

THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF MUSLIMS IN THE WEST

*Transcript of a Speech Given by Maulana Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi
(Delivered in England several years ago, but applicable to all Muslims living in Muslim minority countries)*

All praise is due to Almighty God, Allah, and may He, the Exalted, bestow His peace and blessings upon Prophet Muhammad, upon his good and pure family, as well as upon all of the noble companions, and upon those who follow them in righteousness until the Day of Judgement.

Dear Brothers in Islam,
Muslims shoulder a momentous responsibility in a country where Islam is not the dominant religion, where Western values and an un-Islamic way of life hold the upper hand and in which personal and partisan interests are top of the agenda and self-gratification is the goal of life. In such cases, Muslims, particularly when they are in the minority, face a difficult situation.

What is imperative is that they should have unshakeable faith, a conduct marked by boldness and thoughtfulness, and absolute conviction in the message with which Allah has endowed them. They should live by a high standard and not suffer from any inferiority complex. If they do not do so, they will simply be seen as imitators of Western civilization and will not gain any respect. And in this eventuality, they will not be able to play an effective and significant role, which may draw others' attention and bring about any change.

A Muslim in the Persian Court

Let me relate an incident, which illustrates this point well. It demonstrates a devoted Muslim's conduct, a man who had full confidence in his message. For him, all the outward forms of glory and luxury had no significance whatsoever. Rather he felt pity for those given to a life of indulgence and luxury. This incident dates back to the

early days of Islamic history. What prompts me to relate it to you is that this incident contains abundant lessons and is full of insight and advice.

The commander-in-chief of the Persian army, Rustum, who was next only to the Persian Emperor in his glory and power, asked the commander of the Muslim army, Sa'd bin Abi Waqqas, Radi-Allahu anhu, to send to him someone who could explain to them why the Arabian nomads and bedouins had come to Persian centers of civilization and great military power. For they bore no correspondence to Arabia.

One can well visualize what opinion Rustum had of the Arab bedouins whose lifestyle was certainly inferior to Rustum's. For the Arabs lived in tents, and their staple diet was dates and camel's meat. Rustum had utter contempt for the Arabs. He, however, summoned someone who may be able to explain to him the Arab's purpose and motives in engaging in a battle with the Persians.

An Ordinary Muslim, An Extraordinary Human Being

It is one of the miracles of Islam that it elevated all Arabs to a lofty and high standard in that they took pride in their faith, in Allah, and in Islam, and lived by the message of Islam. Sa'd bin Abi Waqqas selected Rab'i bin 'Amir, Radi-Allahu anhu, for this purpose. Rab'i bin 'Amir is a somewhat obscure figure in Islamic history. He did not have much to his credit. I am not relating this incident for its own sake or for its sheer interest or because it affords some gratification to our nationalistic pride; the reason why I narrate it to you is to give you some idea of Rab'i's tremendous faith and confidence, which he displayed before the commander-in-chief of the Persian Empire. This enabled him to speak freely and boldly before Rustum. This may help you compare and contrast his response with your own conduct, conviction, power of faith and your attitude towards Western culture, civilization and its hegemony. This may also serve as a vantage point for observing how we have been discharging our responsibilities and how we respond to the prevailing Western civilization, which holds general currency in the contemporary world and a position of leadership and superiority.

Rab'i bin 'Amir appeared in Rustum's court. His dress was marred with patches and darning marks. He was carrying an ordinary sword and shield. He entered the Persian camp riding an ordinary horse. Dressed in his unimpressive outfit he entered the court, crushing its plush carpets. He tied his horse and approached Rustum. As he was armed with his shield and sword, guards at the entrance objected and asked him to lay down his weapons. Rab'i bin 'Amir refused, saying that he had not approached Rustum on his own, rather Rustum had invited him. If the guards did not let him enter in his armed state, he would return to his camp. Rustum allowed him to retain his arms.

From Narrowness to Spaciousness

Underwhelmed by the sumptuous setting of the court, Rab'i approached Rustum with great confidence. Rustum asked him what had brought the Arabs to Persia? With his indomitable courage and conviction, which owed its origin to the divine Scripture and the Prophet's message he elegantly said:

"Allah (the Almighty) has sent us so that we may liberate fellow human beings from subservience to other fellow human beings and bring them to obedience to the One True God. We are here to take them from the narrowness of the world to its spaciousness. Our aim is to free them of the persecution perpetrated against them by other religions. We want to bless them with the justice and equity of Islam."

