evil are not equal.'

If we reflect upon the whole complex system according to which our world functions, we shall come to the conclusion that it is essentially one of conversion. Through the conversion of matter, energy is created. Through the conversion of the soil's nutrients, trees are grown. The cow eats grass and the grass is converted by it into milk. Indeed, all kind of progress depend upon this principle of conversion in the universe.

Man likewise is subject to these very processes, the lives of individuals as well as the cohesion of society being dependent upon this universal principle. In the case of true believers, the conversion is of anger into forgiveness. This is achieved by extinguishing the fire of revenge within themselves. Their hatred is then converted into love. In short, on all occasions when one reacts negatively to the misdeeds of one's fellow-men, one must make every endeavour to take this negative reaction and convert it into positive action.

This principle was exemplified in many ways throughout the life of the Prophet of Islam. For instance, he had good reason to regard the Meccans as objects of his vengeance, for they had stubbornly opposed his message, forced him to leave the city and had subsequently had skirmishes with the Muslims without there having been any provocation on the part of himself or his companions. But when Mecca was conquered, he did not treat them as war criminals which is, in effect, what they were, but, instead, forgave them unconditionally and unilaterally. The Prophet did not wreak his revenge on a single one of them.

Non-Aggression

Another important Islamic principle calculated to guarantee a peaceful society is that of refraining from all offensive action. In Islam, war is to be waged only as a matter of defense, and that, too, when it is quite unavoidable. The Quran permits to fight only against attackers, so that we have no right to wage war against anyone who is not on the offensive.

The Prophet of Islam himself engaged directly in warfare on only three occasions, at Badr, Uhud and Hunain. In each case, he was forced into fighting. The Battle of Badr took place when the Meccan army advanced upon Medina with the avowed intention of slaying the Prophet and his Companions. Only then did the Prophet ready himself and his companions for defensive action. The battle of Uhud, which takes its name from a mountain on the periphery of Medina, was fought between the Meccans and the Muslims of Medina. The fact that the fighting took place on the borders of Medina, which is a 300 mile march from Mecca, is a clear indication of the defensive nature of the engagement as far as the Medinans were concerned. For the Prophet, there was no way out but to defend himself.

The third battle took place at Hunain, when the Prophet was on his way from Mecca to Taif. The path to Taif lay between two mountains, and there, under cover of the mountainous terrain, the enemy lay in wait. Finding themselves suddenly ambushed, the Prophet and his companions were forced to fight in self-defense.

Islam aims at fashioning souls which are God-oriented; which find God so great that everything else pales into insignificance; which comes to possess such boundless peace of mind that nothing can disturb it; which is totally free of negative reaction; which can turn everything in this world, whether far or near, into food for more profound thought which, finally can never become a prey to worldliness. This truth is aptly illustrated by this *hadith* of the Prophet of Islam.

“Nine things the Lord has commanded me:

Fear of God in private and in public;

Justness, whether in anger or in calmness;

Moderation in both poverty and affluence;

That I should join hands with those who break away from me;

and give to those who deprive me;

and forgive those who wrong me;

and that my silence should be meditation;

and my words remembrance of God;

and my vision keen observation.

(Razin)

The Lesson of the Universe

The Quran tells us repeatedly that the heavens and the earth are engaged in the glorification of God. This means that they clearly convey the word and attributes of God. This is so ordained that man may learn a lesson from them, and may also join in this universal caravan.

We may ask, "In which language do the earth and the heavens sing the praises of God?" The answer is, in the language of silence. It is in this language of silence that God communicates throughout the length and breadth of the universe. When He converses, it is in the language, not of sounds, but of happenings. Now, one who can listen only to a language of sounds will remain in ignorance of God's message.

Look at a tree. It has a complete existence. How does it happen that, at one and the same time, it grows in opposite directions, the trunk and branches going upwards and the roots going downwards? Why are there two apparently opposing propensities in the same thing? This is a riddle which God poses, to make man think, to make man take stock of his surroundings, to make man exercise his powers of deduction. The first thing that it teaches him is that if he aspires to a high position in life, he must build himself a strong base from which to rise upwards. Secondly, there is the lesson of tree's shadow. The tree itself grows upwards, but its shadow is cast down upon the ground. Why should this be so? This is to make man conscious of the fact that – on a parallel with nature however high a position you may attain to in life, you must always lead a modest, inner existence. This is one of the greatest secrets of harmonious living.

