

Islam and Civilization

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Scope and Significance

Islam and civilisation is a realistic and living issue which relates not only to the prophethood of Muhammad (peace be upon him) and the teachings of Islam, but also to the reality of life itself, the present and future of mankind and the historic role played by Muslims in the development of culture and the building up of a flourishing civilisation. This is a subject important enough to receive the attention of an academic body instead of by just a single individual. In its depth and scope, it can compare with any discipline of thought pertaining to the life of man. It covers an immense area in time and space, from the first century of the Islamic era to this day and from one corner of the world to the other. In its immanence, it encompasses everything from creed to morals and behaviour, individual as well as social, and is linked with diverse phenomena, whether it be law, political, international relations, arts, letters, poetics, architecture, cultural refinement, etc.

Each of these aspects of human life are indeed many-sided and, hence, an academic body composed of scholars of different disciplines is required to study them so that each may undertake objective research and present his detailed findings courageously, without fear or favour. Each of these scholars, specialist in his own field, can discuss the issues in greater detail as, for example, one can study the creed and religious thought of Islam, another sociology and culture, a third Islamic law, a fourth the equality and dignity of man, a fifth the position of women, and so on. Detailed discussions on each such subject can indeed cover an encyclopaedia instead of being dealt with by an individual like me who has little time to spare for literary pursuits. But as the saying goes, the thing which cannot be owned completely should not be given up altogether. I have, in working on this subject, kept in mind the Qur'anic verse which says: And if no torrent falls on it, then even a gentle rain (Al Baqarah: 265).

A Delicate Task

An analysis of the ingredients of any developed culture is perhaps a very difficult and delicate task. For the intrinsic constituents of any culture become assimilated over time; these are always elusive and their interaction is difficult to indicate after they have shaped themselves into a wholeness that is known as a society and its culture. They enter into peoples lives imperceptibly and become a part of their soul and life blood; give it a distinct identity much in the way that instincts, education and training, circumstances and it go to make the personality of an individual. No chemical laboratory exists which is of any help in such a historical

analysis nor has a microscope been invented which can minutely examine the constituent elements of any culture.

Such difficulties mean that the only way to achieve this is by an in-depth study of different nations and their cultures so that their past and present may be compared to determine the effects of Islamic teachings and, the revolutionary call of the Prophet (peace be upon him) for the reformation and the guidance of human society.

The part played by this call in reforming or changing earlier creeds, pagan ways of thought, the manners and customs of the ancient world as well as in giving birth to new ideas and values that have helped give rise to a new culture and civilisation, has to be studied and examined. This is stupendous task but one which is also rewarding enough to be undertaken by an academic body or university in any Islamic country, if not by organizations like UNESCO or the more developed academic centres of Europe or America. There is not the least doubt that such research would be more useful than those in which these universities and literary bodies are engaged at present.

Difficulties Confronting the task

Identifying the influences of Islam on human life and culture is an extremely difficult task since these have by now become part and parcel of the life and culture of different nations. This to such an extent that these people themselves cannot indicate whether they are extrinsic or intrinsic, borrowed from Islam or evolved by them internally. Many of these Islamic influences are now the flesh and bone of their existence and are integrated with their modes of thought and culture.

The all-pervasive Influence of Islam

Here I would first like to cite a passage from my own work *Islam and the World* in which I have delineated the impact of Islamic civilisation in shaping the attitudes of people and their cultural advancement during the heyday of its glory:

"The rejuvenating currents of Islam ran through the world, infusing men everywhere with a new life and an unparalleled enthusiasm for progress. The lost values of life had been discovered. Paganism became a sign of reaction, while it was considered progressive to be associated with Islam. Even nations that did not come directly under the influence of Islam, profoundly, though unconsciously, benefited by the freshness and vitality of the new creative impulses released by its impact on large parts of the world. Numerous aspects of their thought and culture bear evidence to the magic touch of Islam. All the reform movements that arose in

their midst, owed their origin to Islamic influences." (Nadwi, S. Abul Hasan Ali, Islam and the World, Lucknow, 1980 p.87)

It is well-nigh impossible to enumerate the influence exerted by Islam in different fields and on different nations and countries. We can only attempt here to describe these in a few spheres where they have played a conspicuous role in the reformation, guidance and progress of humanity towards a better and healthier existence in contradiction to the norms usually adopted by the Muslims during the period of their decadence.

We will now turn to a brief discussion of some of these universal gifts which Islam has given mankind. Namely: a clear and distinct faith in the Oneness of God; the concept of human unity and equality; and Islam's proclamation of human dignity.

