



ISLAM  
AT THE  
CROSSROADS

MUHAMMAD ASAD

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*Muhammad Asad*

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NEW ERA PUBL.  
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## *Contents*

Author's Note	7
Foreword	9
The Open Road of Islam	13
The Spirit of the West	29
The Shadow of the Crusades	49
About Education	63
About Imitation	75
Hadīth and Sunnah	82
Conclusion	98

الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ وَحْدَهُ، وَالصَّلَاةُ وَالسَّلَامُ عَلَى مَنْ لَانَبِيِّ بَعْدِهِ

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book was written nearly half a century ago – to be precise, in the autumn of 1933 – and was first published in Delhi in 1934, and subsequently in Lahore: a plea to the Muslims of my generation to avoid a blind imitation of Western social forms and values, and to try to preserve instead their Islamic heritage which once upon a time had been responsible for the glorious, many-sided historical phenomenon comprised in the term “Muslim civilization”.

This first literary effort of mine on a purely Islamic subject found an immediate response among English-speaking Muslims of what was then an undivided India, and was reprinted in many editions. An Arabic translation followed a few years later, and its impact on the educated public in the Middle East was, if anything, even greater than that of the original, English-language version. The positive reception accorded to it soon gave rise to other books, by other Muslim writers, who took up the main theme of *Islam at the Crossroads* and elaborated it in various forms and on various levels, each according to his own bent of mind, sometimes coinciding with this or that of my views, but more often than not arriving at conclusions and postulates which appeared to me then – and appear to me now – contrary to what I had envisaged. What I had in mind when I wrote this book was a re-awakening of the Muslims’ consciousness of their being socially and culturally *different* from the all-powerful Western society, and thus a deepening of their pride in, and their desire to preserve, such of their own traditional forms and institutions as would help them to keep that essential “difference” alive and make them once again culturally creative after the centuries of our community’s utter

stagnation and intellectual sterility. Throughout, the main accent was on “re-awakening” and “preserving”: that is to say, preserving those forms and values of our past which were still relevant to the reality of Islam as a culture-producing force, and re-awakening the spirit of Islamic ideology as expressed in the Holy Qur’ān and the Prophet’s Sunnah.

But, as it happened, much of what I had aimed at when writing *Islam at the Crossroads* was subsequently misunderstood by some of the Muslim readers and leaders who failed to grasp the full implications of my call to cultural creativeness, and began to think that what mattered was a mere return to the social forms evident in the past centuries of Muslim decadence. This, as I have already said, was quite contrary to what I had aimed at. To be sure, a re-awakening has taken and is taking place in the Muslim world: but, alas, it is not a re-awakening to the true values of the Qur’ān and the Sunnah but, rather, a confusion resulting from the readiness of so many Muslims to accept blindly the social forms and thought-processes evolved in the medieval Muslim world instead of boldly returning to the ideology apparent in the only true sources of Islam: the Qur’ān and the Sunnah.

It is in the endeavour to clarify something of the tragic confusion nowadays prevailing in the Muslim world that I am now presenting a new, revised edition of this book in the hope that it may be of benefit to the Muslim youth of *today*, just as the original 1934 edition was dedicated to the Muslim youth of those days – to the fathers or even the grandfathers of the present generation. If some of their forebears misunderstood my effort, perhaps the present-day young Muslims are better able to appreciate its meaning in the light of what has passed since it first appeared half a century ago. May it aid them on the difficult road that still lies ahead of them.

Tangier, 1982.

MUHAMMAD ASAD

## FOREWORD

Seldom has mankind been intellectually as restless as it is in our time. Not only are we faced with a multitude of problems requiring new and unprecedented solutions, but also the angle of vision in which these problems appear before us is different from anything to which we have been accustomed so far. In all countries society passes through fundamental changes. The pace at which this happens is everywhere different; but everywhere we can observe the same pressing energy which allows of no halt or hesitation.

The world of Islam is no exception in this respect. Here also we see old customs and ideas gradually disappear and new forms emerge. Where does this development lead? How deep does it reach? How far does it fit into the cultural mission of Islam?

This book does not pretend to give an exhaustive answer to all these questions. Owing to its limited scope only one of the problems facing the Muslims today, namely, the attitude which they should adopt towards Western civilization, has been selected for discussion. The vast implications of the subject, however, have made it necessary to extend our scrutiny over some basic aspects of Islam, more particularly with regard to the concept of the Sunnah. It is impossible to give here more than the bare outline of a theme wide enough to fill many bulky volumes. But none the less – or, perhaps, therefore – I feel confident that this brief sketch will prove, for others, an incentive to further thought on this most important problem.

And now about myself – because the Muslims have a right, when a convert speaks to them, to know how and why he has embraced Islam.

In 1922 I left my native country, Austria, to travel through Africa and Asia as a special correspondent to some of the leading Continental newspapers, and spent from that year onward nearly the whole of my time in the Islamic East. My

interest in the nations with which I came into contact was in the beginning that of an outsider only. I saw before me a social order and an outlook on life fundamentally different from the European; and from the very first there grew in me a sympathy for the more tranquil – I should rather say, more human – conception of life, as compared with the hasty, mechanized mode of living in Europe. This sympathy gradually led me to an investigation of the *reasons* for such a difference, and I became interested in the religious teachings of the Muslims. At the time in question, that interest was not yet strong enough to draw me into the fold of Islam, but it opened to me a new vista of a progressive human society, organized with a minimum of internal conflicts and a maximum of real brotherly feeling. The reality, however, of present-day Muslim life appeared to be very far from the ideal possibilities given in the religious teachings of Islam. Whatever, in Islam, had been progress and movement had turned, among the Muslims, into indolence and stagnation; whatever there had been of generosity and readiness for self-sacrifice had become, among the present-day Muslims, perverted into narrow-mindedness and love of an easy life.

Prompted by this discovery and puzzled by the obvious disparity between *Once and Now*, I tried to approach the problem before me from a more intimate point of view: that is, I tried to imagine myself as being *within* the circle of Islam. It was a purely intellectual experiment; and it revealed to me, within a very short time, the right solution. I realized that the one and only reason for the social and cultural decay of the Muslims consisted in the fact that they had gradually ceased to follow the teachings of Islam in spirit. Islam was still there; but it was a body without a soul. The very element which once had created the strength of the Muslim world was now responsible for its weakness: Islamic society had been built, from the very outset, on religious foundations alone, and the weakening of those foundations has necessarily weakened the cultural structure – and possibly might cause its ultimate disappearance.

The more I understood how concrete and how immensely practical the teachings of Islam are, the more eager became my questioning as to *why* the Muslims had abandoned their full application to real life. I discussed this problem with many thinking Muslims in almost all the countries between the Libyan

Desert and the Pamirs, between the Bosphorus and the Arabian Sea. It almost became an obsession which ultimately overshadowed all my other intellectual interests in the world of Islam. The questioning steadily grew in emphasis until I, a non-Muslim, talked to Muslims as if I had to defend Islam from their negligence and indolence. This progress was imperceptible to me, until one day – it was in the autumn of 1925, in the mountains of Afghanistan – a young provincial governor said to me: “But you *are* a Muslim, only you don’t know it yourself.” I was struck by these words and remained silent. But when I returned to Europe once again in 1926, I realized that the only logical consequence of my attitude was to embrace Islam.

So much about the *circumstances* of my becoming a Muslim. Since then I have been asked, time and again: “*Why* did you embrace Islam? What was it that attracted you particularly?” – and I must confess that I do not have any single satisfactory answer. It was not any *particular* teaching that attracted me, but the whole wonderful, inexplicably coherent structure of moral teaching and practical life-programme. I could not say, even now, which aspect of it appeals to me more than any other. Islam appears to me like a perfect work of architecture. All its parts are harmoniously conceived to complement and support each other; nothing is superfluous and nothing lacking; and the result is a structure of absolute balance and solid composure. Probably this feeling that everything in the teachings and postulates of Islam is “in its proper place” had created the strongest impression on me. There might have been, along with it, other impressions as well which today it is difficult for me to analyze. After all, it was a matter of love; and love is composed of many things: of our desires and our loneliness, of our high aims and our shortcomings, of our strengths and our weaknesses. So it was in my case. Islam came over to me like a robber who enters a house by night; but, unlike a robber, it entered to remain for good.

Ever since I endeavoured to learn as much as I could about Islam. I studied the Qur’ān and the Traditions of the Prophet. I studied the language of Islam and its history, and a good deal of what had been written about it and against it. I spent nearly six years in the Hijaz and Najd, mostly in Mecca and Medina, so that I might experience something of the original surroundings



in which this religion was preached by the Arabian Prophet. As the Hijaz is the meeting ground of Muslims from many countries, I was able to compare most of the different religious and social views prevalent in the Islamic world in our days. Those studies and comparisons created in me the firm conviction that Islam, as a spiritual and social phenomenon, is still, in spite of all the drawbacks caused by the deficiencies of the Muslims, by far the greatest driving force mankind has ever experienced; and all my interest became, since then, centred around the problem of its regeneration.

This little book is a humble contribution towards that great goal. It does not pretend to be a dispassionate survey of affairs; it is the statement of a case, as I see it: the case of Islam *versus* Western civilization. And it is not written for those to whom Islam is only one of the many, more or less useful, accessories to social life, but rather for those in whose hearts still lives a spark of the flame which burned in the hearts of the Companions of the Prophet – the flame that once made Islam so great as a social order and a cultural achievement.

*Delhi, March 1934.*

M.A.

## THE OPEN ROAD OF ISLAM

One of the slogans most characteristic of the present age is “the conquest of space”. Means of communication have been developed which are far beyond the dreams of former generations; and these new means have set in motion a far more rapid and extensive transfer of goods than ever before within the history of mankind. The result of this development is an economic interdependence of nations. No single nation or group can today afford to remain aloof from the rest of the world. Economic development has ceased to be local. Its character has become world-wide. It ignores, at least in its tendency, political boundaries and geographical distances. It carries with itself – and possibly this is even more important than the purely material side of the problem – the ever-increasing necessity of a transfer not only of merchandise but also of thoughts and cultural values. But whereas those two forces, the economic and the cultural, often go hand in hand, there is a difference in their dynamic rules. The elementary laws of economics require that the exchange of goods between nations be *mutual*; this means that no nation can act as a buyer only while another nation is always a seller; in the long run, each of them must play both parts simultaneously, giving to, and taking from, each other, be it directly or through the medium of other actors in the play of

economic forces. But in the cultural field this iron rule of exchange is not a necessity, at least not always a visible one: that is to say, the transfer of ideas and cultural influences is not necessarily based on the principle of give-and-take. It lies in human nature that nations and civilizations which are politically and economically more virile exert a strong fascination on the weaker or less active communities, and influence them in the intellectual and social spheres without being influenced themselves. Such is the situation today with regard to the relations between the Western and the Muslim worlds.<sup>1</sup>

From the viewpoint of the historical observer, the strong, one-sided influence which Western civilization exerts on the Muslim world – whether admitted or not admitted by the Muslims themselves – is not at all surprising, because it is the outcome of a long historic process for which there are several analogies elsewhere. But whereas the historian, being concerned with observation only, may be satisfied, for us Muslims the problem remains unsettled. For us who are not mere interested spectators, but very real actors in this drama – for us who regard ourselves as the followers of the Prophet Muhammad – the problem really *begins* here. We believe that Islam, unlike other religions, is not only a spiritual attitude

<sup>1</sup>This idea of “buying” and “selling” in the cultural sense, and of the negative role of the present-day Muslim world in this respect, was later taken up and further developed by that eminent Algerian writer, the late Malik bin Nabi, who stressed the fact – first pointed out in this book – that, having lost their one-time creativity, the Muslims have not only become utterly dependent on Western goods but have also become mere “buyers” of Western technology and organizational methods as well as of Western social and political concepts, without becoming “sellers”, i.e., without transmitting any positive impulses of their own to the West in return.

of mind, adjustable to different cultural settings, but a self-sufficing orbit of culture and a social system of clearly defined features. When, as is the case today, a foreign civilization extends its radiations into our midst and causes certain changes in our own cultural organism, we are bound to make it clear to ourselves whether that foreign influence runs in the direction of our own cultural possibilities or against them; whether it acts as an invigorating serum in the body of Islamic culture, or as a poison.

An answer to this question can be found through analysis only. We have to discover the motive forces of both civilizations – the Islamic and that of the modern West – and then to investigate how far a cooperation is possible between them. And as the Islamic civilization is essentially a religious one, we must, first of all, try to define the general role of religion in human life.

What we call the “religious attitude” is a natural outcome of man’s intellectual and biological constitution. Man is unable to explain to himself the mystery of life, the mystery of birth and death, the mystery of infinity and eternity. His reasoning stops before impregnable walls. He can, therefore, do two things only. The one is to give up all attempts at understanding life as a *totality*. In this case, he will rely upon the evidence of external experiences alone and will limit his conclusions to their sphere. Thus he will be able to understand single fragments of life, which may increase in number and clarity as rapidly or as slowly as human knowledge of Nature increases, but will, none the less, always remain only fragments – the grasp of the totality itself remaining beyond the methodological equipment of human reason. This is

the way the natural sciences go. The other possibility – which may well exist side by side with the scientific one – is the way of religion. It leads man, by means of an inner, mostly intuitive experience, to the acceptance of a unitary explanation of life on the assumption that there exists a supreme Creative Power which governs the universe according to some preconceived plan above and beyond human understanding. As has just been said, this conception does not necessarily preclude man from an investigation of such facts and fragments of life as offer themselves for external observation; there is no *inherent* antagonism between the external (scientific) and internal (religious) perceptions. But the latter is, in fact, the only speculative possibility of conceiving all life as a unity of essence and motive-power; in short, as a well-balanced, harmonious totality. The term “harmonious”, though so terribly misused, is very important in this connection, because it implies a corresponding attitude in man himself. The religious human being knows that whatever happens to him and within him can never be the result of a blind play of forces without consciousness and purpose; he believes it to be the outcome of God’s conscious will alone, and, therefore, organically integrated within a universal plan. In this way man is enabled to solve the bitter antagonism between the human Self and the objective world of facts and appearances which is called Nature. The human being, with all the intricate mechanism of his soul, with all his desires and fears, his feelings, and his speculative uncertainties, sees himself faced by a Nature in which bounty and cruelty, danger and security are mixed in a wondrous, inexplicable way and apparently work on lines

entirely different from the methods and the structure of the human mind. Never has purely intellectual philosophy or experimental science been able to resolve this conflict. This exactly is the point where religion steps in.