Then take the sea. Sea water is invariably salty. But when the water of this same sea is sent to man in the form of rain, it has already been transformed into sweet water. Why is there this essential difference in seawater and rainwater? Again, it is a phenomenon which is designed to make man think. It makes it clear to him that, however bitter the feelings he harbours within himself, they should undergo a process of transformation before they are ultimately poured out, so that what formerly was all bitterness is now sweetness and light. This is what man is meant to think of when he sips the cool, sweet water brought from the sea by the rainclouds.

The universe is God's lesson to man. But it can be a lesson only to those who keep their eyes and ears open – in other words, to those who are willing to be receptive to it.

Ticket to Success

The key to success in the present day is education. Those who are already in possession of it are in every way the gainers.

We need only scan the reports of competition awards in the national dailies to see some of the 'fruits' of education. For example, of the top six science students in an annual all-American science competition held in 1987, one was an Indian girl, a Miss Keshani Bhushan, who received a one thousand dollar a month scholarship. (*Hindustan Times*, 30 August, 1987).

The following March, a news item in the Delhi newspapers highlighted another Indian success – "Indian boy tops in U.S. science competition", as it was captioned in the *Indian Express* (March 21, 1988).

In the USA various kinds of scientific competitions are held, one of the more important of these being the Westinghouse Science Talent Search. In its 4th annual competition in 1988, the student who stood first was again an Indian – Chetan Naik. He was awarded twenty thousand dollars annually so that he could continue his studies with all the proper facilities. In previous years, five of the winners of the competitions went on to receive the Nobel Prize.

Education in modern times is the surest ticket to success, and the degree-based system of education has made it possible for anyone who is capable of hard work of acquire it. If a man exploits such possibilities with wisdom and diligence, he can achieve the highest success, no matter where he may be – in India, the USA or in any other country.

15 September 1989

God's own are those who accept the Quran

Anas ibn Malik reports the Prophet as saying: "Some people belong to God." Asked who they were, he said, "Those who adhere to the Quran."

Harmony

In the course of a debate on the social condition of India, a participant asked what the secret was of establishing harmony in a plural society like India. I conceded that his question was valid, but pointed out that there should be one change in the wording: "What is the secret of harmony in *any* society?"

Whenever people give their minds to the question of harmony, they assume, consciously or unconsciously, that it is a question which concerns only a plural society. But this is just a fallacy. In effect, this is a problem facing every society. The proof is that, whatever the friction existing in India, it exists to an even greater degree in Pakistan, *which is not a plural society*. What is referred to in India as communal strife is essentially the same kind of friction which occurs in Pakistan, with the difference that in the latter country it takes place between members of the same community.

The truth is that the only way to avoid social strife is to display tolerance. That is, one must ignore or tolerate the behaviour of others whenever they give some cause for grievance. This is how to establish a pleasant relationship with one another in spite of there being unpleasantness.

Whenever people live together in groups, be they from a single community or from several – or even if they belong to the one family it is almost inevitable that, at some point or the other, discord and strife will rear their ugly heads. This being an inescapable fact of life, the secret of harmonious living lies, not in devising schemes to root out the causes of disharmony, but in finding a strategy to establish harmony *notwithstanding the existence of palpable reasons for strife*. This is what would be called true tolerance.

Society cannot escape being governed by those same laws of nature which, for example, produce roses, but only when accompanied by thorns. And those roses are quite inseparable from their thorns. Even if people everywhere joined in loud protest about these thorns, there would be no way that the thorns would just go away. And even if we bulldozed all rose plants out of existence, with the exception of just one tiny plant, that little plant would, of course, produce its roses, but they would still be accompanied by multiple thorns.

This is nature's lesson to mankind. This is the way nature tells us to bring about harmony in our society: we must learn to live with our roses complete with their thorns. We must, instead of quarreling with the thorns, ignore or tolerate them, in order to have the blossoms we so desire. As George Bernard Shaw so aptly puts it: "Though all society is founded on intolerance, all improvement is found on tolerance."

17 September 1989

Even self-sacrifice is of no value without total sincerity

A certain Muslim participated in the Battle of Uhud (3 AH) and died fighting. When his mother learnt of the death, she cried out for her “martyred” son. “Hold your peace,” the Prophet told her. “How do you know that he has been martyred? He used to indulge in vain talk and was miserly with things that it would have done him no harm to give away.

(Al-Tirmidhi)

17 September 1989

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 which God alone wishes will come to pass.”

17 September 1989

Salvation is for those who tread the path of the Prophet and his Companions.