A Clear and distinct faith in the Oneness of God

The initial gift of Islam, which also constitutes the invaluable heritage of Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the gift of the Absolute and undiluted Oneness of God. This creed is revolutionary, life-giving and vigorous, and cannot be compared with anything else that man has pinned his faith on, either before or after the Prophet of Islam. (peace be upon him)

The Effect of Paganism of Human Life

Man has been proud and presumptuous, boastful of his creations, such as philosophy, poetry and the art of government; he has taken as much pride in enslaving other countries and nations as he has in digging canals and turning arid lands into gardens; often he has arrogated himself to the position of God; but he has also demeaned himself by bowing his head before inanimate, lifeless objects, things of his own creation which neither harm nor do him any favour:

"And if a fly should rub them of aught, they would never rescue it. Feeble indeed are the seeker and sought (Al-Hajj: 73)

Man prostrated himself before his own creations, feared them and begged them for help. He was over-awed by mountains, rivers, trees, animals and harboured credulous beliefs and irrational fears of demons and devils. He paid divine respect even to reptiles and insects. He spent his life in fear of the unknown and hope from non-existent powers, all of which went to produce mental confusion, cowardice, doubtfulness and indecision in him. Brahmanic India shot ahead of every other region in the world with its 33 million gods and goddesses. (Dutt, R.C., Ancient India, Vol. III, p. 276 and O'Mally, L. S.S. Popular Hinduism: The

Religion of the Masses, Cambridge, 1935.) Everything which fascinated man or appeared frightening was elevated to the position of a deity.

The Effect of Monotheism on Human Life

The Qur'an and the Holy Prophet declared that this universe was neither without (peace be upon him) a Lord nor was it jointly controlled by a set of deities. It had One Lord and Master, the Creator and Controller wielding complete and Absolute power over it. The Qur'an announced: Lo! His is the Creation and the Command, (Al-Araf: 54) meaning that God was the Sole Creator, the Sole Originator, or, the Sole Creative Principle and everything around man was dependent on Him by virtue of its creation by Him. Yet to Him submitted whose is in the Heavens and the earth, willingly or unwillingly (Ali-Imran: 83), was a natural corollary of this declaration meaning that all things in nature, whether heavenly or earthly, bow down to His decrees and have perforce to submit to His Physical laws— so Exalted is he. So was it not incumbent on the

creature possessing will and option to submit to Him willingly? sincere and exclusive obeisance was due to God alone. He asks: Belongs not sincere religion to God? (Sad: 3)

The natural consequences following from this belief was that the world was united through a Common Principle; a Universal Law ran through it. Man was led to acknowledge a unity of purpose, motive and law in the varied phenomena of nature which could also help him find meaning and significance in his own life since it was integral to the wisdom underlying the integrated nature of this universe.

The Prophet of Islam acquainted man with the clear and easy creed to the Unity of God which was satisfying and full of vitality since it took away all irrational fear from him. This simple creed made him self-reliant, courageous, rational and undoubting by removing the fear of everything else save that of His real Master and Lord. It was because of this creed that man came to recognise his Creator as the Supreme Power, as the Enricher and the Destroyer. This discovery meant a world of change for him; he could now see the unity of cause in the manifoldness of phenomena, was reassured of his pivotal position in the scheme of creation, became aware of his worth and dignity; in short, his acceptance of the serfdom of the One and only God made him the master of every other created being and object. As a vicegerent of God, he became aware of the exalted position allocated to him as the executor of the Will of God on earth. It was a concept previously unknown to the world.

The Effect of Monotheism on Other Religions

It was, thus, the Prophethood of Muhammad (peace be upon him) which granted the gift of absolute monotheism to humanity. Faith in One and only God was earlier something most unusual but its forceful advocacy by Islam made it such a compelling concept that no religion and no social philosophy remained uninfluenced by it. Even polytheistic religions taking pride in idol worship and a multiplicity of deities began confessing the existence of the Supreme Lord and Master by taking recourse to philosophical justifications for the concept of unity in multiplicity. They were ashamed of their pantheism, developed an inferiority complex and started to make efforts to bring their creed closer to Islam.

How the absolute and unalloyed monotheism of Islam proved to be a revolutionary concept for humanity has been sharply delineated by Syed Sulaiman Nadwi in his *Sirat-un-Nabi* in the following words:

Those nations which were unfamiliar with the creed of monotheism were also nescient of the worth and dignity of man; they took man as just a servitor of every natural phenomenon. It was the lesson of monotheism, taught by Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), that removed the fear of everything save God from the heart of man. This was a revolutionary concept for it pulled down everything from the sun to the rivers and ponds on earth from their pedestal of divinity to an attendant in the service of mankind. The magic of regal glory and splendour vanished: monarchs of Babylonia, Egypt, India and Iran no longer remained the lords and the "highest gods", deriving their right and authority from the gods and angels, but became servants and guardians to be appointed by the people themselves.

