

Civilisation

AT THE CROSS ROADS

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ
مَجْلَدٌ وَنَصْلٌ عَلَى رَسُولِ الْكَرِيمِ

Civilisation at the Cross Roads

The end of the Second World War in Europe and Asia did not bring peace or establish security. In fact, the very means through which the surrender of Japan was enforced has since filled the hearts of men with new fears and fresh anxieties. Nothing that has happened during the intervening period has served to allay these fears and to set these anxieties at rest. Developments during this period have only enhanced and intensified them.

The other day, a leading newspaper posed the question :

“Will the atom prove to be a servant of man
or his killer”?

Perhaps the problem could be viewed in better perspective if the question asked were : “Will man prove himself master of the atom or perish as its victim”?

The choice lies with man, not with the atom. The atom is only an instrument: a servant. Will man employ it for the promotion of human welfare or for his own destruction?

What invests this problem with the gravest solemnity is, of course, its stupendous potentialities in either direction. Never before has man had placed at his disposal resources so vast, capable of being harnessed to such varied uses in so many fields of human endeavour.

Mankind stands at the threshold of a new era; it is

witnessing the inauguration of a new epoch. Of all the manifold and almost limitless possibilities of progress, of beneficence, of the promotion of human welfare, of the alleviation of pain, in short, of the enrichment of life on earth, that are opening out before us we can to-day form but a vague concept. The prospect should, however, inspire us with hope and fill our hearts with eagerness to scale new heights, to penetrate fresh mysteries, to master new secrets, to harness an ever multiplying volume of forces and powers to the service of man. Our dominant feeling should be of joy and jubilation. On the contrary, as I have said, it is one of fear and anxiety, amounting sometimes to terror. It is strange and bewildering that this should be so.

Every increase of knowledge, every accession of human capacity, constitutes a widening of horizons, a broadening of the fields of endeavour and achievement. It is a Divine bounty; it is a mark of Divine approval of man's increasing exercise of the talents bestowed upon him by his Maker. It should foster human happiness; be a perpetual source of joy.

Then why is it that recent revolutionary advances in certain domains of science and technology have incited and augmented fear and anxiety and intensified a sense of doom, rather than stimulated an upsurge of happiness derived from a sense of achievement, an anticipation of much higher standards of human welfare?

Is it because the scientific revolution has outpaced man's slow advance in other domains? Is it because a rift has appeared between man's rapidly increasing capacity and power for good or ill, on the one hand, and his standards of good and evil and his capacity for fostering good and restraining evil, on the other? May it not be that the spectacle of this ever-widening rift and the contemplation of the awful catastrophe that must overtake mankind if this rift should become unbridgeable are the true causes of our fear and anxiety?

If this is so, should not our effort be directed towards searching for the means of integration between all aspects of human life, so that life should become a co-ordinated whole or unity, and cease to be at conflict with itself?

Human society, starting with the family, has progressed through the tribe to the nation and is now seeking to take on

an international character. In the course of this process, various sections have had to contend with many difficulties. The struggle has left troublesome legacies, which are still awaiting settlement and adjustment. In many spheres even our most advanced thinking, however, still falls short of that which has been made imperative by the scientific revolution. In most respects our thinking is still national or, at the most, continental. It is not yet truly international or global, though even that would not be adequate to the needs of to-day.

Our first need is that our thinking must transcend all intervening limitations and barriers and should embrace humanity and the universe, in its scope.

The atom bomb was exploded twenty years ago; we now have the hydrogen bomb, are faced with the cobalt bomb and may soon be confronted with even more powerful and far reaching developments. We cannot hope to keep pace with, much less control and direct, "stratospheric", "fissionary" and "fusionary" forces, if I might be permitted so to designate them, with thinking at the pedestrian, bow and arrow, and gunpowder levels. We must train ourselves to think in terms of humanity and the universe.