The Prophet said: “The Jews broke up into seventy one sects and the Christians into seventy two. This community will break up into seventy three, all of which will be in the Fire, except of one.” “Which one is that, Prophet of God?” the Companions asked him. “Those who follow my path and that of my Companions,” the Prophet replied.

(Ibn Kathir, *Tafseer*)

Examples from the Life of the Prophet

In recent times, Muslim thinking has gone to the extreme of demanding that anyone who ridicules, or casts aspersions on the Prophet should be condemned to death and summarily executed. No such absolute law, however, forms part of the *Shariah*, nor is there any genuine argument in support of the death penalty to be found anywhere in the Quran. Never once were any of the Prophets commanded by God to instigate the killing of anyone who dared to commit such acts of blasphemy, in spite of the Quran having mentioned at least 50 instances – hardly stray incidents – of all the prophets having been mocked without exception by their contemporaries.

To such offenders, only two kinds of reaction were considered possible. Either they had to have their criticism refuted by counter-arguments, or they had to be given due warning about incurring the wrath and chastisement of Almighty God.

These transgressors fell into two categories, non-Muslims, and people who called themselves Muslims without actually being so, i.e. hypocrites. The Prophet of Islam was confronted with both kinds of people, who harassed him unmercifully. But neither the so-called Muslims nor the non-Muslims were awarded the death penalty in the Quran for having merely ridiculed the Prophet. The truth is that had impertinence to, or contempt for the Prophet been held punishable by death, this would have led to irremediable losses, in terms of human lives, to Islam. The termination of those lives would have meant no further possibility of converting the culprits to true religion. It may seem something of a paradox, but the defenders of Islam who have gone down in history as the Companions of the Prophet had frequently been guilty of impudence to the Prophet before their acceptance of Islam. If they had been put to death the moment they committed this folly, theirs would not just have been the execution of some common criminals, but would have amounted to the murder of people who later went on to become the makers of Islamic history. That very history of Islam in which Muslims take the most pride would subsequently have taken a very different and inglorious course, for all the most valuable individuals would have been lost before they could accept Islam and play the heroic role destined for them by the divine scheme at the universal level in world history.

We quote here some incidents during the life of the Prophet in order to illustrate this point.

With an Eye to the Future

In the days of the Prophet, one of Mecca's most prominent citizens was Suhail Ibn Amr. Today he is hailed as a companion of the Prophet, but in the early days, he was his dire opponent, having participated in the Battle of Badr waged against the Prophet by the idolaters. This battle resulted in defeat for the latter and Suhail ibn Amr was captured and brought to Medina along with 70 other prisoners.

Famous for his eloquence, Suhail ibn Amr was dubbed the 'orator' of the Quraysh. He did not hesitate to use his powers of oratory against Islam, lampooning the Prophet in his poetry and oratory, and constantly instigating the people against the Prophet and Islam. When he was taken prisoner after the defeat, he was brought before the Muslims who were in complete control of the situation. Umar Farooq then said to the Prophet, "Please allow me to break Suhail ibn Amr's front teeth, so that his tongue will protrude. This will so impair his speech that he will no longer be able to indulge in vituperative oratory." In view of Suhail ibn Amr's vindictive behaviour, this seemed quite justifiable. But the Prophet refused to concur. He said, "I will not have him disfigured. If I disfigure him, God will disfigure me, even although I am a Prophet." Then the Prophet made one other observation to Umar Farooq which related ostensibly to only one individual, but which was actually a universal reality. He said that Suhail ibn Amr might one day attain to such a position that they would never even think of reproaching him, far less castigating him. (*Surat ibn Hisham*, part II, p. 293). Suhail ibn Amr was, therefore, not put to death, and was set free without even being disfigured. He was allowed to go home in peace.

But even the Prophet's exemplary treatment of Suhail did not deter the latter in his enmity towards Islam. He later instigated the Meccans once again to attack Medina with an army of 3,000. This resulted in the disastrous war of Uhud in 3 AH.

It was this same Suhail ibn Amr who saw to it that the word 'Prophet' was expunged from the peace treaty of Hudaibiyah in 6 AH, and forced the Prophet to agree to all the unilateral conditions made by the Quraysh while the peace treaty was being drawn up.

Then God's succour came to the Prophet: Mecca was conquered by the Muslims in 8 AH. Suhail ibn Amr still, however, clung to idolatry. Nevertheless, even in the face of his proven crimes, the Prophet did not mete out any punishment to him. On the contrary, he directed his Companions to behave well towards Suhail: "Anyone who meets Suhail should not be hostile in his demeanor. I swear by my life that Suhail is undoubtedly a man of wisdom and nobility. And a man such as he cannot for long remain unaware of Islam." (*Seerat Halbiya*, Vol II, p. 226).