Mankind under the authority of gods and goddesses had been divided into castes and classes, high and low, noble and menials; some were supposed to have been born of God's mouth, others from his hand or foot. These articles of faith had drawn such lines of demarcation between man and man that he could never hope to be united again. Human equality and brotherhood had perished from the earth converting it into a vast arena for asserting one's superiority and vanity through the most barbarous means, if need be. Then came the belief in monotheism levelling all human beings, destroying all concepts of high and low-born, making them all servants of God, equal in His sight, brother unto one another and having equal rights and obligations. The revolutionary changes that were brought about by this radical creed in the social, moral and political fields of human life are self-evident from the pages of history.

The truth of this principle was at last acknowledged by those who were not acquainted either with the Oneness of God or the equality of mankind; who could

not get rid of the false notion of their superiority even in the House of God; who discriminated on grounds of wealth, colour and race between men bowing in submission to the same deity. Muslims, however, have been enjoying the fruits of human equality for the last thirteen hundred years solely because of their faith in the Oneness of God. They do not acknowledge any man-made distinctions; all are servants of the same Lord, all are equal in the sight of God; no dividing line of wealth, race, colour and nationality can now separate them; only he is worthy of greater honour who is more God-fearing, more obedient of God³. Surely the noble among you in the sight of God is the most God-fearing of you (Al-Hujurat: 13).

The Influence of Islam on India

The deep imprint which Islam has left on Indian thought and culture has been discussed by K.M. Pannikar in his Survey of Indian History, which he says:

One thing is clear. Islam had a profound effect on Hinduism during this period. Medieval Hindu theism is in some ways a reply to the attack of Islam; and the doctrines of medieval teachers, by whatever names their gods are known, are essentially theistic. It is the one supreme God that is the object of the devotee's adoration and it is to His grace that we are asked to look for redemption. All Bhakti cults are therefore essentially monotheistic, not in the exclusive sense that other devotees cannot worship the same supreme being under other names, but in the affirmative belief that whether known as Siva, Krishna or Devi, they all symbolise the One and the Eternal. This is of course most noticeable in the songs of Kabir, the influence of which was very greater among the common folk.

Another well-known scholar, Dr Tarachand, who argues in a similar vein has cited Barth:

The Arabs of the Khilafat had arrived on the shores (of South India) in the character of travelers and had established commercial relations and intercourse with these parts long before the Afghans, Turks or Mongols, their co-religionists, came as conquerors. Now, it is precisely in these parts that from the ninth to the twelfth century, those great religious movements took their rise which are connected with the name of Sankara, Ramanuja, Anandatirtha and Basava, out of which the majority of the historical sects came and to which Hinduism presents nothing analogous till a much later period.⁶

Dr Tarachand discusses the growth of the emotional cult, the Bhakti school, and after delineating the propositions put forward by different authorities, reaches the conclusion that:

It is necessary to repeat the most of the elements in the southern schools of devotion and philosophy, taken singly, were derived from ancient systems; but the elements in their totality and in their peculiar emphasis betray a singular approximation to Muslim faith and therefore make the argument for Islamic influence probable.

In his other book, *Society and State in the Mughal Period*, Dr. Tarachand writes about the Bhakti school:

There was the third group of mystics who employed the language of the people to preach their radical creeds. They mostly belonged to the lower castes and their movement represents the urge of the unprivileged masses to uplift themselves. Some of them were persecuted by Governments, some incur social opprobrium, and others were not regarded as worthy of notice. But they were held in high esteem among the humbler classes who followed their simple teachings with eagerness and understanding. They laid stress upon the dignity of man, for they taught that every individual would reach the highest goal of human life by his own effort... The movement arose in the fifteenth century and continued till the middle of the seventeenth, but then it declined and gradually lost its momentum.

The leaders of this group hailed from all parts of India but their teachings manifest a distinct influence of Islam on their beliefs.

Sikhism

The same is true of Sikhism which has made an important contribution to the cultural, religious and political life of India. The system of Guru Nanak and his followers, as well as its literature and traditions, show that it owes its origin to the reformation of Hinduism under Islamic influence. Its founder, Guru Nanak, was deeply attracted by Islamic teachings. He learnt Persian and Sufi doctrines from Syed Hasan Shah. He is also reported to have been closely associated with six other Muslim mystics of his time. He is stated as having performed Hajj and spent some of his time in Baghdad. The most significant associate which Guru Nanak found was undoubtedly, Shaikh Farid whose 142 stanzas were admitted in the *Adi Granth* itself.