In the light of religious perception and experience, the human, self-conscious Self and a mute, seemingly irresponsible Nature are brought into a relation of spiritual harmony because both, the individual consciousness of man and the Nature that surrounds him and is within him, are nothing but coordinate, if different, manifestations of one and the same Creative Will. The immense benefit which religion thus confers upon man is the realization that he is, and never can cease to be, a well-planned unit in the eternal movement of Creation: a definite part of the infinite organism of universal destiny. The psychological consequence of this conception is a deep feeling of spiritual security – that balance between hopes and fears which distinguishes the positively religious man – whatever his religion – from the irreligious.

This fundamental position is common to all great religions, whatever may be their specific doctrines; and equally common to all of them is the moral appeal to man to surrender himself to the manifest Will of God. But Islam, and Islam alone, goes beyond this theoretical explanation and exhortation. It not only teaches us that all life is essentially a unity – because it proceeds from the Divine Oneness – but it shows us also the practical way by which every one of us can reproduce, within the limits of his individual, earthly life, the unity of Idea and Action both in his existence and in his consciousness. To attain that supreme goal

of life man is, in Islam, not compelled to renounce the world; no austerities are required to open a secret door to spiritual purification; no pressure is exerted upon the mind to believe in incomprehensible dogmas in order that salvation be secured. Such demands are utterly foreign to Islam: for it is neither a mystical doctrine nor a philosophy. It is simply a programme of life in accord with the "laws of nature" which God has decreed upon His creation; and its supreme achievement is a complete coordination of the spiritual and the material aspects of human existence. In the teachings of Islam, both these aspects are not only "reconciled" to each other in the sense of leaving no inherent conflict between the bodily and the moral existence of man, but the fact of their coexistence and actual inseparability is *insisted upon as the natural basis of life.*

This, I believe, is the reason for the peculiar form of the Islamic prayer, in which spiritual concentration and certain bodily movements are coordinated with each other. Inimical critics of Islam often select this way of praying as a proof of their allegation that Islam is a religion of formalism and outwardness. And, in fact, people of other religions, who are accustomed neatly to separate the "spiritual" from the "bodily" almost in the same way as the dairyman separates the cream from the milk, cannot easily understand that in the unskimmed milk of Islam both these ingredients, though distinct in their respective constitutions, harmoniously live and express themselves together. In other words, the Islamic prayer consists of mental concentration *and* bodily movements because human life itself is of such a composition, and because we are supposed to approach God through the sum-total of

all the faculties which He has bestowed upon us.

A further illustration of this attitude can be seen in the institution of the *tawāf*, the ceremony of circumambulating the Ka'bah in Mecca. As it is an indispensable obligation for everyone who enters the Holy City to go seven times around the Ka'bah, and as the observance of this injunction is one of the three most essential points of the Meccan pilgrimage, we have the right to ask ourselves: What is the meaning of this? Is it necessary to express devotion in such a formalistic way?

The answer is quite obvious. If we move in a circle around any object we thereby establish that object as the central point of our action. The Ka'bah, towards which every Muslim turns his face in prayer, symbolizes the Oneness of God. The bodily movement of the pilgrim in the *tawāf* symbolizes the activity of human life. Consequently, the *tawāf* implies that not only our devotional thoughts but also our practical life, our actions and endeavours must have the idea of God and His Oneness for their centre – in accordance with the words of the Holy Qur'an:

وما خلقت الجن والانس إلا ليعبدون

“I have not created the invisible beings and mankind to any end other than that they may [know and] worship Me” (*sūrah* 51:56).

Thus, the conception of “worship” in Islam is different from that in any other religion. Here it is not restricted to the purely devotional practices, for example prayers or fasting, but extends over the whole of man's practical life as well. If the object of our life as a whole is to be the worship of God, we



must necessarily regard this life, in the totality of all its aspects, as one complex moral responsibility. Thus, all our actions, even the seemingly trivial ones, must be performed as acts of worship; that is, performed *consciously* as constituting a part of God's universal plan. Such a state of things is for the man of average capability a distant ideal; but is it not the purpose of religion to bring ideals into real existence?

The position of Islam in this respect is unmistakable. It teaches us, firstly, that the permanent worship of God in all the manifold actions of human life is the very meaning of this life; and, secondly, that the achievement of this purpose remains impossible so long as we divide our lives into two parts, the spiritual and the material: they must be bound together, in our consciousness and in our actions, into one harmonious entity. **Our notion of God's Oneness must be reflected in our own striving towards a coordination and unification of the various aspects of our life.**

A logical consequence of this attitude is a further difference between Islam and all other religious systems known to me. It is to be found in the fact that Islam, as a teaching, undertakes to define not only the metaphysical relations between man and his Creator, but also – and with scarcely less insistence – the earthly relations between the individual and his social surroundings. The earthly life is not regarded as a mere empty shell, a meaningless shadow of the Hereafter that is to come, but as a self-contained, positive entity. God Himself is a Unity not only in essence but also in purpose; and, therefore, His creation is a unity, possibly in essence but certainly in purpose.

God-consciousness – in the wider sense just explained – constitutes, according to Islam, the meaning of human life. And it is this conception alone that shows us the possibility of man's reaching perfection in his individual, earthly life. Of all religious systems, Islam alone declares that individual perfection is possible in our earthly existence. Islam does not postpone this fulfilment until after a suppression of the so-called "bodily" desires, as the Christian teaching does; nor does it promise a continuous chain of rebirths on progressively higher planes, as is the case with Hinduism; nor does it agree with Buddhism, according to which perfection and salvation can only be obtained through an annihilation of the individual Self and its emotional links with the world. No – : Islam is emphatic in the assertion that man can reach perfection in his earthly, individual life by making full use of all his natural endowments and worldly possibilities.

To avoid a misunderstanding, the term "perfection" will have to be defined in the sense in which it is used here. With regard to human, biologically-limited beings, we cannot possibly consider the idea of "absolute" perfection, because the Absolute belongs to the realm of Divine attributes alone. Human perfection, in its true psychological and moral sense, must of necessity have a relative and strictly limited connotation. It does not imply the possession of *all* imaginable good qualities, nor even the progressive acquisition of new qualities from outside, but solely *the development of the already existing, positive qualities of the individual in such a way as to rouse his innate but otherwise dormant powers*. Owing to the natural variety of life-

phenomena, the inborn qualities of man differ in each individual case. It would be absurd, therefore, to suppose that all human beings should, or even could, strive towards one and the same “type” of perfection – just as it would be absurd to expect a perfect race-horse and a perfect heavy-draught horse to possess exactly the same qualities. Both may be individually perfect and satisfactory, but they will be *different*, because their original characters are different. With human beings the case is similar. If perfection were to be standardized to a specific “type” – as Christianity does in the type of the ascetic saint – human beings would have to give up, or change, or suppress, all their individual differentiations. But this would clearly violate the Divine law of individual variety which dominates all life on this earth. Therefore Islam, which is not a religion of repression, allows to man a very wide margin in his personal and social existence, so that the various qualities, temperaments and psychological inclinations of different individuals might find their own ways to positive development according to their individual predispositions. Thus, a man may be an ascetic, or he may enjoy the full measure of his sensual possibilities within the lawful limits; he may be a nomad roaming through the deserts, without food for tomorrow, or a rich merchant surrounded by his goods: so long as he sincerely and consciously submits to the laws decreed by God, he is free to shape his personal life to whatever form his nature directs him. His duty is to make the best of himself so that he might honour the life-gift which his Creator has bestowed upon him; and to help his fellow-beings, by means of his own development, in their spiritual, social and material

endeavours. But the *form* of his individual life is in no way fixed by a single standard. He is free to make his choice from among all the limitless lawful possibilities open to him. The basis of this “liberalism” in Islam is to be found in the conception that man’s original nature is essentially good. Contrary to the Christian idea that man is born sinful, or the teachings of Hinduism that he is originally low and impure and must painfully stagger through a long chain of transmigrations towards the ultimate goal of perfection, the Islamic teaching contends that man is born pure and – in the sense explained above – potentially perfect. It is said in the Holy Qur’ān:

لقد خلقنا الانسان في أحسن تقويم

“Verily, We create man in the best conformation” – but in the same breath the Qur’ān continues:

ثم رددناه أسفل سافلين ، إلا الذين آمنوا وعملوا الصالحات

“... and thereafter We reduce him to the lowest of low – excepting only such as attain to faith and do good works” (*sūrah* 95:4–6).

In these verses is expressed the doctrine that man is originally good and pure; and, furthermore, that disbelief in God and lack of good actions may destroy his original perfection. On the other hand, man may retain, or regain, that original, individual perfection if he consciously realizes God’s Oneness and submits to His laws. Thus, according to Islam, evil is never essential or even original; it is an acquisition of man’s conscious life, and is due to a misuse of the innate, positive qualities with which God endows every

human being. Those qualities are, as has been said before, different in every individual, but always potentially perfect in themselves; and their full development is possible within the period of man's individual life on earth. We take it for granted that the life *after* death, owing to its entirely changed conditions of feeling and perception, will confer upon us other, quite new qualities and faculties which will make a still further progress of the human soul possible; but this concerns our future life alone. In this earthly life, too, the Islamic teaching definitely asserts, we – every one of us – can reach a full measure of perfection by developing the positive, already existing traits of which our personalities are composed.

Of all religions, Islam alone makes it possible for man to enjoy the full range of his earthly life without necessarily losing his spiritual orientation. How entirely different is this from the Christian conception! According to the Christian dogma, mankind stumbles under a hereditary sin committed by Adam and Eve, and consequently the whole of human life is looked upon – in dogmatic theory at least – as a gloomy vale of sorrows. It is the battlefield of two opposing forces: the Evil, represented by Satan, and the Good, represented by Jesus Christ. By means of bodily temptations, Satan tries to bar the progress of the human soul towards the light eternal; and whereas the soul belongs to Christ, the body is the playground of satanic influences. One could express it differently: the world of Matter is essentially satanic, whereas the world of the Spirit is divine and good. Everything in human nature that is material, or “carnal”, as Christian theology prefers to

call it, is a direct result of Adam's succumbing to the advice of the hellish Prince of Darkness and Matter. Therefore, to attain to salvation, man must turn his heart away from this world of the flesh towards the future, spiritual world, where the "original sin" is redeemed by the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

Even if this dogma is not – and never was – obeyed in practice, the very existence of such a teaching tends to produce a permanent feeling of bad conscience in the religiously inclined man. He is tossed about between the peremptory call to neglect the world and the natural urge of his heart to live and to enjoy this life. The very idea of an unavoidable, because inherited, sin, and of its mystical – to the average intellect incomprehensible – redemption through the suffering of Jesus on the cross, erects a barrier between man's spiritual longing and his legitimate, worldly desires.

In Islam we know nothing of an "original sin"; we regard such a concept as contrary to the idea of God's justice. God does not make a child responsible for the doings of his parents: how, then, could He have made all those numberless generations of mankind responsible for a sin of disobedience committed by their remote ancestors? It is no doubt possible to construct philosophical explanations of this strange assumption, but for the unsophisticated intellect it will always remain as artificial and as unsatisfactory as the concept of the Trinity itself. And as there is no hereditary sin, there is also no universal redemption of mankind in the teachings of Islam. Redemption and damnation are *individual*. Every Muslim is his own redeemer; he bears all possibilities of spiritual success and failure within his own heart. It is said of

man in the Qur'ān:

لها ما كسبت وعليها ما اكتسبت

“In his favour shall be whatever good he does, and against him whatever evil he does” (*sūrah* 2:286). Another verse says:

ليس للانسان إلا ما سعى

“Nought shall be accounted unto man but what he is striving for” (*sūrah* 53:39).

But if Islam does not share the gloomy view of life as expressed in Pauline Christianity, it teaches us, none the less, not to attribute to earthly life that exaggerated value which modern Western civilization attributes to it. While the Christian outlook implies that earthly life is a bad business, the modern West – as distinct from Christianity – adores life in exactly the same way as the glutton adores his food: he devours it, but has no respect for it. Islam, on the other hand, looks upon earthly life with calm and respect. It does not worship it, but regards it as an organic stage on our way to a higher existence. But just *because* it is a stage, and a necessary stage, too, man has no right to despise or even to underrate the value of his earthly life. Our travel through this world is a necessary, positive part in God's plan. Human life, therefore, is of tremendous value; but we must never forget that it is a purely instrumental value. In Islam there is no room for the materialistic optimism of the modern West which says: “My kingdom is of this world alone” – nor for the life-contempt of the Christian saying: “My kingdom is not of this world”.

Islam goes the middle way. The Qur'ān teaches us to pray:

ربنا آتنا في الدنيا حسنة وفي الآخرة حسنة

“O our Sustainer! Grant us good in this world and good in the life to come!” (*sūrah* 2:201).

Thus, a full appreciation of this world and of whatever it offers is not necessarily a handicap for our spiritual endeavours. Material prosperity is desirable, though not a goal in itself. The goal of all our practical activities ought always to be the creation and the maintenance of such personal and social conditions as might be conducive to the development of moral stamina in human beings. In accordance with this principle, Islam leads man towards a consciousness of moral responsibility in all that he does, whether great or small. The well-known injunction of the Gospels, “Render unto Caesar that which belongs to Caesar, and render unto God that which belongs to God” has no place in the theological structure of Islam, in which, firstly, everything is regarded as belonging to God, and, secondly, because Islam does not admit of the existence of a conflict between the moral and the socio-economic requirements of our life. In everything there can be only one choice: the choice between Right and Wrong – and nothing in-between. Hence the intense insistence on *action* as an indispensable element of morality.

Every individual Muslim has to regard himself as to some extent personally responsible for all happenings around him, and to strive for the establishment of Right and the abolition of Wrong at every time and in every direction. A sanction for this attitude is to be



found in the Qur'anic verse:

كنتم خير أمة أخرجت للناس، تأمرون بالمعروف وتنهون عن المنكر

“You are indeed the best community that has ever been brought forth for [the good of] mankind: you enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong” (*sūrah* 3:110).

This is the moral justification of the aggressive activism of Islam, a justification of the early Islamic conquests and of its so-called “expansionism”. For the world of Islam was sometimes expansionist, if one insists on using this term; but this kind of activism was not prompted by love of domination; it had nothing to do with economic or national self-aggrandizement or with the greed to increase Muslim comforts at other people’s cost; nor has it ever meant the coercion of non-believers into the fold of Islam. It has only meant, as it means today, the construction of a worldly framework for the best possible spiritual development of man. For, according to the teachings of Islam, moral knowledge automatically forces moral responsibility upon man. A mere Platonic discernment between Right and Wrong, without the urge to promote Right and to destroy Wrong, is a gross immorality in itself, for morality lives and dies with the human endeavour to establish its victory upon earth.