The Prophet's concessions to Suhail ibn Amr did not cease. After the Hawazin campaign, the Prophet gave him one hundred camels as a token of conciliation. After receiving such a gift, Suhail could not bring himself to go on ignoring the Prophet's message. He thereupon accepted Islam and became the Prophet's Companion.

With the death of the Prophet, the idea gained ground among the Arab tribes that God's succour could no longer reach them, because the person through whom it came to them had departed this world. This led the majority of the Arab tribes to revert to apostasy. According to Ibn Ishaq, when the Prophet died, most of the Meccans wanted to turn their backs on Islam. They were quite determined about it. The atmosphere in Mecca turned so hostile that the Prophet's appointee to the governorship of Mecca, Attab ibn Usayd, went into hiding.

By that time, Suhail ibn Amr had become a member of the Islamic community. When he saw how the situation had deteriorated in Mecca, he stood before the people, and making the maximum use of his fine oratorical skills and striking personality, he said, "Listen, the Prophet's passing away has done nothing but add to the power of Islam. Let anyone venture to do anything against us and we will have him killed."

After hearing this powerful speech made by Suhail ibn Amr, people gave up the idea of turning apostate. Later, Attab ibn Usayd also came out of hiding. This was what the Prophet had meant when he said that one day, he (Suhail) might be in a position to command respect rather than elicit abuse. (*Seerat ibn Hisham*, Vol IV, p. 346).

This tradition of the Prophet shows that his vision was not confined to the present but went far ahead to future possibilities. If a man showed rebellious tendencies at that time, the Prophet was ready to overlook this in favour of his potential fidelity to his mission at a later date. He felt that the very capabilities which such a person drew upon in his fight against Islam would be turned to good account once he accepted Islam, and began to fight for it instead of against it. History shows that that is exactly what did happen.

10 AH is known in Islamic history as the year of grief. It was in this year that first the Prophet's uncle and guardian, Abu Talib, and then his wife, Khadija, died. Now the atmosphere in Mecca became hostile to the spreading of his message. It was this situation which caused the Prophet to travel to Taif in the hopes that there he might find a more propitious environment in which to spread the word of God.

His hopes were not to be fulfilled. The chiefs of Taif, Abd Yalil, Masood, and Hubaib not only treated him with utmost scorn and arrogance, but they also set the street urchins upon him to ridicule him, stone him and thus drive him away from Taif. The Prophet finally returned bruised and bleeding from the stoning he had received in Taif. The Prophet once said to his wife Aisha that the hardest of his days was the one he had spent in Taif.

In *Sahih-al-Bukhari* (in the chapter on angels) it is recorded that when the Prophet was returning from Taif, wounded and grief-stricken, the Angel Gabriel came to him at a place called Qarn-e-Saalab. He called out to the Prophet, saying, "God has seen the treatment meted out to you by your community. Now God is sending the angel of the mountains to you. You can command him to do whatever you want to the people of Taif."

At this point the angel of the mountains appeared before him. Greeting the Prophet, he said, "God has sent me to you. God has heard what your people had to say against you. I am the angel of the mountains. If you wish, I can crush the whole settlement of Taif between these two mountains." The Prophet declined his offer, saying, "I still hope that God will produce from this generation men who will worship one God and who will not place anything else on a par with Him."

This incident shows that if the Prophet's own generation were unbelievers, he was ready to wait for the conversion of subsequent generations. In spite of receiving only insults and haughtiness from his contemporaries, he did not want to exterminate these people in the hopes that their offspring and the succeeding generations would breed men who acknowledge God's greatness and who bowed before Him.

It is recorded in the annals of history, that after the victory of Mecca, all the inhabitants of Taif entered the fold of Islam, subsequently performing great feats in its name. For instance, Abu Ubayd Masood Thaqafi, a descendant of that generation, commanded the Muslim army which engaged in the holy war in Iran under the Caliphate of Umar Farooq. He displayed exemplary courage in the face of the Persian army of elephants and inspired such awe in the hearts of the Iranians that they lost the will to do battle with the Muslims.

Another highly esteemed warrior of Islam who also belonged to this same cruel and insolent Thaqif tribe was *Mohammad bin Qasim Thaqafi. Entering India via Sindh in 711 AD (95 AH), he proved himself an extremely just and capable leader. Within the space of just two years, he had spread God's message on such a large scale throughout the length and breadth of Sindh and the Punjab, that whole region came within the fold of Islam. The present Pakistan owes its existence not so much to Mohammad Ali Jinnah as to Muhammad ibn Qasim Thaqafi. When he left India for Damascus, the Indian people wept at the thought of losing such a worthy and noble leader, and set up a statue to venerate him.