Guru Nanak called upon his followers to worship Alakh Niranjān— the True, the Immortal, the Self-existent, the Invisible, the Pure One God, to treat all human beings as equals and to renounce idols and incarnations. It is not only with respect to the idea of the Unity of God that the identity of his teachings is discernible; he liberally made use of Sufi terms and imagery.

Tauhid and the Christian World

The impact of Islam on the Christian world has been delineated by an Egyptian scholar, Dr Ahmad, Amin in *Zuhal Islam*. He writes:

Several dissensions arose in Christendom which unmistakably reveal the influence of Islam. In the eighth century A.D., that is, the second and third century A.H., a movement emerged in Septamania(10) which denied confession of sin before Church authorities. It propagated the view that the bishops had no authority to absolve anyone from sin, for which one should only beseech God. Islam had no organised church nor there was any concept of such a confession of sin.

Another movement of a similar nature was against the presence of images and statues in churches which was known as Iconoclast. This was a sect in the eighth century A.D. or the third and fourth century A.H., which was opposed to the worship paid to statues. The Roman Emperor Leo III issued an Edict in 726. A.D. against showing respect to the images and statues and then interdicted it in 730 A.D. The Popes, Gregory II and III and Jerome, the Patriarch of Constantinople, were in favour of paying homage to images and statues while Constantine V and Leo IV were opposed to it. The struggle that ensued between them need not be describe here, but what we would like to emphasise is that the Iconoclast movement, as the historians acknowledge, came into existence through the impact of Islam on Christianity. They are on record that Clodius, the Pontiff of Touraine who became Pontiff in 828/213), used to destroy images and the Cross and prohibited divine honours being paid to them. He was born and brought up in Spain where he must have learnt to hate images and statues as objects of worship. Bukhari and Muslim include a report from Ayesha, the Prophet's wife, which says: "The Prophet returned from a journey when I had hung a curtain having a few pictures on a window. When the Prophet saw it, he tore it apart and remonstrated me saying; Ayesha, the Day of Reckoning will be the hardest for those who copy God's creation.

She further relates that she made pillows out of that cloth.

There have been sects in Christianity which explained Trinity as belief in One God and denied divinity of Jesus.

European historians, particularly those of the Church, discern the influence of Islam in the conflict between the Papist and the Protestant reformers. The sixteenth century movement for the reform of abuses in the Roman Church, led by Martin Luther, betrays the influence of Islam.

Simple faith in the Unity of God has been a standing reproach to the inexplicable intricacy of Trinity. Michael Servetus (1511-1553) a contemporary of Calvin and Luther depicts his anguish in *The Errors of Trinity*:

How much this tradition of Trinity has alas been the laughing stock of Mohammedans only God knows. The Jews also shrink from giving adherence to this fancy of ours, and laugh at our foolishness about the Trinity, and on account of its blasphemies, they do not believe that this is the Messiah promised in their Law. And not only the Mohammedans and the Hebrews, but the very beasts of the field, would make fun of us, did they grasp our fantastic notion, for all the workers of the Lord bless the One God.

Christianity amalgamated antagonistic doctrines, according to Ernest De Bunsen, which were framed by St. Paul and so came to be recognised as the foundation of orthodox Christianity. Several others like George Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells and Dr. Albert Schweitzer have also reached the conclusion that the Pauline heresy became the foundation of Christian orthodoxy while the legitimate teachings of Jesus Christ were disowned as heretical. Perhaps no wonder then that Luther spearheaded Protestantism, a revolt against the assumption of supremacy in spiritual matters by the Roman Catholic Church and taught that man is responsible to God and not to the Church.

The Reason for Failure

A well-grounded fact demonstrated by the history of religions and in tune with human psychology is that reformative or even revolutionary movements that take shape within the bosom of any religion are ultimately absorbed within that religion if they do not reject its basic postulates and maintain an ambivalent attitude towards it. The fate of all such movements, no matter to which religion they belong is the same; they lose both their identity and their message.