## THE SPIRIT OF THE WEST

In the foregoing chapter an attempt has been made to give an outline of the moral foundations of Islam. We readily realize that Islamic civilization was the most complete form of theocracy that history has ever known.<sup>2</sup> In Islam, spiritual considerations stand above everything and underlie everything. If we compare this attitude with that of Western civilization, we are impressed by the vast difference in outlook.

The modern West is ruled in its activities and endeavours almost exclusively by considerations of practical utility and dynamic evolution. Its inherent aim is the experimenting with the potentialities of life without attributing to this life a moral reality of its own. For the modern European or American the question of the meaning and purpose of life has long

<sup>2</sup>I should like to make it clear that I am *not* using the term “theocracy” in the sense in which it is commonly understood in the West. On the basis of their own historical experiences, Westerners identify “theocracy” with the political power exercised by an established church-organization – in their case, the medieval Christian Church and its priestly hierarchy. Islam, on the other hand, does not admit of any “priesthood” or “clergy” and, therefore, of any institution comparable to the Christian Church. Consequently, whenever we Muslims speak of “theocracy” we think – or ought to think – of nothing more or less than of a socio-political structure in which all legislation is ultimately based on what we consider a Divine Law, i.e., the *shari’ah* of Islam. (Cf. in this respect the chapter on “Terminology and Historical Precedent” in my book *The Principles of State and Government in Islam*.)

since lost all practical importance. Important to him is only the question as to what *forms* life can assume, and as to whether the human race is progressing towards ultimate mastery over Nature. This last question the modern Occidental answers in the affirmative; not so, however, the believing Muslim. In the Qur'ān God says of Adam and his race:

إني جاعل في الأرض خليفة

“Behold, I am about to establish upon earth one who shall inherit it” (*sūrah* 2:30).<sup>3</sup> This evidently means that man is destined to rule and to progress on earth. But there is a vast difference between the Islamic and the Western viewpoints as to the quality of human progress. The modern West believes in the possibility of a progressive moral and social improvement of mankind, in its collective sense, by means of practical achievements and the development of scientific thought. The Islamic viewpoint, however, is diametrically opposed to this Western, materialistically-dynamic conception of humanity. Islam regards the spiritual possibilities of the collective entity “mankind” as a static quantity: as something that has been definitely laid down in the very constitution of human nature as such. Islam has never taken for granted, as does the West, that human nature – in its general, supra-individual sense – is undergoing a process of progressive change and improvement resembling the growth of a tree: simply because Islam rests on the premise that the basis of

<sup>3</sup>For this rendering of the above Qur'ānic verse, see note 22 on p. 8 of *The Message of the Qur'ān*, translated and explained by Muhammad Asad.

that nature, the human soul, is not a biological quantity. The fundamental mistake of modern Western thought to regard an increase in material knowledge and comfort as identical with a moral improvement of mankind stems from the equally fundamental mistake of applying biological rules to non-biological facts. At the root of it lies the modern Western disbelief in the existence of what we describe as a “soul”. Islam, being based on transcendental conceptions, regards the soul as a reality beyond question or doubt. Though certainly not opposed to each other, material progress and spiritual progress are not one and the same, relating, as they do, to two distinctly different – if complementary – aspects of human life; and these two forms of progress do not necessarily depend on one another. They may, but need not always, develop simultaneously.

While clearly admitting the possibility and strongly asserting the desirability of an outward – that is, material – progress of mankind as a collective body, Islam as clearly denies the possibility of a *spiritual* improvement of humanity as a whole by means of its collective achievements. The dynamic element of spiritual improvement is limited to the individual being, and the only possible curve of spiritual and moral development is that between the birth and the death of each single individual. We cannot possibly march towards perfection as a collective body. Everyone must strive towards the spiritual goal as an *individual*, and everyone must begin and end with himself or herself.

This decidedly individualistic outlook on the spiritual destinies of man is counterbalanced, but indirectly confirmed, by the rigorous Islamic

conception of society and of social collaboration. The duty of society is to arrange outward life in such a way that the single individual should find as few obstacles as possible, and as much encouragement as possible, in his spiritual endeavours. This is the reason why Islamic Law, the *shari'ah*, is concerned with human life on its spiritual as well as on its material side, and both with its individual and its social aspects.

Such a conception, as I have said before, is possible only on the basis of a positive belief in the existence of a human soul and, therefore, in a transcendental purpose inherent in human life. But for the modern Occidental, with his negligent semi-denial of the soul's existence, the question of a purpose in human life has no longer any practical importance. He has left all transcendental speculations and considerations behind him.

What we call the "religious attitude" is always based on the belief that there exists an all-embracing, transcendental moral law, and that we human beings are bound to submit to its commands. But modern Western civilization does not recognize the necessity of man's submission to anything save economic or social or national requirements. Its real deity is not of a spiritual kind: it is Comfort. And its real, living philosophy is expressed in a Will to Power for power's sake. Both have been inherited from the old Roman civilization.

The mention of Roman civilization as being – at least to some extent – genetically responsible for the materialism of the modern West may sound strange to those who have heard the frequent comparison of the Roman Empire with the old Islamic Empire. How, then, could there be such a pronounced difference

between the fundamental conceptions of Islam and of the modern West if in the past the political expressions of both were akin to one another? The simple answer is: they were not really akin. That popular, so often quoted comparison is one of the many historical platitudes with which superficial half-knowledge feeds the minds of the present Western generation. There is nothing whatever in common between the Islamic and the Roman Empires beyond the fact that both extended over vast territories and heterogeneous peoples – for, during the whole of their existence these two empires were impelled by utterly different motive-forces and had, so to speak, different historical purposes to fulfil. Even on the morphological side we observe a vast difference between the Islamic and the Roman Empires. It took the Roman Empire nearly one thousand years to grow to its full geographic extent and political maturity, whereas the Islamic Empire sprang up and grew to its fullness within the short period of about eighty years. As regards their respective decay, the difference is even more enlightening. The downfall of the Roman Empire, finally sealed by the migrations of the Huns and Goths, was effected during one single century – and was effected so completely that nothing of it remained but works of literature and architecture. The Byzantine Empire, commonly supposed to have been the direct heir to Rome, was its heir only insofar as it continued to rule over some of the territories which once had formed part of the latter. Its social structure and political organization had hardly anything to do with the conceptions of Roman polity. The Islamic Empire, on the other hand, as embodied in the Caliphate, underwent, no

doubt, many deformations and dynastic changes in the course of its long existence, but its structure remained essentially the same. As for external attacks, even that of the Mongols – which was far more violent than anything the Roman Empire had ever experienced at the hands of the Huns or Goths – was not able to shake the social organization and the unbroken political existence of the Empire of the Caliphs, although it undoubtedly contributed to the economic and intellectual decay of later times. In contrast with the one century which was needed to destroy the Roman Empire, the Islamic Empire of the Caliphs needed about a millennium of slow decay until its ultimate political breakdown, represented by the extinction of the Ottoman Caliphate, became a fact, followed by the signs of social dissolution which we are witnessing at present.

All this forces upon us the conclusion that the inner strength and social soundness of the Islamic world were superior to anything mankind had hitherto experienced by way of social organization. Even Chinese civilization, which has undoubtedly shown similar powers of resistance through many centuries, cannot be used as a comparison. China lies on the edge of a continent, and was until half a century ago – that is, until the rise of modern Japan – beyond the reach of any rival power; the wars with the Mongols at the time of Jenghiz Khan and his successors touched hardly more than the fringe of the Chinese Empire. But the Islamic Empire stretched over three continents and was all the time surrounded by inimical powers of considerable strength and vitality. Since the dawn of history, the so-called Near and Middle East was the volcanic centre of conflicting

racial and cultural energies; but the resistance of the Islamic social organization was, until recently at least, invincible. We need not search far for an explanation of this wonderful spectacle: it was the religious teaching of the Qur'ān that gave a solid foundation and the life-example of the Prophet Muhammad that formed a band of steel around that grand social structure. The Roman Empire had no such spiritual element to keep it together, and therefore it broke down so rapidly.

But there is yet a further difference between those two old empires. While in the Islamic Empire there was no privileged nation, and power was made subservient to the propagation of an idea regarded by its torchbearers as the sublime religious truth, the idea underlying the Roman Empire was conquest of power and the exploitation of other nations for the benefit of the mother country alone. To promote better living for a privileged group, for the Romans no violence was too harsh, no injustice too base. The famous "Roman justice" was justice for the *Romans* alone. It is clear that such an attitude was possible only on the basis of an entirely materialistic conception of life and civilization – a materialism certainly refined by intellectual and aesthetic taste, but none the less foreign to all spiritual values. The Romans never in reality knew religion. Their traditional gods were a pale imitation of Greek mythology, mere colourless ghosts silently accepted for the benefit of social convention. In no way were those gods allowed to interfere with "real" life. When consulted, they had to give oracles through the medium of their priests; but they were never supposed to confer moral laws upon men or to direct



their actions.

This was the soil out of which modern Western civilization grew. It undoubtedly received many other influences in the course of its development, and it naturally changed and modified the cultural inheritance of Rome in more than one respect. But the fact remains that all that is real today in Western ethics and world-view is directly traceable to the old Roman civilization. As the intellectual and social atmosphere of ancient Rome was utterly utilitarian and anti-religious – in fact, if not by open admission – so is the atmosphere of the modern West. Without having a proof against transcendental religion, and without even admitting the need of such a proof, modern Western thought, while tolerating and sometimes even emphasizing religion as a social convention, generally leaves transcendental ethics out of the range of practical consideration. Western civilization does not strictly *deny* God, but has simply no room and no use for Him in its present intellectual system. It has made a virtue out of an intellectual difficulty of man – his inability to grasp the totality of life. Thus, the modern Occidental is likely to attribute practical importance only to such ideas as lie within the scope of empirical sciences or, at least, are expected to influence men's social relations in a tangible way. And as the question of the existence of God does not belong *prima facie* to either of these two categories, the Western mind is, on principle, inclined to exclude God from the sphere of practical consideration.

The question arises: how is such an attitude compatible with the *Christian* way of thinking? Is not Christianity – which is supposed to be the spiritual

fountainhead of Western civilization – a faith based on transcendental ethics? Of course it is. But, then, there can be no greater error than to consider Western civilization as an outcome of Christianity. The real intellectual foundations of the modern West are, as already mentioned, to be found in the old Roman conception of life as a purely utilitarian proposition without any transcendental considerations. It can be expressed as follows: “Since we do not know anything definite – that is, provable by means of scientific experiments and calculations – about the origin of human life and its destiny after bodily death, it is better to concentrate all our energies on the development of our material and intellectual possibilities without allowing ourselves to be hampered by transcendental ethics and moral postulates based on assumptions which defy scientific proof.” There can be no doubt that this attitude, so characteristic of modern Western civilization, is as unacceptable to Christianity as it is to Islam or any other religion, because it is irreligious in its very essence. To ascribe, therefore, the practical achievements of modern Western civilization to the supposed efficacy of Christian teachings is extremely ridiculous. Christianity has contributed very little to the powerful scientific and material development in which the present civilization of the West excels all others.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, those achievements emerged out of Europe’s age-long intellectual fight *against* the

<sup>4</sup>On the other hand, it must in all fairness be pointed out that up to the end of the seventeenth century, Christianity (or, more specifically, the Christian Church) played a very large and very positive role in the development of Western visual arts – painting, sculpture and architecture – as well as of Western music, having been not only a source of inspiration but also an important patron of the arts.

Christian Church and its outlook on life.

Throughout long centuries, the spirit of Europe was oppressed by a religious system embodying the contempt of human nature. The note of asceticism which pervades the Gospels from one end to the other, the demand to submit passively to wrong inflicted and to “turn the other cheek”, the denigration of sex as something based on the fall of Adam and Eve from Paradise, the “original sin” and its atonement through Christ’s crucifixion – all this leads to an interpretation of human life not as a positive stage but almost as a necessary evil – as an “educative” obstacle on the path of spiritual progress. It is clear that such a belief does not favour energetic endeavours concerning worldly knowledge and the improvement of the conditions of earthly life. And, indeed, for a very long time the intellect of Europe was subdued by this gloomy conception of human existence. During the Middle Ages, when the Church was omnipotent, Europe had no vitality and no role whatsoever in the realm of scientific research. It lost even all real connection with the philosophical achievements of Rome and Greece out of which European culture had once originated. Man’s intellect revolted more than once; but it was beaten down by the Church again and again. The history of the Middle Ages is full of that bitter struggle between the genius of Europe and the spirit of the Church.

The liberation of the European mind from the intellectual bondage to which the Christian Church had subjugated it took place in the time of the Renaissance, and was to a very large extent due to the new cultural impulses and ideas which the Arabs had been transmitting to the West for several centuries.

Whatever had been best in the culture of ancient Greece and the later Hellenistic period the Arabs had revived in their learning and improved upon in the centuries that followed the establishment of the early Islamic Empire. I do not claim that the absorption of Hellenistic thought was an undisputed benefit to the Arabs and the Muslims generally – because it was not. But for all the difficulties which this revived Hellenistic culture may have caused to the Muslims by introducing Aristotelian and Neo-Platonic concepts into Islamic theology and jurisprudence, it acted, through the Arabs, as an immense stimulus to European thought. The Middle Ages had laid waste Europe's productive forces. The sciences were stagnant, superstition reigned supreme, social life was primitive and crude to an extent hardly conceivable today. At that point the cultural influence of the Islamic world – at first through the adventure of the Crusades in the East and the brilliant intellectual achievements of Muslim Spain and Sicily in the West, and later through the growing commercial relations established by the republics of Genoa and Venice with the Near East – began to hammer at the bolted doors of European civilization. Before the dazzled eyes of European scholars and thinkers another civilization appeared – refined, progressive, full of passionate life and in possession of cultural treasures which Europe had long ago lost and forgotten. What the Arabs had done was far more than to revive ancient Greek science. They had created an entirely new scientific world of their own and developed hitherto unknown avenues of research and philosophy. All this they communicated through different channels to the Western world: and it is not

too much to say that the modern scientific age in which we are living at present was not inaugurated in the cities of Christian Europe, but in such Islamic centres as Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo, Cordoba, Nishapur, Samarqand.

The effect of these influences on Europe was tremendous. With the approach of Islamic civilization a new intellectual light dawned on the skies of the West and infused it with fresh life and a thirst for progress. It is no more than in just appreciation of its value that European historians term that period of regeneration the *Renaissance* – that is, “re-birth”. It was, in fact, a re-birth of Europe as such.