The Prophet would have been quite justified in punishing his tribe after the treatment they had meted out to him in Taif, and he was certainly in a position to do so when the angel of the mountains descended at God's behest to do his bidding. But he preferred to be lenient, so that future generations of their people could champion the cause of Islam, and make history in the process.

Subsequent events fully justified the Prophet's expectations. But had he crushed the people of Taif for their insolence by using the powers of the angel of the mountain, Taif would have left nothing to posterity but ruins, instead of going on to become one of the bastions of Islam.

Today's Enemy Tomorrows Friend

Today, the name of Ikramah, son of Amr ibn Hisham (known later as Abu Jahal – father of the ignorant) figures among those of the honourable companions of the Prophet. But prior to the conquest of Mecca he had been – like his father before him – a staunch opponent of the Prophet. Following in his father's footsteps, he was insolent and aggressive towards the Prophet and even after his father's death, he continued actively to oppose Islam. For instance, at the battle of Uhud, he commanded the left wing of the army opposing the Prophet. (The right wing was commanded by Khalid bin Walid, another later convert.).

**See Fatuhul Buldan.*

Ikramah's crimes against the Prophet were so glaringly obvious, that after the conquest of Mecca, he took refuge in Yemen. He was certain that if he was discovered there, he would at once be put to death. However, his wife, who had by that time embraced Islam, went to Yemen and persuaded him to come back to Mecca. Ashamed of all his past deeds, he appeared before the Prophet with bowed head and asked, "Am I to be spared?" The Prophet replied, "Yes, you are to be shown mercy." Finally, Ikramah recited the testament of faith and accepted Islam. (The details of this incident have been recorded in the Book of Seerah.)

When it was known that Ikrama was on his way back from Yemen to meet the Prophet, the latter said to his companions, "Ikramah is coming to us, but on no account are you to abuse his father. Abusing the dead does them no injury, but it does hurt those who are still alive." When Ikramah finally arrived and approached the Prophet, the latter hastened to greet him. In fact, he moved with such alacrity that his outer garment, a length of cloth in which he wrapped himself, fell to the ground.

After accepting Islam, Ikramah begged one favour of the Prophet, who answered that he had but to ask and he would surely receive whatever he desired. Ikramah then requested the Prophet to forgive him, and to pray to God for His forgiveness for all the enmity he had displayed towards him, all the hurdles he had placed in his path, all the battles he had waged against him and all the abusive language he had used, both to his face and behind his back. The Prophet immediately prayed to God to forgive him for all the enmity he had shown him, for all the activities in which he had engaged in order to extinguish God's light, and for all he had done to defame him, whether openly or covertly.

At this, Ikramah said, "O Prophet of God, by God, whatever I used to spend to turn people away from the path of God I will now double to encourage them to tread that very path. Whatever battles I fought to prevent God's message being spread, I will now fight with redoubled energy in the path of God." True to his word, he devoted his life and his wealth to the holy struggle, until he was martyred fighting bravely in the war of Yarmuk. (*Hayat al Sahaba*, Damascus, part I, pp. 176-77).

Ikramah had committed all sorts of misdemeanours against the Prophet, ranging from insolence to outright aggression. And apparently he deserved to be put to death. But the Prophet was not an executioner. He was a *dayee* (missionary). He saw veiled in Ikramah's "today," a vision of 'tomorrow.' It was this missionary vision which caused him to forgive him unconditionally. Later events proved how correct his assessment had been. Disguised under the garb of an enemy, there had all along been the true friend Ikramah. One who had formerly led a life turned to evil because of his repeated blasphemies, now, in his late life, became a cornerstone of Islam.

(To be continued)

24 September 1989

Lodge God in one's heart: that is the best of states

When Abu Darda was told that Abu Saad ibn Munabbih had freed a hundred slaves, his comment was: "Certainly, this is a great act. But let me tell you of one that is even greater: faith which encompasses night and day, and, on one's tongue, the constant remembrance of God."

(Hilyat al-Auliya)

24 September 1989

Remembering God is a constant state of prayer.

Abdullah ibn Masud once observed that a man of knowledge was always at his prayers. His listeners asked him to explain this. "Thoughts of God are always in his heart and on his tongue," said Ibn Masud.

(Jami Bayan al-Ilm)