But when I say humanity and the universe, I do not mean to confine myself to man and his life on this planet in all its dimensions. That again is a limitation which tends to distort our perspective. To prove adequate to our needs of to-day and to-morrow and to exhibit things and values in their true proportions, our perspective must acquire the widest, almost a limitless, sweep. In the speed of our movement, we have pierced the supersonic barrier; our moral and spiritual vision must also pierce the barriers set up by our present concepts of life and mortality. We must learn to think, not only in terms of life and death, but also in terms of the hereafter. It is only then that our perspective will become correctly adjusted and we shall be able to devise and put into effect a true standard of values. If we do not begin to think in terms of eternity, our thinking will be out of measure and will continue unbalanced. We must, therefore, adjust our thinking to new dimensions, namely—Humanity, Universe and Eternity.

I am a Muslim. My thinking is stimulated, nourished and sustained by the eternal verities taught by Islam. I would beg you, therefore, to bear with me while I proceed to illustrate what I have just said, from the source that I have indicated, namely—the Qurán, the scripture of Islam. I venture to think that you will find little in what I may submit with which you may be disposed to find fault. Indeed, you will recognise that this guidance proceeds from the Source that we are all happy to share and bear witness to. The Quran opens with the brief verse :

“The perfect worthiness of all true praise belongs to God, Who nourishes, sustains and, stage by stage, leads towards perfection all the universes”.

Thus, at the very outset, our thinking is lifted to the level of the universe and its stage by stage evolution towards perfection, or, in other words, towards greater and greater beneficence. It is worthy of note that the plural and not the singular has been employed in respect of the universe. There are universes beyond universes: they are all evolving towards ever increasing beneficence.

We are further reminded that all this beneficence is for the service and benefit of man.

“God has subjected to your service whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is in the earth; all this is from Him. In this surely are Signs for a people who reflect”. (XLV : 14)

To discover these signs and to derive full benefit from them, it is necessary to reflect upon the phenomena to which attention has been drawn. Here is thus a direct exhortation to lift our thinking to the level of the universe for the benefit of the whole of mankind. There are many other verses in the Quran which reinforce the same idea of the subordination of all that is in the universe to the service of man and the exhortation to ponder, to reflect and to reason. For instance:

“He grants wisdom to whom He pleases, and whoever is granted wisdom is indeed granted abundant good; and none would be reminded save those endowed with understanding.” (II : 270):

The principles of "fission" and "fusion" are but forward steps towards the enrichment and fulfilment of human life and should not be a source of fear or anxiety. They are, as I have said, gifts and bounties: an accession of power and strength. It is their use or abuse which would convert them into instruments of good or evil.

The question remains, what is it that will serve to safeguard humanity against the abuse of further accessions of power and strength? We must recognise that the march of knowledge and the advance of science will not be reversed or checked. Nor must we seek to reverse, check or slow them down. Any such attempt would in any case prove futile and would, moreover, be evidence that we are seeking to reverse our destiny.

Those of us who believe that God is truly the Creator of the Universe and not merely a so-called First Cause, must perforce believe that the universe, and so also man, have been created with a purpose and that we must constantly advance towards the fulfilment of that purpose.

The Quran says:

"God is the Creator of all things and He is Guardian over them all: His are the keys of the heavens and the earth: Those who reject the signs of God, they are the losers". (XXXIX: 63—64)

"We have not created the heaven and the earth and all that is between the two, in sport. Had We wished to find a pastime, We would surely have found it in what is with Us, if at all We had been so inclined". (XXI: 17-18)

"We have not created the heaven and earth and all that is between them in vain. This is the view of those who reject Us. Woe, then, to those who reject Us, because of the Fire." (XXXVIII: 28)

"God has created the heaven and the earth with truth and that every soul may be requited with that which it earns; and they shall not be wronged". (XIV: 28)

“Did you then think that We had created you without purpose and that you would not be brought back to Us? ” (XXIII: 116)

God is the Creator of the universe, the universe is under His control. He has created the universe and man with a purpose. We must all return to Him and are accountable to Him. This consciousness must inspire, direct and guide us all the time. The purpose of man’s creation is that he should become a manifestation of God’s attributes, in other words, the image of God.
(LI : 57)

All the ills from which we suffer to-day are a consequence of our neglect of this purpose and our apathy in its pursuit. In fact, most of us are prone to substitute the means which have been provided for the attainment of this purpose, for the purpose itself. We occupy ourselves with the diligent pursuit of the means as ends in themselves: they become the idols that we worship. Thus we constantly defeat the true purpose of our existence and by creating multiple barriers between ourselves and God, we finally shut ourselves off from Him.