The rejuvenating currents emanating from Islamic culture enabled the best minds of Europe to fight with new strength against the disastrous supremacy of the Christian Church. In the beginning this contest had the outward appearance of reform movements which sprang up, almost simultaneously, in different European countries with the object of adapting the Christian way of thinking to the new exigencies of life. These movements were sound in their own way and, if they had met with real spiritual success, they might have produced a reconciliation between science and religious thought in Europe. But, as it happened, the harm caused by the Church of the Middle Ages was already too far-reaching to be repaired by mere reformation which, moreover, quickly degenerated into political struggles between interested groups. Instead of being truly reformed, Christianity was merely driven into a defensive attitude and gradually forced to adopt an apologetic tone. The Church – whether Catholic or Protestant – did not really give up any of its mental acrobatics, its

incomprehensible dogmas, its world-contempt, its unscrupulous support of the powers-that-be at the expense of the oppressed masses of humanity: it merely tried to gloss over these grave failings and to explain them away by means of hollow assertions. No wonder then that, as the decades and the centuries advanced, the hold of religious thought grew weaker and weaker in Europe until in the eighteenth century the predominance of the Church was definitely swept overboard by the French Revolution and its socio-political consequences in other countries.

At that time, once again, it appeared as if a new, regenerated civilization, freed from the dead hand of the scholastic theology of the Middle Ages, had a chance of growth in Europe. In fact, at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century we encounter some of the best and spiritually most powerful European personalities in the domain of philosophy, art, literature and science. But this spiritual, truly religious conception of life was and remained restricted to a few individuals. The great European masses, after having been for so long imprisoned in religious dogmas which had no connection with the natural endeavours of man, could not, and would not, once those chains were broken, find their way back to a true religious orientation.

Perhaps the most important intellectual factor which prevented Europe's religious regeneration was the conception of Jesus Christ as the Son of God. Philosophically-minded Christians, of course, never took this idea of sonship in its literal sense; they understood by it a manifestation of God's Mercy in human form. But, unfortunately, not everyone is of a philosophical bent of mind. For the overwhelming

majority of Christians, the expression “son” had and has a very direct meaning, although there was always a mystical flavour attached to it. For them, Christ’s “sonship of God” quite naturally led to an anthropomorphic idea of God Himself, who assumed the shape of a benign old man with a flowing white beard; and this shape, perpetuated by innumerable paintings of high artistic value, remained impressed upon Europe’s subconscious mind. During the time when the dogma of the Church reigned supreme in Europe there was not much inclination to question this strange conception. But with the intellectual shackles of the Middle Ages once broken, the thinking people among the Europeans could not reconcile themselves to a humanized God-Father: on the other hand, this anthropomorphization had become a standing factor in the popular conception of God. After a period of enlightenment, European thinkers instinctively shrank back from the conception of God as presented in the teachings of the Church: and as this was the only conception to which they had been accustomed, they began to reject the very idea of God and, with it, of religion itself.

In addition to this, the dawn of the industrial era with its glamour of stupendous material progress began to direct men towards new interests, and thus contributed to the subsequent religious vacuum of the West. In this vacuum the development of Western civilization took a tragic turn – tragic from the viewpoint of anyone who regards religion as the strongest reality in human life. Freed from its former bondage to Trinitarian Christianity, the modern Occidental mind overstepped all limits and entrenched itself, by degrees, in a decided antagon-

ism to any form of spiritual claim upon man. Out of a subconscious fear of being once more overwhelmed by forces claiming spiritual authority, Europe became the champion of everything anti-religious in principle and action. And thus it returned to its old Roman heritage.

One cannot be blamed for contending that it was not a potential “superiority” of the Christian faith over other creeds which enabled the West to attain to its brilliant material achievements: for those achievements are unthinkable without the historic struggle of Europe’s intellectual forces against the very principles of the Christian Church. Its present materialistic conception of life is Europe’s revenge on Christian “spirituality” which had gone away from the natural truths of life.

It is not within our scope to go deeper into the relations between Christianity and modern Western civilization. I have only tried to show three of the reasons, perhaps the main reasons, why that civilization is so thoroughly anti-religious in its conceptions and methods: one is the heritage of Roman civilization with its utterly materialistic attitude as regards human life and its inherent value; another, the revolt of human nature against the Christian world-contempt and the suppression of natural urges and legitimate endeavours of man (followed by the Church’s traditional alliance with the holders of political and economic power and its cold-blooded sanction of every exploitation which the power-holders could devise); and, lastly, the anthropomorphic conception of God. This revolt against religion was entirely successful – so successful that the various Christian sects and Churches were



gradually compelled to adjust some of their doctrines to the changed social and intellectual conditions of Europe. Instead of influencing and shaping the social life of its adherents, as is the primary duty of religion, Christianity resigned itself to the role of a tolerated convention and a garb for political enterprises. For the masses it has now only a formal meaning, as was the case with the gods of ancient Rome, which were neither allowed nor supposed to exert any real influence upon society. No doubt, there are still many individuals in the West who feel and think in a truly religious way and make the most desperate efforts to reconcile their beliefs with the spirit of their civilization; but they are exceptions only. The average Occidental – be he a Democrat or a Fascist, a Capitalist or a Communist, a manual worker or an intellectual – knows only one positive “religion”, and that is the worship of material progress, the belief that there is no other goal in life than to make that very life continually easier or, as the current expression goes, “independent of Nature”. The temples of this “religion” are the gigantic factories, cinemas, chemical laboratories, dance-halls, hydro-electric works: and its priests are bankers, engineers, film stars, captains of industry, record sportsmen. The unavoidable result of this craving for power and pleasure is the creation of hostile groups armed to the teeth and determined to destroy each other whenever and wherever their respective interests clash. And on the cultural side, the result is the creation of a human type whose morality is confined to the question of practical utility alone, and whose highest criterion of good and evil is material success.

In the profound transformation which the social life

of the West is undergoing at present, that new utilitarian morality becomes more and more apparent. All virtues which have a direct bearing upon the material welfare of society – for example, technical efficiency, patriotism, nationalist group-sense – are being exalted and often absurdly exaggerated in men's valuation; whereas virtues which until recently were valued from a purely ethical point of view, as, for example, filial love or sexual fidelity, rapidly lose their importance – because they do not confer a tangible, material benefit upon society. The age in which the insistence on strong family bonds was decisive for the well-being of the group or the clan is being superseded, in the modern West, by an age of collective organization under far wider headings. And in a society which is essentially technological and is being organized at a rapidly increasing pace on purely mechanical lines, the behaviour of a son towards his father is of no great social import so long as those individuals behave within the limits of general decency imposed by the society on the intercourse between its members. Consequently, the Western father daily loses more and more authority over his son, and quite logically the son loses his respect for his father. Their mutual relations are being slowly overruled and, for all practical purposes, made obsolete by the postulates of a mechanized society which has a tendency to abolish all privileges of one individual over another and – in the logical development of this idea – also the privileges due to family relationship.

Parallel to this goes the progressive dissolution of the “old” sexual morality. Sexual fidelity and discipline are quickly becoming a thing of the past in

the modern West, because they were mainly motivated by ethics: and ethical considerations have no tangible, immediate influence on the material well-being of society. And so, discipline in sexual relations is rapidly losing its importance and is being supplanted by the “new” morality which proclaims the unrestricted individual freedom of the human body. In the near future, the only sexual restriction will be, at best, derived from considerations of demography and eugenics.

It is not without interest to observe how the anti-religious evolution sketched above has been brought to its logical climax in Soviet Russia which, on the cultural side, does not represent a development essentially different from the rest of the Western world. On the contrary, it seems that the Communist experiment is but a culmination and a fulfilment of those decidedly anti-religious and – ultimately – anti-spiritual tendencies of modern Western civilization. It may even be that the present sharp antagonism between the Capitalistic West and Communism is, at its root, due only to the different pace at which those essentially parallel movements are progressing towards a common goal. Their inner similarity will, no doubt, become more and more pronounced in the future: but even now it is visible in the fundamental tendency of both Western Capitalism and Communism to surrender the spiritual individuality of man and his ethics to the purely material requirements of a collective machinery called “society”, in which the individual is but a cog in a wheel.

The only possible conclusion is that a civilization of this kind must be a deadly poison for any culture

based on religious values. Our original question, whether it is possible to adapt the Islamic way of thinking and living to the exigencies of Western civilization, and *vice versa*, must be answered in the negative. In Islam, the first and foremost objective is the moral progress of the human being: and, therefore, ethical considerations overrule the purely utilitarian ones. In modern Western civilization, the position is exactly reversed. Considerations of material utility dominate all manifestations of human activity, and ethics is being relegated to an obscure background and condemned to a merely theoretical existence without the slightest power to influence the community. To talk of ethics, in such circumstances, is nothing short of hypocrisy: and thus the intellectually decent among modern Western thinkers are subjectively justified if, in their speculations on the social destinies of Western civilization, they avoid any allusion to transcendental ethics. With the less decent – as also with those who are less clearly decided in their moral attitudes – the conception of transcendental ethics survives as an irrational factor of thought, much in the same way as the mathematician is obliged to operate with certain “irrational” numbers which represent, in themselves, nothing tangible, but are, none the less, required to bridge the gaps of the imagination due to the structural limitations of the human mind.

Such an evasive attitude towards ethics is certainly incompatible with a religious orientation: and, therefore, the moral basis of modern Western civilization is incompatible with Islam.

This should in no way preclude the possibility of Muslims receiving from the West certain impulses in

the domain of the exact and applied sciences; but their cultural relations should begin and end at that point. To go further and to imitate Western civilization in its spirit, its mode of life and its social organization is impossible without dealing a fatal blow to the very existence of Islam as an ideological proposition.

## THE SHADOW OF THE CRUSADES

Quite apart from spiritual incompatibility, there is yet another reason why Muslims should avoid imitating Western civilization: many of its historical experiences are deeply tinged by a strange animosity towards Islam.

To some extent this also is an inheritance from Europe's antiquity. The Greeks and the Romans regarded only themselves as "civilized", while everything foreign, and particularly everything living to the east of the Mediterranean, bore the label "barbarian". Since that time the Occidentals have believed that their racial superiority over the rest of mankind is a matter of fact; and the more or less pronounced contempt for non-European races and nations is one of the standing features of Western civilization.

This alone, however, is not enough to explain its feeling as regards Islam. Here, and here alone, the Western attitude is not one of mere indifference, as in the case of other "foreign" religions and cultures: it is one of deep-rooted and almost fanatical aversion; and it is not only intellectual but bears an intensely emotional tint. The West may not accept the doctrines of Buddhist or Hindu philosophy, but it will always preserve a balanced, reflective attitude of mind with regard to those systems. As soon, however, as it turns towards Islam, the balance is disturbed and

an emotional bias creeps in. With very few exceptions, even the most eminent of European orientalists have been guilty of an unscientific partiality in their writings on Islam. In their investigations it almost appears as if Islam could not be treated as a mere object of scientific research, but as an accused standing before his judges. Some of these orientalists play the part of a public prosecutor bent on securing a conviction; others are like a counsel for the defence who, being personally convinced that his client is guilty, can only half-heartedly plead "mitigating circumstances". All in all, the technique of the deductions and conclusions adopted by most of the orientalists reminds us of the proceedings of those notorious Courts of Inquisition set up by the Catholic Church against "heretics" in the Middle Ages: that is to say, they hardly ever investigate historical facts with an open mind, but start, in almost every case, from a foregone conclusion dictated by prejudice. They select the evidence according to the conclusion that they *a priori* intend to reach. Where an arbitrary selection of witnesses is impossible, they cut parts of the evidence of the available witnesses out of context or "interpret" their statements in a spirit of unscientific malevolence, without attributing any weight to the presentation of the case by the other party, that is, the Muslims themselves.

The result of such a procedure is the strangely distorted picture of Islam and things Islamic that faces us in the orientalist literature of the West. This distortion is not confined to one particular country; it is to be found in England and in Germany, in America and in Russia and in France, in Italy and in

Holland – in short, wherever Western orientalists turn their attention to Islam. They seem to be tickled by a sense of malicious pleasure whenever an occasion – real or imaginary – arises for adverse criticism. And as those orientalists are not a special race by themselves but only exponents of their civilization and their social surroundings, we must necessarily come to the conclusion that the Occidental mind, on the whole, is for some reason or other prejudiced against Islam as a religion and a culture.<sup>5</sup> One of these reasons may be the antique view which divided all the world into “Europeans” and “Barbarians”; and another reason, more directly connected with Islam, can be found by looking back at the past, and particularly at the history of the Middle Ages.

The first great clash between a united Europe, on the one side, and Islam, on the other, namely, the Crusades, coincided with the very beginning of European civilization. At that time this civilization, still in alliance with the Church, had just begun to see its own way after the dark centuries which had followed the decay of Rome. Its literature was just then passing through a new blossoming spring. The fine arts were slowly awakening from the lethargy caused by the warlike migrations of the Goths, Huns and Avars. Europe had just emerged out of the crude

<sup>5</sup>In this respect we have witnessed in the course of the last half-century a great improvement in the tone and the methods of Europe's and America's orientalist writings, although a small minority among the orientalists do not seem to have shed their prejudices entirely. On the whole, Western writings on Islam and the Muslim world show a steadily growing appreciation of Islamic thought and Muslim aims, and the old conscious or subconscious tendency to distort the image of Islam has all but disappeared from serious orientalist literature.



conditions of the early Middle Ages; it had just acquired a new cultural consciousness and, through it, an increased sensitivity. And it was exactly at that extremely critical period that the Crusades brought it into hostile contact with the world of Islam. There had been, to be sure, conflicts between Muslims and Europeans before the age of the Crusades: the Arab conquests of Sicily and Spain and their attacks upon Southern France. But those wars took place before Christian Europe's awakening to its new cultural consciousness, and therefore they had in their time, at least from the European point of view, the character of local issues and were not yet fully understood in all their importance. It was the Crusades, first and foremost, that decided the European attitude towards Islam for many centuries to come. The Crusades were decisive because they fell in the period of Europe's childhood, as it were, a period when its peculiar cultural traits were asserting themselves for the first time and were still in the process of evolution. As in individuals, so also in nations the violent impressions of an early childhood persevere, consciously or subconsciously, throughout later life. They are so deeply embossed that they can only with difficulty, and seldom entirely, be removed by the intellectual experiences of a later, more reflective and less emotional age. So it was with the Crusades. They produced one of the deepest and most permanent impressions on Europe's mass psychology. The universal enthusiasm they aroused in their time cannot be compared with anything that Europe had ever before experienced, and with hardly anything that came afterwards. A wave of intoxication swept over the whole continent, an elation which

overstepped, for some time at least, the barriers between states and nations and classes. It was then, for the first time in history, that Europe conceived itself as a unity – and it was a unity against the world of Islam. Without indulging in undue exaggeration we can say that *modern Europe was born out of the spirit of the Crusades*. Before that time there had been Anglo-Saxons and Germans, French and Normans, Italians and Danes: but during the Crusades the new *political* concept of “Christendom”, a cause common to all European nations alike (and by no means identical with the religious concept of “Christianity”) was created: and it was the hatred of Islam that stood as godfather behind the new creation. . . .