Reformative movements within Christianity and Hindu sects calling people to accept Divine Unity and the brotherhood of mankind were ultimately assimilated within the religions they tried to reform. Contrary to such reformism, the Prophets of God (peace be on all them) were always candid and straightforward in their condemnation of what they did not think to be correct. This is best illustrated by what the Prophet Abraham (peace be upon him) is reported to have said to his people:

Surely an excellent pattern you have in Abraham and those who followed him. They said to their people: we disown you and what you worship beside Allah. We renounce you: enmity and hate shall reign between us until you believe in Allah alone except the saying of Abraham to his father: I shall implore Allah to forgive

you, although I have no power for you with Allah at all. O Lord, in Thee we put our trust and to Thee we turn and to Thee we shall come at last. (Al-Mumtahaha:4)

The stand taken by the Prophet Abraham was meant not for the people of his time alone. He enjoined posterity to follow his example:

And (recall) when Abraham said to his father and his people: I renounce what you worship save Him, who has created me it an abiding precept among his descendants, so that they might turn (to none but Allah). (Al-Zukhruf: 26-28)

It was this teaching which has helped Islam to maintain its pristine purity to this day. The principle to be followed for ever being: whosoever perished might perish by a clear sign, and by a clear sign he might live who remained alive. (Al-Aufal: 42)

The Concept of Human Unity and Equality

The Historic Declaration of Man's Brotherhood

The second great favour conferred by the Messenger of God on human beings was the concept of the equality and brotherhood of mankind. The world before him was divided into manifold castes and creeds, tribes and nations; some claiming the ranks of nobility for themselves and condemning others to the position of serfs and chattels.

These differences were by no means less sharp than those existing between the free-born and the slaves or between the worshipper and the worshipped. It was for the first time, amidst the gloom overshadowing the world for centuries, that the world heard the clarion call of human equality from the Prophet of Islam: (peace be upon him)

"O Mankind, Your God is One and you have but one father. You are all progeny of Adam, and Adam was made of clay. Lo! The noblest among you, in the sight of God, is one who is best in conduct. No Arab has any preference over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab over an Ahab save by his piety.

His announcement was in fact a twin declaration of the Unity of God and the Unity of mankind. These are the two natural foundations for raising the edifice of peace and progress, friendship and co-operation between different peoples and nations. It created a twin relationship between human beings— that of One Lord of all mankind and the other of one father of all of them. The Oneness of God was the spiritual principle of human equality just as a common lineage placed them on the same plane of humanity:

Mankind, fear your Lord, Who created you of a single soul, and from it created its mate, and from the pair of them scattered abroad many men and women; and fear God by Whom you demand one another, and the wombs, surely God ever watches over you. (Al-Nisa: 1).

O mankind, We have created you male and female, and made you races and tribes, that you may know one another. Surely the noblest among you in the sight of God is the most God-fearing of you. God is All knowing, All-aware. (Al-Hujurat: 13)

The Prophet of Islam (peace be upon him) simultaneously announced:

God has put an end to the convention of the pagan past taking pride in your fathers; now there will be pious believers or unbelieving wrongdoers. All are sons of Adam and Adam was made of clay. No Arab excels a non-Arab but by his piety.

These were the teachings which made Islam, consisting of widely different tribes, races and nations, a commonwealth of Believers hailing from many countries and regions. It conferred no privileges at all: no Bani Lavis and Brahmins of Judaism and Hinduism. No tribe or race could claim any preference over another nor any blood or lineage could lay a claim to nobility for its own sake. The only criterion recognised for preference over others was an individual's endeavour to improve his morality and character. The Musnad of Imam Ahmad reports the Prophet as saying: "Iranians would attain knowledge even if it were to be found in Venus."

The Arabs have always shown the highest mark of respect to those non-Arab scholars who have excelled them in religious disciplines and taken them as their teachers and guides. Strange though it may seem, they have not conferred such titles of honour on Arabs themselves as they have on certain non-Arabs. Imam Muhammad ibn Ismail-al-Bukhari (d. 256 A.H.) them as Amir-ul-Muminin fil Hadith (Commander of the faithful of Hadith) and his Al-Jami'-al-Salih was regarded as the most authentic book next only to the Holy Qur'an. Imam Abul Ma'ali 'Abdul Malik al-Juwaini of Nishapur (d. 268 A.H.) was known as Imam-ul-Haramayn (Leader of the Two Sacred Cities) and Imam Abu Hamid Muhammad b. Muhammad al-Ghazzali (d. 505 A.H.) as Hujjat-ul-Islam (Proof of Islam).?

By the end of the first century of the Islamic era, non-Arabs had attained distinction in almost every branch of learning and attained prominence even in such sciences as fiqh (jurisprudence) and hadith (traditions). Any work on the literary history of the Arabs or biographies bear witness to this development. All this happened in the golden era of Islam when the Arabs held political power.

An eminent Arab scholar Abdul Rahman ibn al-Khaldun (d. 808 A.H.) expresses surprise at this, saying:

It is a strange historical fact that most of the scholars of religious and intellectual sciences were non-Arabs. The contribution of the Arabs was extremely meager although it was an Arab civilisation and its founder was also an Arab. Saibuyah held the most prominent position in Arabic Syntax, then it was Bu 'Ali Farsi and then Az-Zajaj, and all these were non-Arabs. Same is the case with experts in the field of hadith (traditions) *usul fiqh* (principles of jurisprudence) and *ilm kalam* (theological dialectics).