Our deepest concern should be to put ourselves in accord with God, our Creator, the true Source of all beneficence. How to do it is no great mystery. The Quran puts it in very simple language :

“When My servants ask thee about Me, say: ‘I am near, I answer the prayer of the supplicant when he prays to Me’. So they should hearken to Me and believe in Me, that they may follow the right way.” (II: 187)

Once we have established our relationship with God and are in accord with Him, it would become easy to think in terms of humanity. It is only *through* God that we can adjust our relationship with our fellow-beings of all races, colours, creeds and classes. Any other approach is bound to be partial and must fall short in some respect or the other. The realisation that ever human being is God’s creature, servant, ambassador, with a spark of divinity in him or her, alone will enable

each of us, not only to exercise tolerance and patience, to cultivate sympathy and understanding, but also to respect the *personality* of every other and thus to promote the dignity and worth of the human person. We must recognise the simple fact that each one of us is related to every other and indeed to the whole universe only through his or her *own* personality. The universe has a meaning for each one of us only through his or her own individual personality. Outside of our own personality it has no meaning for us. While we are conscious of this fact *vis-a-vis* ourselves, are we equally conscious of it in respect of every other human being? This lies at the root of the whole concept of the brotherhood of man, of which we hear so much these days and of which we still see so little in practice across the social, religious, racial and colour divisions. We must respect, revere, reverence the personality of every other human being to make brotherhood a reality. This can come about only by the realisation of our common relationship to each other through our common allegiance to God and our holding fast to that allegiance.

“Hold fast, all together, by the rope of God and be not divided; and remember the favour of God, which He bestowed upon you when you were enemies and He united your hearts in love, so that thereby through His grace you became as brothers. You were on the brink of a pit of fire and He saved you from it. Thus does God explain to you His Signs that you may be guided”. (III : 104)

Yet in our relationship with our fellow-beings, as in all other relationships, we must have some standard of worth and value. If it is not to be family, rank, wealth, office, race, colour etc., what then shall it be? Here is the standard.

“Oh mankind, We have created you from male and female and have made you into tribes and nations for greater facility of intercourse. Verily, the most honourable among you, in the sight of God, is he who is the most righteous among you. Surely God is All-Knowing, All-Aware”.

(XLIX : 14)

If the purity and righteousness of a person's life become the sole criteria of honour among mankind, as we are taught they are in the sight of God, we shall very soon achieve a much needed moral and spiritual revolution in society and in its outlook. All other standards would then adjust themselves in subordination to this. For, again, it is obvious and at various places the Quran recognises, that all factors in human life have their uses and their value and that they can all serve a beneficent purpose if they are properly regulated and adjusted. Islam is a faith that insists upon the acceptance of life on a positive and constructive basis and disapproves and even condemns the rejection, negation, or stultification of life. It seeks to inculcate a consciousness of the capacity and dignity of life and a recognition of the far-reaching consequences of human action and human thought. We are admonished:

“Oh ye who believe, fear God and let every soul look to what it sends forth for the morrow. Fear God: Verily God is well aware of what you do. Be not like those who forgot God and whom He has consequently caused to forget their own souls”. (LIX : 19-20)

It is disregard of the morrow that has falsified our standards of values.

“They say, ‘There is nothing but this our present life; we live here and we die. Time alone destroys us.’ They have no knowledge concerning it, they do but conjecture.....Say, ‘It is God Who gives you life, then causes you to die; then He will gather you together unto the Day of Resurrection about which there is no doubt. But most men know not’. To God belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth and when the Hour shall come, on that day those who follow falsehood will be the losers”. (XLV : 25 and 27-28)

The Quran is as insistent upon belief in the life after death as it is upon belief in the Existence and Unity of God. It warns that without this belief, human life would not be in balance. It is only through achieving this “balance”, neither

transgressing nor falling short of the measure set up by God, that life on earth can become beneficent.