Dear Friends and Brothers!

What Rab'i said about Islam's message and its primary goal with full conviction and what he said about releasing men from the yoke of other religions' injustices and to bring them under Islam's justice and equity is not all surprising. For this was his very faith. However, part of his utterance, that in which he says they had been sent to free the Persians from the narrowness of the world to its spaciousness, amazes me. Had he referred to the narrowness of this world and spaciousness of the Hereafter, it would

not have perplexed me in the least. For every Muslim believes in this truism and Rab'i belonged to the early days of Islamic history when Muslims were full of conviction.

However, as I pointed out, I am amazed by his utterance that the Muslims were to liberate fellow human beings from the narrowness of this world and to take them to its spaciousness. In other words, Rab'i told Rustum that the Muslims had not come out of Arabia attracted by booty or any material considerations, which would accrue to them. Rather, they felt pity for their fellow human beings. They intended to free them from their narrow and dark cells. For the Persians and non-Muslims appeared to them as caged animals leading only an animal-like existence. For the Persians were slaves to their own desires and fashions of the day. They were so much bound by their own traditions and customs that they could not do anything on their own. They needed help and support at every step.

The Lifestyles of Rich, Famous, and Ignorant

It is borne out by history that when the Persian emperor Yazdgar escaped from his palace, he felt thirsty on his way. He entered a house and was offered water in an ordinary glass. He refused to drink it in such an ordinary glass, for he was used to taking water in gold and silver vessels. If a Persian wore a crown worth less than one hundred thousand dirham or if he did not have a palace with fountains and an orchard, he did not enjoy any respect in that society.

In other words, Rab'i pointed out to him that they were the slaves of their slaves; for they depended totally on others. The Muslims, however, wanted to liberate them and take them to freedom. The Muslims had not come to Persia for their own interests. Rather they had taken this long, arduous journey for the sake of the Persians themselves. They did not lack anything in their own homeland. For the Arabian peninsula is vast enough. However, they felt concerned about the unnatural way of life to which the Persians were addicted. The Muslims were not slaves to their own

desires. Nor were they addicted to good dress and food and to a train of slaves. They led a life of absolute freedom in the desert and thanked Allah for whatever they received.

Allah had sent them to liberate those whom He wills from subservience to fellow human beings and to bring them to the obedience to Allah, to free them from the narrowness of this world, to bring them to it's spaciousness and to enable them to benefit from Islam's justice and equity by freeing them of the oppression of other religions. For the Persians had been a target of other religions' persecution, and had led a contemptible life. They did not enjoy any real peace or happiness.

Bring Them What They Are Missing

Let me once again emphasize that you should play an independent, effective and fundamental role in society. Your life should be an ideal one which may draw the attention of others. It should excite the minds of the local people who may be compelled to contrast their own life with yours. Your life should make them curious for gaining sound information about Islam. However, if you slavishly imitate the Western lifestyle and degrade yourselves, there will not be and cannot be any distinction between you and the local people. In this case, they will not feel any attraction towards you. Nor will it make them reflect on you or hold you in esteem. They will not consider you a model to emulate.

However, when you present before them a unique way of life, it will make them curious. They will be forced to approach you, seeking the source of your worldview. They will naturally ask you how you learnt these high values and noble ideals. They will be keen to have literature about Islam and the biography of the Prophet Muhammad Sall-Allahu alayhi wa sallam.

You should, thus, explain to them what made you different and what helped you attain your noble character. This will make them respectful towards you - Insha Allah.

My Dear Muslim Brothers!

You must present a model and an ideal way of life, which may make them interested in studying Islam and eager to know the source of your guidance, which enabled you to follow a particular way of life and worldview.

No Inferiority Complex, No Imitation

This is the only way in which you can play an effective role in non-Islamic societies. However, if you assimilate yourself fully into their society and take to their way of life, as a result of either some inferiority complex or out of sheer imitation whether in the U.K., or in India or in Africa or in any part of the world, you can never influence them nor can you ever bring about any change in them, even if you live in their midst for centuries.

Finally, I must thank you for listening to me with such attention. I apologize for any lapse that I may have committed.

Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the Universe.