It is one of the great ironies of history that this first act of collective consciousness, the intellectual *constitution*, so to say, of the Western world was due to impulses entirely and unreservedly backed by the Christian Church, whereas most of the subsequent achievements of the West became possible only through an intellectual revolt against almost everything that the Church stood and stands for.

It was a tragic development, both from the viewpoint of the Christian Church and from that of Islam. Tragic for the Church, because it lost, after such a startling beginning, its hold over the minds of Europe. And tragic for Islam, because it had to bear the fire of the Crusades, in many forms and disguises, through long centuries afterwards.

Out of the unspeakable cruelties, the destruction and the debasement which the pious Knights of the Cross inflicted upon the lands of Islam which they conquered and subsequently lost, grew the poisonous seed of that age-long animosity which has ever since

embittered the relations between East and West. Otherwise, there was no inherent necessity for such a feeling. Though the civilizations of Islam and of the West differ in their spiritual foundations and their social aims, they surely should be able to tolerate one another and to live side by side in friendly intercourse. This possibility was given not only in theory but in fact. On the Muslim side there always existed a sincere wish for mutual tolerance and respect. When the Caliph Harun ar-Rashid sent his embassy to Emperor Charlemagne, he was mainly prompted by that desire and not by a wish to profit materially by a friendship with the Franks. Europe was at that time culturally too primitive to appreciate this opportunity to its full extent, but it certainly showed no dislike of it. But later on, of a sudden, the Crusades appeared on the horizon and destroyed the relations between Islam and the West. Not because they meant war: so many wars between nations have been waged and subsequently forgotten in the course of human history, and so many animosities have turned into friendship. But the evil caused by the Crusades was not restricted to the clash of weapons: it was, first and foremost, an intellectual evil. It consisted in poisoning the European mind against the Muslim world as a whole through a deliberate misrepresentation, fostered by the Church, of the teachings and ideals of Islam. It was at the time of the Crusades that the ridiculous notion of Islam as a religion of crude sensualism and brutal violence, of an observance of formalities instead of a purification of the heart, entered the mind of Europe, to remain there for a long time.

The seed of hatred was sown. The enthusiasm of

the Crusades soon had its sequels elsewhere in Europe: it encouraged the Christians of Spain to fight for the recovery of that country from the “yoke of the heathens”. The destruction of Muslim Spain took centuries to be accomplished. But precisely because of the long duration of this struggle, the anti-Islamic feeling in Europe deepened and grew to permanency. It resulted in the extermination of the Muslim element in Spain after a systematic, merciless persecution; and that victory was echoed by the rejoicings of all Europe – although its after-effect was the destruction of a most brilliant culture and its supersession by medieval ignorance and crudeness.

But even before the last remnant of Muslim Spain, the Kingdom of Granada, had been re-conquered by Christian Spain in 1492, a third event of great importance marred the relations between the Western world and that of Islam: the fall of Constantinople to the Turks. In the eyes of Europe, the Byzantine Empire had still retained something of the old Greek and Roman glamour and was regarded as Europe’s bulwark against the “barbarians” of Asia. With its ultimate fall, the gateway of Europe was thrown open to the Muslim flood. In the warlike centuries that followed, the hostility of Europe against Islam became a matter not only of cultural but also of political importance; and this contributed to its intensity.

With all this, Europe profited considerably by these conflicts. The Renaissance, that revival of European arts and sciences with its extensive borrowing from Islamic, mainly Arabic, sources, was largely due to the material contacts between East and West. Europe gained by it, in the domain of culture,

far more than the world of Islam ever did; but it did not acknowledge this eternal indebtedness to the Muslims by a diminution of its old hatred of Islam. On the contrary, that hatred grew with the passing of time and hardened into a custom. It overshadowed the popular feeling whenever the word “Muslim” was mentioned; it entered the realm of popular proverbs, it was hammered into the heart of every European man and woman. And what was most remarkable, it outlived all cultural changes. The time of the Reformation came, when religious factions divided Europe and sect stood in arms against sect: but the hatred of Islam was common to all of them. A time came when religious feeling began to wane in Europe: but the hatred of Islam remained. It is a most characteristic fact that the great French philosopher Voltaire, who was one of the most vigorous enemies of the Christian Church in the eighteenth century, was at the same time a fanatical hater of Islam and its Prophet. Some decades later there came a time when learned men in the West began to study foreign cultures and to approach them sympathetically: but in the case of Islam the traditional aversion almost always crept as an irrational bias into their scientific investigations, and the cultural gulf which history had unfortunately laid between Europe and the world of Islam remained unbridged. The contempt for Islam had become part and parcel of European thought. It is true that the first orientalist in modern times were Christian missionaries working in Muslim countries, and the distorted pictures which they drew of the teachings and the history of Islam were calculated to influence the Europeans in their attitude towards the “heathen”; but this twist of mind perseveres even

now, when the orientalist sciences have long since become emancipated from missionary influences, and have no longer a misguided religious zeal for an excuse. Their prejudice against Islam is simply an atavistic instinct, an idiosyncrasy based on the impression which the Crusades, with all their sequels, caused on the mind of early Europe.<sup>6</sup>

One could well ask: How does it happen that such an old resentment, religious in its origin and possible in its time because of the spiritual predominance of the Christian Church, still persists in the West at a time when religious feeling there is undoubtedly at a very low ebb?

But to a modern psychologist such seemingly contradictory phenomena are not at all astonishing. He knows now that a person may completely lose the religious beliefs which were imparted to him during his childhood, while some particular superstition, originally connected with those now discarded beliefs, still remains in force and defies all rational explanation throughout the whole life of that person. Such is the case with the Western attitude towards Islam. Although the religious feeling which was at the

<sup>6</sup>It should be borne in mind that the above was written in 1933. As I have mentioned in footnote 5, a change has occurred in the orientalist literature of the past few decades. However, what may be described as "the popular mind" of Europe and America has not yet been able to achieve a balanced attitude vis-à-vis Islam and things Islamic. To a large extent it is the Muslims themselves who are to blame for this state of affairs. On the one hand, they have not succeeded in presenting Islamic thought to the West in a continued, systematic manner, taking Western mentality and Western literary associations fully into consideration; and, on the other hand, Muslim assertions of their religious and socio-political aims are often too strident to be regarded as valid, objectively justified expressions in the necessary dialogue between Islam and the West.

root of the anti-Islamic resentment has in the meantime given way to a more materialistic outlook on life, that old resentment itself remains as a subconscious factor in the mind of Western man. The degree of its strength varies, of course, in each individual case, but its existence cannot be disputed. The spirit of the Crusades – in a very diluted form, to be sure – still lingers over the West and influences its attitude towards the Muslim world and all matters Islamic.

In Muslim circles we often hear the assertion that the Occident's hatred of Islam, due to those violent conflicts in the past, is gradually disappearing in our days. It is even alleged that the West shows signs of an *inclination* towards Islam as a religious and social teaching, and many Muslims quite seriously believe that wholesale conversions of Europeans and Americans are imminent. This belief is not, by itself, unreasonable for us who hold that of all religious systems Islam alone responds to the true needs and possibilities inherent in human nature and, therefore, also to the true exigencies of human society. We have, moreover, been told by our Prophet that ultimately Islam would be accepted by all mankind. But, unfortunately, there is not the slightest evidence that this could happen within the conceivable future. So far as Western civilization is concerned, a turning towards Islam could possibly come about after a series of terrible social cataclysms which would shatter the present cultural self-conceit of the West and change its mentality so thoroughly as to make it apt and ready to accept a religious explanation of life. Today, the Western world is still completely lost in the adoration of its material achievements and in the

belief that comfort, and comfort alone, is a goal worth striving for. Its materialism, its denunciation of a religious orientation of thought are certainly increasing in force, and not decreasing as some optimistic Muslim observers would have us believe.

It is said that modern science begins to admit the existence of a uniform creative power behind the visible framework of Nature; and this, those optimists allege, is the dawn of a new religious consciousness in the Western world. But this assumption only betrays a misunderstanding of Western scientific thought. No serious scientist can or ever could deny the probability of the universe being due, in its origin, to some single, dynamic cause. The question, however, is, and always was, as to the qualities which one could attribute to that "cause". All transcendental religious systems assert that it is a Power possessing absolute consciousness and insight, a Power which creates and rules over the universe according to a definite plan and purpose, without being itself limited by any law; in a word, it is God. But modern science as such is neither prepared nor inclined to go so far (in fact, this is not the domain of science) and leaves the question of the consciousness and independence – in other words, the divinity – of that creative power quite open. Its attitude is something like this: "It might be, but I don't know it and have no scientific means of knowing." In the future this philosophy may perhaps develop into some sort of pantheistic agnosticism in which soul and matter, purpose and existence, creator and created are one and the same. It is difficult to admit that such a belief could be regarded as a step towards the positive, Islamic conception of God: for it is not a farewell to materialism but simply



its elevation to a higher, more refined intellectual level.

As a matter of fact, the West has never been farther from Islam than it is today. Its active hostility to our religion may be on the decline; this, however, is not due to an appreciation of the Islamic teachings but to the growing cultural weakness and disintegration of the Islamic world. Europe was once afraid of Islam, and this fear forced it to adopt an inimical attitude towards everything that had an Islamic colour, even in purely spiritual and social matters. But at a time when Islam has lost most of its importance as a factor opposed to European political interests, it is quite natural that with diminished fear the West should also lose some of the original intensity of its anti-Islamic feelings. If these have become less pronounced and active, this does not entitle us to conclude that the West has "come closer" to Islam; it only indicates its growing indifference to Islam.<sup>7</sup>

By no means has Western civilization changed its peculiar mental attitude. It is at present as strongly opposed to a religious conception of life as it was before; and, as I have already said, there is no convincing evidence that a change is likely to take place in the near future. The existence of Islamic missions in the West and the fact that some Europeans and Americans have embraced Islam (in most cases without fully understanding its teachings)

<sup>7</sup>None the less, the greatly increased wealth of the Muslim world, due to its huge oil resources and its subsequent importance in the realm of world economics and politics, has brought with it a considerable Western interest in the world of Islam, especially in the field of arts and history. But as a religion, Islam is still a more or less unknown quantity in the West, and this in spite of the frequent Muslim-Christian meetings, colloquia and seminars.

is no argument at all. In a period in which materialism is triumphant all along the line, it is only natural that a few individuals here and there who still have a longing for a spiritual regeneration eagerly listen to any creed based on religious conceptions. In this respect Muslim missions do not stand alone in the West. There are innumerable Christian mystical sects with "revivalist" tendencies, there is the fairly strong Theosophic movement, there are Buddhist temples and missions and converts in various European and American cities. Using exactly the same arguments as the Muslim missions use, those Buddhist missions could claim (and do claim) that Europe is "coming closer" to Buddhism. In both instances the assertion is ridiculous. The conversion of a few individuals to Buddhism or Islam does not in the least prove that either of these creeds has really begun to influence Western life on any appreciable scale. One could go even further and say that none of these missions has been able to arouse more than a very moderate curiosity, and that mainly due to the fascination which an "exotic" creed exerts upon the minds of romantically-inclined people. Certainly there are some notable exceptions, and some of the new converts are earnest seekers after truth; but exceptions are not enough to change the aspect of a civilization. On the other hand, if we compare the number of those exceptional conversions with the number of Westerners who are daily flocking towards purely materialistic creeds, such as Marxism, we are able to appreciate more correctly the real trend of modern Western civilization.

It may be, as I have pointed out before, that the growing social and economic unrest, and possibly a

new series of world wars of hitherto unknown dimensions and scientific terrors will lead the materialistic self-conceit of Western civilization in such a gruesome way *ad absurdum* that its people will begin once more, in humility and earnest, to search after real spiritual truths: and then a successful preaching of Islam might become possible in the West. But such a change is still hidden behind the horizon of the future. It is a dangerous, self-deceiving optimism, therefore, for Muslims to talk of Islamic influences as being on their way to conquer the spirit of the West. Such talk is in reality nothing but the old Mahdi-belief in a “rationalist” disguise – the belief in a power that would suddenly appear and make the tottering structure of Muslim society triumphant on earth. This belief is dangerous, because it is pleasant and easy and tends to lead us away from the realization of the fact that we are culturally nowhere, whereas Western influences are today more potent than ever in the Muslim world; that we are sleeping, while those influences undermine and destroy Islamic society everywhere. To desire the expansion of Islam is one thing; and to build false hopes on this desire is another.

## ABOUT EDUCATION

So long as Muslims continue looking towards Western civilization as the only force that could regenerate their own stagnant society, they destroy their self-confidence and, indirectly, support the Western assertion that Islam is a “spent force”.

In the previous chapters I have given the reasons for my opinion that Islam and Western civilization, being built on diametrically opposed conceptions of life, are not compatible in spirit. This being so, how could we expect that the education of Muslim youth on Western lines, an education based entirely on Western cultural experiences and values, could remain free from anti-Islamic influences?

We are not justified to expect this. Except in rare cases, where a particularly brilliant mind may triumph over the educational matter, Western education of Muslim youth is bound to undermine their will to believe in the message of the Prophet, their will to regard themselves as representatives of the religiously-motivated civilization of Islam. There can be no doubt whatever that religious belief is rapidly losing ground among our “intelligentsia” who have absorbed Western values. This, of course, does not imply that Islam has preserved its integrity as a practical religion among the non-educated classes: but there, anyhow, we generally find a far greater sentimental response to the call of Islam – in the

primitive way in which they understand it – than among the more Westernized “intelligentsia”. The explanation of this estrangement is not that the Western science with which they have been fed has furnished any reasonable argument against the truth of our religious teachings, but that the intellectual atmosphere of modern Western society is so intensely anti-religious that it imposes itself as a dead weight upon the religious potentialities of the young Muslim generation.