“Verily, We sent Our Messengers with Manifest Signs and sent down with them the Book and the Balance that men should conduct themselves with equity”. (LVII : 26)

“The heaven He has raised high and set up a measure, so that you keep the balance with equity and neither transgress nor fall short of the measure”. (LV : 8-10)

It is only a life which is in “balance” in the perspective of to-day and of to-morrow, that is to say, a perspective that embraces both the foreground of the here and the background of the hereafter, in accordance with the measure set up by God, neither transgressing nor falling short of it, that can be truly beneficent. It is only men who lead such lives who will always stand with truth and justice and conduct themselves with equity. In their hands and under their control, all powers and all forces “stratospheric”, “fissionary”, “fusionary” and still others that may be developed will only be instruments of beneficence, that will be employed for fostering human welfare to the greater glory and praise of God.

It may be asked, is this not merely a counsel of perfection. It certainly is a counsel of perfection; nothing less would be adequate. But it is not merely a counsel in the sense of being only academic speculation. What has been said here by way of introduction and illustration and that which is expounded in the Quran in greater detail as the way of the beneficent life in all spheres, spiritual, moral, physical, is all eminently practicable and can easily be put into effect.

But it may be said further, what about the mischief that may be wrought involving the destruction of culture and civilisation, if not the destruction of life itself, by the irresponsible conduct of those who may not be prepared to subscribe to these values and may in fact be opposed to them?

In the first place, while offering guidance on all fundamentals affecting various aspects of human life, the Quran takes note

also of that which has just been mentioned. It bids us to be steadfast in upholding beneficent values, but also warns us to be constantly vigilant and on guard against those who would seek to destroy them.

“Oh ye who believe, be steadfast and strive to excel in steadfastness and be on your guard and keep your duty to God that you may prosper”. (III : 201)

Eternal vigilance is the price of security and the safeguarding of beneficence.

That our vigilance and all the sacrifices that it might entail should weigh in our favour in the Balance, we must take a firm stand in support of truth and righteousness and proclaim this as our sole and complete ideal. In other words, we must definitely take our stand on the side of God and substitute His will rather than our own as our motive.

This might mean for some of us a complete overhauling of the manner of our lives, of our conduct, and of our values. In other words, we may need to carry through a spiritual and moral revolution, at least matching, if not in its turn outpacing, the scientific and technological revolution, the unfolding of which we are privileged to witness.

The proclamation and repetition of high moral principles, though necessary, is of little value unless we carry them into effect and illustrate them in our conduct. A rift between our professions and our practices would portend as grave danger as the rift between our scientific and technological achievements and our spiritual and moral standards.

We must completely eschew hypocrisy and make believe. This would go far to reassure those who may entertain doubt of our motives and be afraid of our intentions.

“Oh ye who believe, why do you say that which you do not. Most displeasing is it in the sight of God that you should say and do not”. (LXI : 34)

Having set our own house in order by the adoption of wholly beneficent standards of values and having brought our conduct into conformity with those values, we must convince

those with whom we seek to enter into agreements, covenants and practical dealings, of our utter sincerity of purpose. . We must avoid all equivocation.

“Oh ye who believe, do your duty to God and say the straightforward word ; He will bless your works with beneficence and will eliminate the consequences of your defaults”. (XXX: 71-72)

All engagements, trusts and covenants must be fully and faithfully carried out in the letter as well as in the spirit. The Quran, while enumerating the characteristics of those who would make a success of their lives says:

“And those who are watchful of their trusts and their covenants”. (XXIII: 9)

Patience and steadfastness must inspire both our policies and our conduct. This is a hard discipline, but is made easy for those who have the certainty of faith in God and the ultimate return to Him.

“Seek help with patience and prayer; this indeed is hard save for the humble in spirit, who know for certain that they will meet their Lord, and that to Him they will return”.
(XXIV: 6-7)

But all this, while helping to set up a society strong in beneficence, would not necessarily secure it against opposition, persecution and the kind of situation which has come to be known as “cold war”. In fact, history shows that every attempt to set up such a society and to conduct it on these principles has always met with opposition and persecution. Even then the remedy is steadfastness and righteous living.