The announcement made by the Prophet of Islam (peace be upon him) cited at the beginning, was pilgrimage made on the historic occasion of his last Hajj. When this was made, perhaps, it would have been difficult for the world to fully appreciate its significance. It was a revolutionary call signifying the release of man from the pressures of society, its values, standards, traditions and practices.

Man always accepts any change gradually and indirectly. We can touch a covered electric wire but not a naked one since we would get a shock and possibly even die. This declaration, then was more appalling than an electric shock.

The long journey of knowledge, thought and culture has now made this revolutionary call so acceptable to us that today every political and social organisation swears by the Charter of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations. Now nobody is taken aback by it, but was it the same when the Prophet proclaimed it?

Humanity before Islam

There was a time when superiority of blood and clan was accepted as a matter of fact. The Holy Qur'an quotes the belief then held by the Jews and Christian in these words: The Jews and the Christians say: We are the children of God, His loved ones. (Al-Ma'ida: 18). The Pharaohs of Egypt claimed themselves to be the incarnation of Ra, the Sun-god, while India had several ruling families who arrogated themselves as the progeny of the sun (*suryavansi*) or the moon (*chandravansi*). The Emperors of Iran called themselves *Kesra* or *Chosroes* meaning that Divine blood flowed in their veins. Chosroes II (*Khosrau Parvez*) even lavished himself with the grandiose title: "The Immortal soul among the gods and peerless God among human beings; glorious is whose name; dawning with the sun-rise and light of the dark-eyed night."²²

The Caesars of Rome were called 'Augustus' meaning majestic, venerable, since they were entitled to receive divine honours²³. Chinese rulers deemed themselves

to be the sons of Heavens. They believed that the Heaven was their God, who, with his spouse, the goddess earth, had given birth to human beings and Pau Ku, the Chinese Emperor, was the first born son of Heaven enjoying supernatural powers²⁴. The Arabs were so proud of their language that every nation besides their own was an 'ajami or dumb to them. Likewise, the Quran'sh of Makkah, conscious of maintaining their superiority, claimed a privileged position even during Hajj. They never went to the Plain of 'Arafat with others. They stayed in the Mosque at Makkah or went to Muzdalifa claiming that privilege on the grounds that they belonged to the House of God. They also claimed themselves to be the elite of Arabia.

The most glaring peculiarity of the religion-social structure of India of the olden days was the all-powerful caste system. This rigid social order having the sanction of religion behind it allowed no inter-mixing of races for it was meant to protect the privileged position of Brahmins. It classified the population of India into four classes with reference to the vocation followed by a particular family in which an individual was born. The system which covered the whole gamut of social life in India divided people into four castes, namely, (i) the Brahmin or the learned and priestly class, (ii) the Kshatriyas or the fighting and ruling class, (iii) The Vaisyas or trading and agricultural people, and (iv) the Sudras or the lowest caste, created from the foot of God, in order to serve the other three classes.

This law of caste distinction gave to the Brahmin the distinction, superiority and sanctity not enjoyed by any other caste. He was both sinless and saved, even if he destroyed the three worlds; no impost could be levied on him; he could not be punished for any crime; while the Sudra could not accumulate wealth or touch a Brahmin or a sacred scripture.

The Vaisyas, or the working classes like weavers, boatmen, butchers etc. and Sudras like scavengers were not allowed to live in a city. They came into the town after day-break and left before sun-set. Not allowed to enjoy the amenities of urban life, they lived in rural slums.

The most precious gift that the Muslims brought to India was the concept of human equality which was completely unknown to India. Muslim society was not divided into castes and trade was not allocated to any particular class. The Muslims mixed freely, lived and dined together, all were free to read or write and carry on any occupation. The Muslim social order posed a challenge to that obtaining in India, but it was also proved a blessing for it. The rigours of caste distinction were weakened and social reform movements were able to concentrate on the shortcomings of Hindu society and, consequently, untouchability was to a large extent removed.

Jawahar Lal Nehru, the former Prime Minister of India, has acknowledged the debt India owes to Islam. He writes in the *Discovery of India*:

The impact of the invaders from the north-west and of Islam on India had been considerable. It had pointed out and shown up the abuses that had crept into Hindu society— the petrification of caste, untouchability, exclusiveness carried to fantastic lengths. The idea of the brotherhood of Islam and of the theoretical equality of its adherents made a powerful appeal, especially to those in the Hindu fold who were denied any semblance of equal treatment.