Religious belief and unbelief are very rarely a matter of argument alone. In some cases the one or the other is gained by way of intuition or, let us say, insight; but mostly it is communicated to man by his cultural environment. Think of a child who from his earliest days is systematically trained to hear perfectly rendered musical sounds. His ear grows accustomed to discern tone, rhythm and harmony; and in his later age he will be able, if not to produce and to render, at least to *understand* the most difficult music. But a child who during the whole of its early life never heard anything resembling music would afterwards find it hard to appreciate even its elements. It is the same with religious associations. As there possibly are some individuals to whom nature has completely denied an “ear” for music, so – possibly but not probably – there are individuals who are completely “deaf” to the voice of religion. But for the overwhelming number of normal human beings the alternative between religious belief and unbelief is decided by the atmosphere in which they are brought up. Therefore the Prophet said: “Every child is born in original purity, and it is but his parents who make him a ‘Jew’, a ‘Christian’ or a ‘Zoroastrian’” (*Ṣaḥīḥ*

*al-Bukhārī*).<sup>8</sup>

The term “parents” used in the above *ḥadīth* can logically be extended to the general environment – family life, school, society, etc. – by which the early development of the child is determined. It cannot be denied that in the present state of decadence, the religious atmosphere in many Muslim houses is of such a low and intellectually degraded type that it may produce in the growing youth the first incentive to turn his back on religion. This may be so; but in the case of the education of young Muslims on Western lines the effect not only *may* be but most probably *will* be an anti-religious attitude in later life.

But here comes the great question: what should be our attitude towards modern learning?

A protest against Western education of Muslims does not in the least mean that Islam could be opposed to education as such. This allegation of our opponents has neither a theological nor an historical foundation. The Qur’ān is full of exhortations to learn “so that you may become wise”, “that you may think”, “that you may know”. It is said at the beginning of the Holy Book:

وَعَلَّمَ آدَمَ الْأَسْمَاءَ

“And he imparted unto Adam all the names” (*sūrah*

<sup>8</sup>The term *fiṭrah*, here rendered as “original purity”, primarily denotes the “original disposition” or “nature” of any sentient being; in its wider sense it signifies the innate faculty to realize God’s existence and oneness” (*Lisān al-‘Arab*, *Tāj al-‘Arūs*, etc.) with which every human being is endowed from birth (cf. *sūrah* 30:30 and note 27 on p. 621 of *The Message of the Qur’ān*; also *sūrah* 7:172 as well as note 139 on p. 230 of the same work). Consequently, the religion of Islam is frequently described as *dīn al-fiṭrah*, implying that it fully answers to the innate, original character of the human psyche.

2:31) – and the subsequent verses show that owing to his God-given knowledge of those “names”, man is, in a certain respect, superior even to the angels. The “names” are a symbolic expression for the power of defining terms, the power of articulate thinking which is peculiar to the human being and which enables him, in the words of the Qur’ān, to be God’s vicegerent on earth. And in order to make a systematic use of his thinking, man must *learn*, and therefore the Prophet said: “Striving after knowledge is a sacred duty (*farīdah*) imposed on every Muslim, male and female” (*Ibn Mājah*). And: “If anybody goes on his way in search of knowledge, God will make easy for him the way to Paradise” (*Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*). And “The superiority of the learned man over a [mere] worshipper is like the superiority of the moon on a night when it is full over all other stars” (*Musnad Ibn Ḥanbal, Jāmi‘ at-Tirmidhī, Sunan Abī Dā’ūd, Sunan Ibn Mājah, Sunan ad-Dārimī*).

But it is not even necessary to quote verses of the Qur’ān or sayings of the Prophet in defence of the Islamic attitude towards learning. History proves beyond any possibility of doubt that no religion has ever given a stimulus to scientific progress comparable to that of Islam. The encouragement which learning and scientific research received from Islamic theology resulted in the splendid cultural achievements in the days of the Umayyads and Abbasids and the Arab rule in Sicily and Spain. I do not mention this in order that we might boast of those glorious memories at a time when the Islamic world has forsaken its own traditions and reverted to spiritual blindness and intellectual poverty. We have no right, in our present misery, to boast of past

glories. But we must realize that it was the negligence of the Muslims and not any deficiency in the teachings of Islam that caused our present decay.

Islam has never been a barrier to progress and science. It appreciates the intellectual activities of man to such a degree as to place him above the angels. No other religion ever went so far in asserting the dominance of reason and, consequently, of learning, above all other manifestations of human life. If we conform to the principles of this religion, we cannot dream of eliminating modern learning from our lives. We *must* have the will to learn and to progress and to become scientifically and economically as efficient as the Western nations are. But the one thing Muslims must *not* wish is to see with Western eyes, to think in Western patterns of thought: they must not wish, if they desire to remain Muslims, to exchange the spiritual civilization of Islam for the materialistic experimentation of the West, whether Capitalist or Marxist.

Knowledge itself is neither Western nor Eastern: it is universal – just as natural facts are universal. But the angle of vision from which facts can be regarded and presented varies with the cultural temperaments of nations. Biology as such, or physics, or botany, are neither materialistic nor spiritual in their scope and purpose; they are concerned with the observation, collection and definition of facts and the derivation from them of general rules. But the inductive, philosophical *conclusions* which we derive from these sciences – that is, the philosophy of science – are not based on facts and observations alone but are to a very large extent influenced by our pre-existing temperamental or intuitive attitudes towards life and



its problems. The great German philosopher Kant remarked: "It seems surprising at first, but is none the less certain, that our reason does not draw its conclusions *from* Nature, but prescribes them *to* it." In short, it is only the subjective angle of vision that matters here, for it may basically influence our interpretation of the various phenomena under consideration. Thus, science, which is neither materialistic nor spiritual in itself, may lead us to widely divergent interpretations of the Universe: interpretations, that is, which may be spiritual or materialistic, according to our own predisposition and, therefore, our angle of vision. The West, notwithstanding its highly refined intellectualism, is materialistically predisposed and, therefore, anti-religious in its conceptions and fundamental presumptions; and so, necessarily, must be the Western educational system as a whole. In other words, it is not the study of modern, empirical sciences that could be detrimental to the cultural reality of Islam, but the spirit of Western civilization through which Muslims approach those sciences.

It is very unfortunate that our own age-long indifference and negligence, so far as scientific research is concerned, have made us entirely dependent on Occidental sources of learning. If we had always followed that principle of Islam which imposes the duty of learning and knowledge on every Muslim man and woman, we would not have to look today towards the Occident for an acquisition of modern sciences in the same way as a man dying of thirst in the desert looks towards the mirage of water on the horizon. But as the Muslims have neglected their own possibilities for so long a time, they have

fallen into ignorance and poverty while Europe has taken a mighty leap forward. It will take a long time to bridge this chasm. Until then we naturally will be obliged to accept modern sciences through the educational media of the West, and be grateful for it. But this means only that we are bound to accept the scientific matter and method, and nothing else. In other words, we should not hesitate to study exact sciences on Western lines, but we should not concede to their *philosophy* any role in the education of Muslim youth. Of course, one could say that at present many of the exact sciences, for example, nuclear physics,<sup>7</sup> have gone beyond a purely empirical investigation and have entered philosophical domains; and that it is in many cases extremely difficult to draw any distinct line between empirical science and speculative philosophy. This is true. But, on the other hand, this is exactly the point where Islamic culture will have to reassert itself. It will be the duty and the opportunity of Muslim scientists, when once they reach those border-lines of scientific investigation, to apply their own powers of speculative reasoning independently of Western philosophical theories. Out of their own – Islamic – attitude they probably will arrive at conclusions quite different from those of the majority of modern Western scientists.

But whatever the future may bring, it is decidedly possible, even today, to study and to teach science without a slavish submission to the intellectual attitudes of the West. What the world of Islam urgently needs today is not a new philosophical outlook, but only an up-to-date scientific and technical education and mental equipment.

If I were to make proposals to an ideal Educational Board governed by Islamic considerations alone, I would urge that of all the intellectual achievements of the West only natural sciences (with the aforementioned reservations) and mathematics should be taught in Muslim schools, while the tuition of European philosophy, literature and history should lose the position of primacy which it holds in today's curricula. Our attitude towards European philosophy should be obvious from what I have said above. And as for European literature, it should certainly not be overlooked – but it should be relegated to its proper philological and historical position. The way in which it is taught at present in many Muslim countries is frankly biased. The boundless exaggeration of Western values and concepts naturally induces young and unripe minds to imbibe wholeheartedly the spirit of Western civilization before its negative aspects can be sufficiently appreciated. And so the ground is prepared not only for a Platonic adoration of Western values, but also for a practical imitation of the social forms based on those values: something which can never go hand in hand with the spirit of Islam. The present role of European literature in Muslim schools should be taken over by a reasonable, discriminating tuition of Islamic literature with a view to impress the student with the depth and richness of his own culture, and thus to infuse him with a new hope for its future.

If the tuition of European literature, in the form in which it is prevalent today in many Muslim institutions, contributes to the estrangement of young Muslims from Islam, the same, in a far larger measure, is true of Western interpretation of world

history. In it the old attitude “Roman *versus* Barbarian” very distinctly comes into its own. Their presentation of history aims – without admitting this aim – at proving that the Western races and their civilization are superior to anything that has been or could be produced in this world; and so it gives a sort of moral justification to the Western quest for domination over the rest of the world. Since the time of the Romans, the European nations have been accustomed to regard all differences between East and West from the standpoint of a presumed European “norm”. Their reasoning works on the assumption that the development of humanity can be judged only on the basis of European cultural experiences. Such a narrowed angle of vision necessarily produces a distorted perspective, and the farther the lines of observation recede from the presumed European “norm”, the more difficult it becomes for Westerners to grasp the real meaning and structure of the historical problems under consideration.

Owing to this egocentric attitude of the Westerners, their descriptive history of the world was, until very recently at least, in reality nothing but an enlarged history of the West. Non-Western nations were taken into account only insofar as their existence and development had a direct influence on the destinies of Europe or America. But if you depict the history of Western nations in great detail and in vivid colours and allow only here and there side-glances at the remaining parts of the world, the reader is prone to succumb to the illusion that the greatness of the Occident’s achievement in social and intellectual respects is out of all proportion to that of

the rest of the world. Thus it almost appears as if the world had been created for the sake of the West and its civilization alone, while all other civilizations were meant only to form an appropriate setting for all that Western glory. The only effect such historical training can have upon the minds of young non-European people is a feeling of inferiority insofar as their own culture, their own historic past and their own future possibilities are concerned. They are systematically trained to disdain their own potential future – unless it be a future surrender to Western ideals.

In order to counteract these negative effects, the responsible leaders of Islamic thought should do their utmost to revise the tuition of history in Muslim institutions. This is a difficult task, no doubt, and it will require a thorough overhaul of our historical training before a new history of the world, as seen through Muslim eyes, is produced. But if the task is difficult, it is none the less possible and, moreover, imperative – otherwise our younger generation will continue to be infused with elements of the Western contempt for Islam; and the result will be a deepening of its inferiority complex. This inferiority complex could no doubt be overcome if the Muslims were prepared to assimilate Western culture *in its entirety* and to banish Islam from their lives. But are they prepared to do that?

We believe, and recent developments in the West reaffirm this belief, that the ethics of Islam, its concepts of social and personal morality, of justice, of liberty, are infinitely higher, infinitely more perfect than the corresponding concepts and ideas within Western civilization. Islam has condemned racial hatred and pointed out the way to human

brotherhood and equality; but Western civilization is still unable to look beyond the narrow horizon of racial and national antagonisms. Islamic society has never known classes and class warfare; but the whole of Western history, from the days of ancient Greece and Rome down to our own time, is full of class struggle and social hatred. Again and again it must be repeated that there is only one thing which a Muslim can profitably learn from the West, namely, the exact sciences in their pure and applied forms. But this necessity for a quest of science from Western sources should not induce a Muslim to regard Western civilization as superior to his own – or else he does not understand what Islam stands for. The superiority of one culture or civilization over another does not consist in the possession of a greater amount of scientific knowledge (although the latter is most desirable), but in its ethical energy, in its greater ability to explain and to coordinate the various aspects of human life. And in this respect Islam surpasses every other culture. We have only to follow its rules in order to achieve the utmost that human beings are capable of achieving. But we cannot and must not *imitate* Western civilization if we wish to preserve and to revive the values of Islam. The harm which the intellectual influence of that civilization causes in the body of Islam is far greater than the material benefit which it could possibly confer.

If, in the past, Muslims were negligent of scientific research, they cannot hope to repair that mistake today by an unquestioning acceptance of all Western learning. The effects of our scientific backwardness and poverty stand no comparison whatever with the deadly effect which a blind following of the Western

educational structure must necessarily have on the spiritual potentialities of the Muslim world. If we wish to preserve the reality of Islam as a cultural factor, we must guard against the moral emptiness of Western civilization which is about to pervade not only our personal inclinations but also our entire social fabric. By imitating the manners and the mode of life of the West, the Muslims are being gradually *forced* to adopt the Western moral outlook: for the imitation of outward appearance leads, by degrees, to a corresponding assimilation of the world-view responsible for that appearance.

## ABOUT IMITATION

The imitation – individually and socially – of the Western mode of life by Muslims is undoubtedly the greatest danger for the existence – or rather, the revival – of Islamic civilization. The origin of this cultural malady (it is hardly possible to call it otherwise) dates back several decades and is connected with the despair of Muslims who saw the material power and progress of the West and contrasted it with the deplorable state of their own society. Out of Muslim ignorance of the true teachings of Islam – very largely due to the narrow-minded attitude of the so-called ‘*ulamā*’ class – arose the idea that Muslims might not be able to keep pace with the progress of the rest of the world unless they adopted the social and economic rules of the West. The Muslim world was stagnant; and many Muslims came to the very superficial conclusion that the Islamic system of society and economics is not compatible with the requirements of progress, and should, therefore, be modified on Western lines. Those “enlightened” people did not trouble to inquire how far Islam, as a teaching, was responsible for the decadence of the Muslims: they did not stop to investigate the *real* ideology of Islam; they merely pointed out, and rightly so, that the teachings of their contemporary theologians were in most instances an obstacle to progress and material achievement. But



instead of turning their attention to the original sources – Qur’ān and Sunnah – they silently identified Islamic Law, the *sharī’ah*, with the petrified *fiqh* of present days, and found the latter wanting in many respects; consequently, they lost all practical interest in the *sharī’ah* as such and relegated it to the realm of history and purely theoretical book knowledge. And so an imitation of Western civilization appeared to them as the only way out of the mire of the decadence and degeneration of the Muslim world. In their well-meant but misguided efforts, such “enlightened” Muslims were assisted throughout the first two decades of this century by a flood of second-rate apologetic writings which, while not openly disclaiming the practical teachings of Islam, tried to show that its ideology could well be subordinated to the social and economic conceptions of the Western world. The imitation of Western civilization by Muslims was thus seemingly justified and the way was paved for that gradual renunciation of the most elementary social principles of Islam – always under the guise of Islamic “progress” – which today marks the evolution of several of the most advanced Muslim countries.