“You shall surely be tried in your possessions and in your persons and you shall surely hear many hurtful things from those who were given the Book before you and from those who set up associates with God; but if you show fortitude and act righteously, that indeed is a matter of high resolve.” (III: 187)

For good is not only beneficent in itself, it is a positive

force against evil, which is negative. The one has the qualities of life, health and progress, while the other is a distemper or disease which, if not cured and removed brings death. Evil is curable only by good, for good prevails over evil and overcomes it,

“Good drives away evil; this is a reminder

for those who would remember”. (II: 115)

Alas, we often forget this reminder. It is so easy to yield to the temptation of giving as “good” as we receive; only in this context, “good” is a euphemism for “bad”. In situations like those with which civilisation is faced to-day the foundations of a culture are put to their severest test. If they survive the test, the culture will endure and flourish even more vigorously, though the superstructure may be shaken and may have to be put in order. If the foundations give way, everything will fall into ruin. The foundations will not endure unless they rest upon truth and righteousness. Those who build these, build on a firm and secure rock; those who build on falsehood and evil or on a mixture of good and evil, build on sand. He who stands firm on goodness will not only save himself, he may also save his brother who is opposed to him and is seeking to injure him and to do him harm.

“Good and evil are not alike. Repel evil with that which is best, and lo, he, between whom and thyself was enmity, will become as though he were a warm friend. But none is granted this save those who are steadfast; and none is granted this save those who possess a large share of good”. (XLI: 35-36)

Patience, steadfastness, high resolve, combined with watchfulness and vigilance and a firm determination that good shall not relax in any circumstances, even under constant provocation, its effort to overcome evil: this is the only rule of conduct that will avail in the crisis through which mankind is passing.

We must make a firm resolve that we shall co-operate with each other only in the promotion of beneficence and righteousness and that no amount of provocation shall induce us to lend our support to oppression or wrong.

During the first thirteen years of the Ministry of the

Holy Prophet of Islam (on whom be the peace and blessings of God), the Muslims were bitterly and brutally persecuted in Mecca. In the end this little band was forced to quit Mecca, one by one, and found a refuge in Medina, where the Prophet also joined them. There, too, they were not left in peace. The Meccans organised expedition after expedition against the Muslims to destroy them and their faith. The Muslims were anxious to be permitted to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca and to worship there in the Sacred Mosque, but the Meccans would not hear of it, nor would they abate their aggressive policies and actions. Finally, Mecca fell. The Muslims entered it with dignity, exacting no retribution and imposing no penalties for the wrongs and injustices that they had suffered during twenty years. The Quran laid down:

“Let not the hostility of a people, that they hindered you from the Sacred Mosque, incite you to transgress. Co-operate with one another in righteousness and piety; do not assist one another in sin and transgression. Fear God; surely God is severe in punishment.” (V : 3)

On the other hand, Islam does *not* teach submission to evil for that would amount to supporting and fostering it. Islam conceives of a truly beneficent society as composed of persons who seek to maintain a just balance between the values pertaining to this life and the next, constantly fostering good and restraining wrong and evil. The following may furnish some idea of the attitudes that Islam inculcates :

“Whatever is bestowed upon you is but the temporary provision of this life; that which is with God is better and more lasting for those who believe and put their trust in their Lord; those who eschew the grievous sins, as well as indecencies, and when they are wroth, they forgive; those who hearken to their Lord and observe prayer and whose affairs are determined by mutual consultation and who spend constantly out of that which We have bestowed upon them; those who, when an injury is inflicted upon them, defend themselves. The recompense of an injury is a

penalty proportionate thereto; but whoso forgives and thereby brings about reformation, his reward is with God. Surely He loves not wrong-doers. But no blame attaches to those who defend themselves when they have been transgressed against. Blame attaches only to those who commit wrongs against others and transgress in the earth without justification. Such will have grievous punishment. But he who is patient and forgives—that surely is a matter of high resolve”. (XLII: 37-44)

It will be noted that even defensive action is permitted only where a wrong has been suffered, though forgiveness is held up as the more meritorious choice. On the other hand, infliction of wrong and transgression is condemned.

Should, however, aggression be embarked upon, which can only be stopped by the exercise of force, permission to use force is accorded.