The impact of Islam on Hinduism can be seen in the Bhakti (love and devotion) movement which began in South India during Muslim rule and spread to the whole country. Describing this phenomenon Dr Tara Chand writes:

Along with them marched a goodly company of saintly men who addressed themselves to the common people. They spoke the common people's dialects and in the main imparted their message through word of mouth. Many of them were endowed with the gift of poetry and their homely memorable verse went direct into the heart of their listeners. Their avoidance of learned jargon, their simple teachings stressing the love of God and of man, their denunciation of idolatry and caste, of hypocrisy, inequality and the externalia of religion, their sincerity, purity and dedicated life appealed to wide circles among the masses.

Their utterances gave shape to modern Indian languages. Their enthusiasm stirred the springs of life and moved men to high endeavour and unselfish behaviour. There is a strange exaltation in society in every region during the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which cannot be accounted for without taking into consideration this sudden outburst of spiritual energy. These centuries are filled with voices— at once warning and encouraging— of truly noble and large-hearted men in surprisingly large numbers. Yet most of them were of humble origin and they destroyed the myth of aristocracy based on birth.

The spirit of human brotherhood built up by Islam is not hampered by concept of racialism or sectarianism, be it linguistic, historic, traditionalistic or even of a dogmatic nature. Its power to unite different races and nations in one brotherhood has always been recognised. A noted orientalist, H.A.R. Gibb, says:

But Islam has yet a further service to render to the cause of humanity... No other society has such a record of success in uniting in an equality of status, of opportunity and of endeavour so many and so various races of mankind. The great Muslim communities of Africa, India and Indonesia, perhaps also the small Muslim community of Japan, show that Islam has still the power to reconcile apparently irreconcilable elements of race and tradition. If ever the opposition of

the great societies of the East and West is to be replaced by co-operation, the mediation of Islam is an indispensable condition.

The British historian, A.J. Toyabee, agrees with Gibb that Islam alone can efface race consciousness:

The extinction of race consciousness as between Muslims is one of the outstanding achievements of Islam, and in the contemporary world there is, as it happens, a crying need for the propagation of this Islamic virtue...

Though in certain other respects the triumph of the English-speaking people may be judged, in retrospect, to have been a blessing to mankind, in this perilous matter of race feeling it can hardly be denied that it has been a misfortune.³¹

Islam was the first religion which preached and practiced democracy. The well-known Indian freedom fighter and poetess Sarojini Naidu witnessed and affirmed this quality of Islam. She writes:

It was the first religion that preached and practised democracy; for in the mosque when the call from the Miniaret is sounded and the worshippers are gathered together, the democracy of Islam is embodied five times a day when the peasant and the king kneel side by side and proclaim, "God alone is great." I have been struck over and over again by this indivisible unity of Islam that makes a man distinctly a brother. When you meet an Egyptian, an Algerian, an Indian and a Turk in London, what matters that Egypt was the motherland of one and India the motherland of another.

Malcolm X was a racist for whom the 'devil white man' was a Satan. However, he shed all his prejudices on coming into contact with Muslims. He recounts his own experience:

During the past eleven days here in the Muslim World, I have eaten from the same plate, drunk from the same glass, and slept in the same bed (or on the same rug)—While praying to the same God— with fellow Muslims, whose eyes were bluest of the blue, whose hair was blondest of the blond, and whose skin was the whiest of the white. And in the words and in the actions and in the deeds of the 'white' Muslims, I felt the same sincerity that I felt among the black African Muslims of Nigeria, Sudan, and Ghana.

We were truly all the same (brothers)— because their belief in one God had removed the 'white' from their minds, the 'white' from their behaviour, and the 'white' from their attitude.

I could see from this, that perhaps if white Americans could accept the Oneness of God, then perhaps, too, they could accept in reality the Oneness of Man—and cease to measure, and hinder, and harm others in terms of their ‘differences’ in colour.

The Proclamation of Human Dignity

The third universal gift of Islam is its declaration that man has been endowed with the highest rank and dignity in the entire scheme of God’s creation. Before the prophethood of Muhammad, on whom be the peace and blessings of God, man had degraded himself to the position of the most inconsequential being on earth. Numerous beasts and trees connected with mythological traditions and pagan beliefs were held as holy and cared for more than man himself. They had to be protected even at the cost of innocent lives; sometimes human beings were sacrificed at the altars of these holy objects. We still come across such gory incidents even in such civilised countries as India.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) restored the dignity of man by declaring that man is the most respectable and prized being in the whole Universe and nothing has a greater claim to honour and love and protection than he. The Holy Prophet raised man to the highest conceivable level, that is, the position of the vicegerent of God on earth. It was for man that the world was created. Says the Qur’an:

It is He who created for you all that is (Al-Baqarah: 29).