It is futile to argue, as many of the Muslim “intelligentsia” do, that it is of no spiritual consequence whatsoever whether we live in this way or that, whether we put on Western dress or that of our forebears, whether we are conservative in our customs or not. Such reasoning is extremely misleading. Of course there is no narrow-mindedness in Islam. As has been said in the first chapter, Islam concedes to man a very wide range of possibilities so long as he does not act in contravention of religious

injunctions. But quite apart from the fact that many a thing which is an essential part of the Western social structure – as, for example, the free and unrestricted intermingling of the sexes, or interest on capital as a basis of economic activity<sup>9</sup> – is unmistakably opposed to the teachings of Islam, the innate character of Western civilization definitely precludes, as I have tried to show, a *religious orientation* in man. And only very superficial people can believe that it is possible to imitate a civilization in its external appearance without being at the same time affected by its spirit. A civilization is not an empty form but a living organism. As soon as we begin to adopt the outward forms of that organism, its inherent currents and dynamic influences set to work in ourselves and mould slowly, imperceptibly, our whole mental attitude.

It is in perfect appreciation of this truth that the Prophet said: “Whoever imitates other people becomes one of them” (*Musnad Ibn Ḥanbal, Sunan Abī Dā’ūd*). This well-known *ḥadīth* is not only a moral admonition but also an objective statement of fact – in this case, the fact of the inevitability of Muslims being assimilated by any non-Muslim civilization which they imitate in its external forms.

In this respect, it is hardly possible to see a fundamental difference between “important” and

<sup>9</sup>As regards the total sexual permissiveness, licentiousness and promiscuity which has pervaded Western society in the course of recent decades, the ethical outlook of Islam is obvious and requires no further commentary. As for the institution of interest (*ribā*) as part and parcel of modern economic activity, it is to be noted that in recent years the Muslim community has made great strides towards the establishment of *interest-free* banking and, hence, of an economic system which would correspond to the demands of the *sharī’ah*.

“unimportant” aspects of social life. Nothing is unimportant in this context. There can be no greater mistake than to suppose that dress, for example, is something purely “external” and, thus, of no importance to the intellectual and spiritual Self of man. Dress is generally the outcome of an age-long development of a people’s tastes and needs. Its fashion corresponds to the aesthetic conceptions of that people, and so to its inclinations. It has been shaped and is constantly being re-shaped according to the changes through which the character and the inclinations of its people are passing. Western fashions of today, for instance, thoroughly correspond to the intellectual and moral character of the modern West. By adopting Western dress in place of his own, the Muslim unconsciously adapts his tastes to those of the West and twists his own intellectual and moral Self in such a way that it ultimately “fits” the new dress. And in so doing he renounces a good deal of the cultural possibilities open to his own people; he renounces their traditional tastes, their aesthetic valuations, their likes and dislikes, and accepts the livery of intellectual and moral serfdom to a foreign civilization. In other words, if a Muslim imitates the dress, the manners and the mode of life of the West, he betrays his preference for its civilization, whatever his avowed pretensions may be. It is practically impossible to imitate a foreign civilization without appreciating its spirit. And it is equally impossible to appreciate the spirit of a civilization which is opposed to a religious outlook on life, and yet to remain a good Muslim.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup>In this context, too, the reader should remember that this book was written nearly five decades ago. At that time it may have still been

The tendency to imitate a foreign civilization is invariably the outcome of a feeling of inferiority. This, and nothing else, is the matter with Muslims who imitate Western civilization. They contrast its power and technical skill and brilliant surface with the sad misery of the world of Islam: and they begin to believe that in our time there is no way but the Western way. To blame Islam for our own shortcomings is the fashion of the day. At best, our so-called intellectuals adopt an apologetic attitude and try to convince themselves and others that Islam is compatible with the adoption of Western values.

In order to achieve the regeneration of the world of Islam, the Muslims must, before adopting any measures of reform, free themselves entirely from the spirit of apology for their religion and social structure. A Muslim must live with his head held high. He must realize that he *is* distinct and different from the rest of the world, and he must learn to be proud of his being different. He should endeavour to preserve this difference as a precious quality, and pronounce it boldly to the world instead of apologizing for it and trying to merge into other cultural circles. This does not mean that Muslims should seclude themselves from the voices coming from without. One may at all

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possible for the Muslim community to preserve, for the sake of its cultural dignity, such traditional elements of dress and of outward appearance in general as would make it visually distinct from Western society. In the intervening period, however, the Muslim world has absorbed a very great deal of Western aesthetic influences, with the result that for many Muslims, and especially for the educated classes among them, a point of no return has been reached. For them, an endeavour to return to the mode of dress and outward appearance of past generations would today amount to no more than another act of sterile and undignified imitation: in this case, the imitation of a dead and unreturnable past.

times receive new, positive influences from a foreign civilization without necessarily abandoning his own. An example of this kind was the European Renaissance. There we have seen how readily Europe accepted Arab influences in the matter and method of learning. But it never imitated the outward appearance and the spirit of Arabian culture, and never sacrificed its own intellectual and aesthetic independence. It used Arab influences only as a fertilizer upon its own soil, just as the Arabs had used Hellenistic influences in their time. In both cases, the result was a spiritual enrichment, a strong, new growth of an indigenous civilization, full of self-confidence and pride in itself. No civilization can prosper, or even exist, after having lost this pride and the connection with its own past.

But the world of Islam, with its growing tendency to imitate the West and to assimilate Western ideas and ideals, is gradually cutting away the bonds which link it with its past, and is losing, therefore, not only its cultural but also its spiritual roots. It resembles a tree that was strong as long as it was deeply rooted in the soil. But the mountain torrent of Western civilization has washed those roots bare: and the tree slowly decays for want of nourishment. Its leaves fall, its branches wither away. At the end the trunk itself stands in danger of collapsing.

An imitation of Western civilization cannot be the right means of reviving the Islamic world from the mental and social torpor caused by the degeneration of practical religion into a mere custom devoid of all life and moral urge. Where else, then, should Muslims look for the spiritual and intellectual impetus so badly needed in these days?

The answer is as simple as the question; indeed, it is already contained in the question. Islam, as I have pointed out many times before, is not only a “belief of the heart” but also a very clearly defined programme of individual and social life. It can be destroyed by being assimilated to a foreign culture which has essentially different moral foundations. Equally, it can be regenerated the moment it is brought back to its own reality and given the value of a factor determining and shaping our personal and social existence in all its aspects.

Under the impact of new ideas and conflicting currents, so characteristic of the period in which we are living, Islam can no longer afford to remain an empty form. Its magic sleep of centuries is broken; it has to rise or to die. The problem facing the Muslims today is the problem of the traveller who has come to a crossroads. He can remain standing where he is; but that would mean death by starvation. He can choose the road bearing the sign “Towards Western Civilization”; but then he would have to say good-bye to his past forever. Or he can choose the other road, the one over which is written: “Towards the Reality of Islam”. It is this road alone which can appeal to those who believe in their past and in the possibility of its transformation into a living future.

## HADĪTH AND SUNNAH

Many reform proposals have been advanced during the last decades, and many spiritual doctors have tried to devise a patent medicine for the sick body of Islam. But, until now, all has been in vain, because all those clever doctors – at least those who get a hearing today – have invariably forgotten to prescribe, along with their medicines, tonics and elixirs, the natural *diet* on which the early development of the patient had been based. This diet, the only one which the body of Islam, sound or sick, can positively accept and assimilate, is the Sunnah of our Prophet Muhammad. The Sunnah is the key to the understanding of the Islamic rise more than thirteen centuries ago; and why should it not be a key to the understanding of our present degeneration? Observance of the Sunnah is synonymous with Islamic existence and progress. Neglect of the Sunnah is synonymous with a decomposition and decay of Islam. The Sunnah is the iron framework of the House of Islam; and if you remove the framework of a building, can you be surprised if it breaks down like a house of cards?

This simple truth, almost unanimously accepted by all learned men throughout Islamic history, is – we know well – most unpopular today for reasons connected with the ever-growing influence of Western civilization. But it is a truth, none the less,

and, in fact, the only truth which can save us from the chaos and the shame of our present decay.

The term *Sunnah* is used here in its widest meaning, namely, the example which the Prophet has set before us in his attitudes, actions and sayings. His wonderful life was a living illustration and explanation of the Qur'ān, and we can do no greater justice to the Holy Book than by following him who was the means of its revelation.<sup>11</sup>

We have seen that one of the main achievements of Islam, the one which distinguishes it from all other transcendental systems, is the complete harmony between the moral and the material aspects of human life. This was one of the reasons why Islam in its prime had such a triumphant success wherever it appeared. It brought to mankind the new message that the earth need not be despised in order that heaven be gained. This prominent feature of Islam explains why our Prophet, in his mission as an apostolic guide to

<sup>11</sup>I should like to stress here that the concept of the Prophet's *Sunnah* has been unwarrantably enlarged by scholars of the post-classical period of Islam. In its only valid, fundamental connotation this term signifies "the way of life" of the Apostle of God. In the first instance, it comprises the moral and ethical attitudes which he adopted towards various human problems – both individual and social – of a *permanent* nature. Secondly, the *Sunnah* embraces such of the Prophet's injunctions – both commands and prohibitions – as relate to *unchanging* circumstances of social life and human behaviour: that is to say, it does not, by itself, embrace injunctions which the Apostle of God issued with a view to a particular historical occasion or a time-bound situation. Thirdly, the *Sunnah* comprises such of the Prophet's outspoken moral valuations – "this is good" or "this is bad" – as are anchored in the human situation as such, and are therefore immune to the changes of time or circumstance. Unless we keep strictly to this threefold definition of the Prophet's *Sunnah*, we will always be in danger of obscuring the principle that it is valid for all times and thus of losing sight of its God-willed character as the second source, next to the Qur'ān, of Islamic Law.



humanity, was so deeply concerned with human life in its polarity both as a spiritual and a material phenomenon. It does not, therefore, show a very deep understanding of Islam if one discriminates between such injunctions of the Prophet as deal with purely devotional and spiritual matters and others which have to do with questions of society and daily life. The contention that we are obliged to follow the commands belonging to the first group, but not obliged to follow those of the second, is as superficial and, in its spirit, as anti-Islamic as the idea that certain general injunctions of the Qur'ān were meant only for the ignorant Arabs at the time of the revelation, and not for the refined gentlemen of the twentieth century. At its root lies a strange under-estimation of the true role of the Arabian Prophet.

Just as the life of a Muslim must be directed towards a full and unreserved cooperation between his spiritual and his bodily Self, so the leadership of our Prophet embraces life as a compound entity, a sum-total of moral and practical, individual and social manifestations. This is the deepest meaning of the Sunnah. The Qur'ān says:

فَلَا وَرَبِّكَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ حَتَّىٰ يُحَكِّمُوكَ فِيمَا شَجَرَ بَيْنَهُمْ  
 نَمَّ لَا يَجِدُوا فِي أَنفُسِهِمْ حَرَجًا مِّمَّا قَضَيْتَ وَيُسَلِّمُوا  
 تَسْلِيمًا

“Nay, by thy Sustainer! They do not [really] attain to faith unless they make thee [O Prophet] a judge of all on which they disagree among themselves, and then find in their hearts no bar to an acceptance of thy

decision and give themselves up [to it] in utter self-surrender” (sūrah 4:65). And:

قلْ: إِنْ كُنْتُمْ تُحِبُّونَ اللَّهَ فَاتَّبِعُونِي يُحْبِبْكُمُ اللَّهُ وَيَغْفِرْ  
لَكُمْ ذُنُوبَكُمْ، وَاللَّهُ غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ. قُلْ: أَطِيعُوا اللَّهَ وَالرَّسُولَ  
فَإِنْ تَوَلَّوْا فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ الْكَافِرِينَ

“Say [O Prophet]: ‘If you love God, follow me, [and] God will love you and forgive you your sins; for God is much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace.’ Say: ‘Pay heed unto God and the Apostle!’” (sūrah 3:31–32).

The Sunah of the Prophet is, therefore, next to the Qur’ān, the second source of Islamic Law. In fact, we must regard the Sunnah as *the only binding explanation* of the Qur’anic teachings, the only means of avoiding permanent dissensions concerning their interpretation and adaptation to practical use. Many verses of the Qur’ān have an allegorical meaning and can be understood in different ways. And there are, furthermore, many questions of practical importance not explicitly dealt with in the Qur’ān. The spirit prevailing in the Holy Book is, to be sure, uniform throughout; but to deduce from it the practical attitude which we have to adopt is not in every case an easy matter. So long as we believe that this Book is the Word of God, perfect in form and purpose, the only logical conclusion is that it was never intended to be used independently of the personal guidance of the Prophet which is embodied in the system of his Sunnah; and our reason tells us that there could not possibly be a better interpreter of the Qur’anic teachings than he through whom they were revealed

to humanity.

And so we come to the very important question as to the *authenticity of the sources* which reveal the life and the sayings of the Prophet to us. These sources are the *aḥādīth*, the Traditions of the sayings and actions of the Prophet reported and transmitted by his Companions and critically collected in the first few centuries of Islam. Many modern Muslims profess that they would be ready to follow the Sunnah if they were convinced that they could rely upon the body of *aḥādīth* on which it rests. It has become a matter of fashion in our days to deny, in principle, the authenticity of most of the *aḥādīth* and, therefore, of the whole structure of the Sunnah.

Is there any scientific warrant for this attitude? Is there any scientific justification for the rejection of *aḥādīth* as a dependable source of Islamic Law?

We should think that the opponents of orthodox thought would be able to bring forward really convincing arguments which would establish, once and for all, the unreliability of the Traditions ascribed to the Prophet. But this is not the case. In spite of all the efforts which have been employed to challenge the authenticity of *ḥadīth* as a body, those modern critics, both Eastern and Western, have not been able to back their purely subjective criticism with results of truly scientific research. It would be rather difficult to do so, inasmuch as the compilers of the early *ḥadīth*-collections, and particularly Bukhārī and Muslim, have done whatever was humanly possible to put the authenticity of every Tradition to a very rigorous test – a far more rigorous test than Western historians usually apply to any historical document.

It would go far beyond the limits of this book to

dwell in detail on the scrupulous method by which the reliability of Traditions was investigated by the early *muḥaddithūn*, the learned men devoted to the study of *ḥadīth*. For our purpose it should suffice to say that a complete science has been evolved, the sole object of which is the research into the meaning, the form and the way of transmission of the Prophet's *aḥādīth*. An historical branch of this science succeeded in establishing an unbroken chain of detailed biographies of all those personalities who have ever been mentioned as narrators of Traditions. The lives of those men and women have been thoroughly investigated from every point of view, and only those have been accepted as reliable whose way of life as well as of receiving and transmitting *aḥādīth* perfectly responds to the standards stipulated by the great *muḥaddithūn* and believed to be the most exacting that could possibly be conceived. If, therefore, anyone wishes to contest today the authenticity of a particular *ḥadīth* or of the system as a whole, the burden of proving its inaccuracy falls upon him alone. It is scientifically not in the least justifiable to contest the veracity of an historical source unless one is prepared to *prove* that this source is defective. If no reasonable, that is, scientific argument can be found against the veracity of the source itself or against one or more of its later transmitters, and if, on the other hand, no other contradictory report about the same matter exists, then we are bound to accept the Tradition as true.