“Permission to fight is given to those against whom war is made, because they have been wronged and God indeed has power to help them: those who have been driven out from their homes unjustly only because they said, ‘our Lord is God’. If God did not repel some men by means of others, cloisters, churches, synagogues and mosques, wherein the name of God is oft commemorated, would surely be destroyed. God will of a surety help those who help Him. God is indeed the Powerful, Mighty—those who, if We establish them in the earth, will observe Prayer and give the alms and enjoin good and forbid evil. With God rests the final issue of all affairsWhoso retaliates with the like of that with which he has been afflicted and is then transgressed against, God will surely help him. God effaces sins and forgives them”. (XXII: 40-42 and 61)

Once fighting is forced upon such a society as is here described, the fight must be pursued with fortitude and vigour. Detailed instructions have been laid down to render war as

humane as possible. Fighting must be confined to combatant. Women, children, old men, priests and those dedicated to the service of society must not be molested. Cruel and barbarous practices must be eschewed, even if they are resorted to by the enemy. Fighting must be brought to a close as speedily as possible. The object should be to restore conditions of peace, security, justice and freedom of conscience and not to crush the enemy. (VIII : 40)

If at any time in the course of the fighting the enemy should be inclined towards a truce, the opportunity should be embraced to put an end to the fighting.

“If they incline towards Peace, incline thou also towards it and put thy trust in God. Surely it is He Who is All-Hearing, All-Knowing. If they intend to deceive thee, then surely God is sufficient for thee”. (VIII : 62-6*)

Should punitive action become necessary, it should be limited to the degree of wrong suffered and should not go beyond it, but if the wrong is suffered in patience, that is better.

“Should you have to retaliate, then confine your retaliation to the extent of the wrong suffered, but if you are patient, that is best. Endure thou with patience, verily patience is possible only with the help of God. Grieve not for thy opponents, nor feel distressed because of their plots. Verily God is with the righteous and the doers of good”. (XVI : 127-129)

Should hostilities break out between two peoples it is the duty of all the others to take combined action to bring about a peaceful settlement of the dispute between them. Should one of the parties be guilty of transgression, all must combine to fight it, till the guilty party is prepared to accept a just settlement of the original dispute. Peace should then be made between them on the basis of justice and equity. (XLIX : 10)

This is a brief summary of the principles which would afford protection against the abuse or misuse of nuclear, atomic or any other kind of power and would confine their use to peaceful and beneficent purposes. To the degree to which these principles are accepted and put into effect, we shall get rid of our fears and anxieties and develop a sense of security devoting ourselves to progress and the promotion of human welfare. We do not need to suffer any despondency that guidance adequate to

our needs is not available. I have referred to the opening verse of the Quran. The very next verse mentions one of the attributes of God as *Rahman*. The word is commonly translated as the Beneficent, but its exact import is "He who makes provision for our every need before the need manifests itself". We may be sure, therefore, that He has made provision for our guidance through the epoch which is opening up before us. By accepting and acting upon that guidance, we can make our lives wholly and truly beneficent. This alone would give us complete security. We shall thereby disarm all aggression. Should aggression nevertheless be embarked upon and persisted in, we shall, having put ourselves and all aspects of our lives in complete accord with Divine guidance, but only then and not merely because we have chosen any particular label, be granted the strength and the perseverance to overcome it, even, if we may happen to be smaller in numbers and weaker in resources. History bears ample witness to this.

"How many a small party has triumphed over a large party, by God's command: God is with the steadfast". (II : 250)

The Quran says :

"God is the light of the heavens and the earth". (XXIV : 36).

"He brings men out of darkness into the light through His Signs and bestows light upon His servants by which they are guided and in which they walk." (LVII : 10, 13 and 29)

The principal function of light is to make everything appear in its true reality. We must constantly seek God's light for our guidance, so that we may be enabled to see everything in its true reality and may be safeguarded against falling into error. We have His firm promise that if we strive for Him, He will guide us along His paths and that He is ever with those who act righteously. (XXIX : 70)

Before I conclude, I should like to say a word to remove a misconception concerning Islam which is very common in the West. It is often said that the attitude of Islam is one of opposition to other faiths. I shall here content myself with making two quotations, to repel this charge :

"Surely those who have believed, and the Jews, and the Sabians, and the Christians—whoso believes in God and the Last Day and acts righteously, on them shall come no fear nor shall they grieve". (V : 70)

"Say, oh people of the Book, come to a word equal between us and you—that we worship none but God and that we associate no partners with Him and that some of us take not others for Lords besides God". (III : 65)

That invitation stands for all time.

"All praise to God, the Lord of all the Universes"!