The Qur’an described man as the paramount and best of creations in the whole Universe.

We have honoured the children of Adam and guided them by land and sea. And provided them with good things and exalted them above many of Our creations. (Al-Isra’: 70) What can affirm human eminence and honour better than the following observation by the Prophet of Islam: The entire creation constitutes the family of God and he is dearest of Him who is the best in his dealings with God’s family.

Can there be a better concept of human dignity and nobility? Has man ever been granted this honour under any religion or social philosophy? The Prophet of Islam made Divine mercy contingent on man being kind to man:

The Most Merciful is compassionate to the softhearted. Show mercy to those on the earth and the Owner of Heavens will be merciful to you.

All those who know about the social and political condition of the world prior to the advent of Islam can appreciate the determined efforts the Prophet made in order to drive home the concept of the worth and dignity of man. The lives of innumerable human beings depended on the whims of a single individual before the prophethood of Muhammad (peace be upon him). Any tyrant could make in blood across countries and continents to gain political ascendancy or just satisfy his whims.

Alexander the Great (356-324 B.C.) rose like a tempest, subdued Syria and Egypt, and crossing Babylonia and Turkistan reached India. He swept the older civilizations before him. Julius Caesar (102-44 B.C.) and several other conquerors like Hannibal (247-182 B.C.) exterminated large populations remorselessly as if those were not human beings but beasts of prey.

These pitiless massacres continued all over the world even after the advent of Jesus Christ. The Roman Emperor Nero (A.D. 54-68) murdered his own wife and mother, persecuted his own countrymen and played the fiddle while Rome burnt, for which he was himself probably responsible. Barbarians like the Goths and Vandals were busy destroying civilisations in Europe and Africa only a hundred years before the prophethood of Muhammad (peace be upon him).

Little regard for human life among the Arabs had made fights and forays a pastime for them and even the most trivial matter could lead them to the battle-field. Bakr and Taghlab, the two tribes of Bani Wa'il, continued to fight for 40 years during which time they fought many a sanguinary battle although it all started by the shooting of an arrow at the udder of a camel which mixed milk with blood. Jassas ibn Marrah killed Kalayb and then Bakr and Taghlab started fighting and about which Kalayb's brother, Al-Muhalhil, remarked: "Men have died, mothers have become childless, children have become orphans; tears stream from the eyes and the dead are lying shroudes."

Similarly the Battle of Dahis-o-Ghabra was sparked off simply because Dahis, the horse of Qays ibn Zuhair, had overtaken that of Hudaiqa ibn Badr. A man of Asad slapped Qays at the instance of Hudaiqa which made his horse lose the race. Thereafter, the war of attrition started in which a large number of people lost their lives and many had to leave their hearths and homes.

The number of battles fought by the Prophet was 27 or 28 while he is reported to have sent out 60 forays and expeditions. In all these battles and expeditions only 1018 peoples, Muslim as well as non-Muslim, lost their lives.

The purpose of these fighting was to restore law and order and to protect human life and property from senseless destruction. A civilised code of conduct was

prescribed for warfare and this changed the character of war from prosecution to disciplinary action.

The moral teachings of Islam create such a strong sense of human dignity that one never treats another person as a sub-human being. A Muslim never treats another man as a chattel or slave nor discriminates between himself and others. An incident preserved by history amply illustrates the sense of human dignity embedded in Islam. Anas relates that he was with 'Umar, the second Caliph, when an Egyptian Copt complained to the Caliph that his horse had beaten that of Muhammad, son of 'Amr ibn al-'As, the Governor of Egypt, and was witnessed by a number of people. When he claimed that he had won the race, Muhammad became enraged and lashed him with a whip. Caliph 'Umar asked him to wait and wrote to 'Amr ibn al-'As asking him and his son to present themselves before him. 'Amr ibn al-'As sent for his son and enquired about the matter, who then denied having committed any crime. Then both 'Amr ibn al-'As and his son repaired to Madina. Caliph 'Umar sent for the Copt and giving him a whip asked him to beat 'Amr ibn al-'As's son. After the Copt had exacted retribution, Caliph 'Umar ordered the Copt to move the whip over 'Amr ibn al-'As's head for it was because of him that he had been flogged. The Copt refused saying that he had already had his revenge. Thereupon 'Umar remarked: "Had you beaten him I would not have intervened." Then, turning to 'Amr ibn al-'As he said, "Whence did you make them slaves who had been born free?" Thereafter, turning to the Copt, 'Umar said, "Go back and have no fear. If anything happens, inform me."