Suppose, for example, someone speaks about the Indian wars of Maḥmūd of Ghazni and you suddenly get up and say, "I don't believe that Maḥmūd ever came to India. It is a legend without any historical

foundation.” What would happen in such a case? At once some person well-versed in history would try to correct your mistake and would quote chronicles and histories based on reports of contemporaries of that famous Sultan as a definite proof of the fact that Maḥmūd *had* been in India. In that case you would have to accept the proof – or you would be regarded as a crank who for no obvious reason denies solid historical facts. If this is so, one must ask oneself why our modern critics do not extend the same logical fairmindedness to the problem of *ḥadīth* as well.

The primary ground for a *ḥadīth* being false would be a wilful lie on the part of the first source, the Companion concerned, or one or another of the later transmitters. As to the Companions, such a possibility can be ruled out *a priori*. It requires only some insight into the psychological side of the problem in order to relegate such assumptions to the sphere of pure fantasy. The tremendous impression which the personality of the Prophet made on these men and women is an outstanding fact of human history; and, moreover, it is extremely well *documented* by history. Is it conceivable that people who were ready to sacrifice themselves and all they possessed at the bidding of the Apostle of God would play tricks with his words? Did not the Prophet say: “Whoever intentionally lies about me will take his place in the Fire”? (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Sunan Abī Dā’ūd, Jāmi’ at-Tirmidhī, Sunan Ibn Mājah, Sunan ad-Dārimī, Musnad Ibn Ḥanbal*). This the Companions knew; they believed implicitly in the words of the Prophet, whom they regarded as a spokesman of God; and is it probable, from the psychological point of view, that they disregarded this

very definite injunction?

In criminal court proceedings the first question facing the judge is *cui bono* – for whose benefit – the crime could have been committed. This judicial principle can be applied to the problem of *ḥadīth* as well. With the exception of Traditions which directly concern the status of certain individuals or groups, as well as the decidedly spurious – and by most of the *muḥaddithūn* rejected – Traditions connected with the political claims of the different parties in the first century after the Prophet’s death, there could be no “profitable” reason for any individual to falsify sayings of the Prophet. It was in a just appreciation of the possibility of *aḥādīth* being invented for some personal ends that the two foremost authorities among the Traditionists, Bukhārī and Muslim, rigorously excluded all Traditions relating to party politics from their compilations. What remained was beyond the suspicion of giving personal advantages to anyone.

There is one argument more on which the authenticity of a *ḥadīth* could be challenged. It is conceivable that either the Companion who heard it from the lips of the Prophet or one or another of the later narrators committed, while being subjectively truthful, a mistake due to a misunderstanding of the Prophet’s words, or a lapse of memory, or some other psychological reason. But the internal, that is, psychological, evidence speaks against any great possibility of such mistakes, at least on the part of the Companions. To the people who lived with the Prophet, each one of his sayings and actions was of the utmost significance, due not only to the fascination which his personality exerted on them,

but also to their firm belief that it was God's will that they should regulate their lives according to the Prophet's direction and example. Therefore, they could not take the question of his sayings offhand, but tried to preserve them in their memory even at the cost of great personal discomfort. It is related that the Companions who were immediately associated with the Prophet formed among themselves groups of two men each, one of whom was to be alternately in the vicinity of the Prophet while the other was busy with the pursuit of his livelihood or other matters; and whatever they heard or saw of their Master they communicated to one another: so anxious were they lest some saying or doing of the Prophet should escape their notice. It is not very probable that, with such an attitude, they could have been negligent as to the exact wording of a *ḥadīth*. And if it was possible for hundreds of Companions to preserve in their memory the wording of the whole Qur'ān, down to the smallest details of spelling, then it was no doubt equally possible for them and for those who immediately followed them to keep single sayings of the Prophet in their memory without adding to them or omitting anything from them.

Moreover, the Traditionists ascribe perfect authenticity only to those *aḥādīth* which are reported in the same form through different, independent chains of narrators. Nor is this all. In order to be *ṣaḥīḥ* (sound), a *ḥadīth* must be corroborated at every stage of transmission by the independent evidence of at least two, and possibly more, transmitters – so that at no stage the report should hinge on the authority of one person only. This demand for corroboration is so exacting that in a

*ḥadīth* reported through, say, three “generations” of transmitters between the Companion concerned and the final compiler, actually a score or more of such transmitters, distributed over those three “generations”, are involved.

With all this, no Muslim has ever believed that the Traditions of the Prophet could have the undisputed authenticity of the Qur’ān. At no time has the critical investigation of *aḥādīth* stopped. The fact that there exist numerous spurious *aḥādīth* did not in the least escape the attention of the *muḥaddithūn*, as non-Muslim and even some Muslim critics naively suppose. On the contrary, the critical science of *ḥadīth* was initiated *because* of the necessity of discerning between the authentic and the spurious, and the very *imāms* Bukhārī and Muslim, not to mention the lesser Traditionists, are direct products of this critical attitude. The existence, therefore, of false *aḥādīth* does not prove anything against the system of *ḥadīth* as a whole – no more than a fanciful tale from the *Arabian Nights* could be regarded as an argument against the authenticity of any historical report of the corresponding period.

Until now, no critic has been able to prove in a systematic way that the body of *ḥadīth* regarded as authentic according to the test-standard of the foremost Traditionists is inaccurate. The rejection of authentic Traditions, either as a whole or in part, is a purely emotional matter, and has failed to establish itself as the result of unprejudiced, scientific investigation. But the motive behind such an oppositional attitude among many Muslims of our time can easily be traced. This motive lies in the impossibility of bringing our present, degenerate



ways of living and thinking into line with the true spirit of Islam as reflected in the Sunnah of our Prophet. In order to justify their own shortcomings and the shortcomings of their environment, these pseudo-critics of *ḥadīth* try to obviate the necessity of following the Sunnah: because, if this were done, they would be able to interpret all Qur'anic teachings just as they please – that is, everyone according to his own inclinations and turn of mind. And in this way the exceptional position of Islam as a moral and practical, individual and social code would be utterly destroyed.

In these days, when the influence of Western civilization makes itself more and more felt in Muslim countries, still another motive is added to the negative attitude of the so-called “Muslim intelligentsia” in this matter. It is impossible to live according to the Sunnah of our Prophet and to follow the Western mode of life at one and the same time. But many among the present generation of Muslims are ready to adore everything that is Western, to worship the foreign civilization simply because it is foreign, powerful and materially imposing. This “Westernization” is the strongest reason why the Traditions of our Prophet and, along with them, the whole structure of the Sunnah have become so unpopular today. The Sunnah is so obviously opposed to the fundamental ideas underlying Western civilization that those who are fascinated by the latter see no way out of the tangle but to describe the Sunnah as an irrelevant, and therefore not compulsory, aspect of Islam – because it is “based on unreliable Traditions”. After that, it becomes easier to twist the teachings of the Qur'ān in such a way that they might appear to suit the spirit of Western

civilization.

Almost as important as the formal, so to say “legal”, justification of the Sunnah through the establishment of the historical dependability of *ḥadīth* is the question as to its inner, spiritual justification. Why should an observance of the Sunnah be regarded as indispensable for a life in the true Islamic sense? Is there no other way to the reality of Islam than through an observance of that large system of actions and customs, of orders and prohibitions derived from the life-example of the Prophet? No doubt, he was the greatest of men; but is not the necessity to imitate his life in all its aspects an infringement on the individual freedom of the human personality? It is an old objection which unfriendly critics of Islam put forward that the necessity of strictly following the Sunnah was one of the main causes of the subsequent decay of the Islamic world, for such an attitude is supposed to encroach, in the long run, on the liberty of human action and the natural development of society. It is of the greatest importance for the future of Islam whether we are able to meet this objection or not. Our attitude towards the problem of the Sunnah will determine our future attitude towards Islam.

We are proud, and justly so, of the fact that Islam, as a religion, is not based on mystic dogmatism but is always open to the critical inquiry of reason. We have, therefore, the right not only to know that the observance of the Sunnah has been imposed upon us but also to understand the inherent reason for its imposition.

Islam leads man to a unification of all aspects of his life. Being a means to that goal, this religion

represents in itself a totality of conceptions to which nothing can be added and from which nothing can be subtracted. There is no room for eclecticism in Islam. Wherever its teachings are recognized as having been really pronounced by the Qur'ān or the Prophet, we must accept them in their completeness; otherwise they lose their value. It is a fundamental misunderstanding to think that Islam, being a religion of reason, leaves its teachings open to individual selection – a claim made possible by a popular misconception of “rationalism”. There is a wide – and by the philosophies of all ages sufficiently recognized – gulf between reason and “rationalism” as it is commonly understood today. The function of reason in regard to religious teaching is of a controlling character; its duty is to see to it that nothing is imposed on the human mind which it cannot easily bear, that is, without the aid of mental jugglery. So far as Islam is concerned, unprejudiced reason has, time and again, given it its unreserved vote of confidence. That does not mean that everyone who comes into contact with the Qur'ān will necessarily *accept* its teachings; this is a matter of temperament, environment, and – last but not least – of spiritual illumination. But surely no unbiased person would contend that there is anything in the Qur'ān *contrary* to reason. No doubt, there are concepts in it beyond the present limits of our understanding; but nothing which offends against man's intelligence as such.

The role of reason in religious matters is, as we have seen, in the nature of a control – a registration apparatus saying “yes” or “no”, as the case may be. But this is not quite true of so-called “rationalism”. It does not content itself with registration and control,

but jumps into the field of speculation; it is not receptive and detached like pure reason, but extremely subjective and temperamental. Reason knows its own limits; but superficial “rationalism” is preposterous in its claim to encompass the world and all mysteries within its own individual circle. In religious matters it hardly even concedes the possibility of certain things being, temporarily or permanently, beyond human understanding; but it is, at the same time, illogical enough to concede this possibility to science – and so to itself.

An over-estimation of this kind of unimaginative rationalism is one of the causes why so many modern Muslims refuse to surrender themselves to the guidance of the Prophet. But it does not need a Kant today to prove that human understanding is strictly limited in its possibilities. Our mind is unable, by virtue of its nature, to understand the idea of *totality*: we can grasp, of all things, their details only. We do not know what infinity or eternity mean; we do not even know what life is. In problems of a religion resting on transcendental foundations we therefore need a guide whose mind possesses something more than the normal reasoning qualities and the subjective rationalism common to all of us; we need someone who is inspired – in a word, a Prophet. If we believe that the Qur’ān is the Word of God, and that Muḥammad was God’s Apostle, we are not only morally but also intellectually bound to follow his guidance implicitly. This does not mean that we should *exclude* our powers of reasoning. On the contrary, we have to make use of those powers to the best of our ability and knowledge; we have to discover the inherent meaning and purpose of the

commands transmitted to us by the Prophet. But in any case – whether we are able to understand its ultimate purpose or not – we must obey the order. I should like to illustrate this by the example of a soldier who has been ordered by his general to occupy a certain strategic position. The good soldier will follow and execute the order immediately. If, while doing so, he is able to explain to himself the ultimate strategic purpose which the general has in view, the better for him and for his career; but if the deeper aim which underlies the general’s command does not reveal itself to him at once, he is nevertheless not entitled to give up or even to postpone its execution. We Muslims rely upon our Prophet’s being the best commander mankind could ever have. We naturally believe that he knew the domain of religion both in its spiritual and its social aspects far better than we ever could. In enjoining us to do this or to avoid that, he always had some “strategic” objectives in view which he thought to be indispensable for the spiritual or social welfare of man. Sometimes this object is clearly discernible, and sometimes it is more or less hidden from the untrained eyes of the average person; sometimes we can understand the deepest aim of the Prophet’s injunction, and sometimes only its immediate purpose. Whatever the case may be, we are bound to follow the Prophet’s commands, provided that their authenticity and their context are fully established.<sup>12</sup> Nothing else matters. Of course,

<sup>12</sup>In this connection the reader is referred to note 11 on p. 83 above. In addition to what has been said in that note, one should always remember that many individual *ahādīth*, even some of the most authentic ones, have been transmitted to us as fragments, without a clear reference to the context. In such cases, only the most meticulous scholarship can reconstruct the circumstances to which the *hadīth* in question refers, and thus establish the permanent character, if any, envisaged by the Apostle of God in the relevant injunction.

there are commands of the Prophet which are obviously of paramount importance and others which are less important, and we have to give the more important precedence over the others. But never have we the right to disregard any one of them because they appear to us “unessential” – for it is said in the Qur’ān of the Prophet:

وما يَنْطِقُ عَنِ الْهَوَىٰ

“He does not speak out of his own desire” (*sūrah* 53:3). That is, he speaks only when an objective *necessity* arises; and he does it because God has inspired him to do so. And for this reason we are obliged to follow the Prophet’s Sunnah in spirit *and* in form, if we wish to be true to Islam. We do not regard its ideology as one way among others, but as *the* way; and the man who conveyed this ideology to us is not just one guide among others, but *the* guide. To follow him in all that he commanded is to follow Islam; to discard his Sunnah is to discard the reality of Islam.

## CONCLUSION

In the foregoing I have tried to show that Islam, in its true meaning, cannot benefit by an assimilation of Western civilization. But, on the other hand, the Muslim world has today so little energy left that it does not offer sufficient resistance. The remnants of its cultural existence are being levelled to the ground under the pressure of Western ideas and customs. A note of resignation is perceivable; and resignation, in the life of nations and cultures, means death.

What is the matter with Islam? Is it really, as our adversaries and the defeatists within our own ranks will have us believe, a “spent force”? Has it outlived its own usefulness and given to the world all that it had to give?

History tells us that all human cultures and civilizations are organic entities and resemble living beings. They run through all the phases which organic life is bound to pass: they are born, they have youth, ripe age, and at the end comes decay. Like plants that wither and fall to dust, cultures die at the end of their time and give room to other, newly-born ones.

Is this the case with Islam? It might appear so at the first superficial glance. No doubt, Islamic culture has had its splendid rise and its blossoming age; it had power to inspire men to deeds and sacrifices, it transformed nations and changed the face of the earth; and later it stood still and became stagnant,

and then it became an empty word, and at present we witness its utter debasement and decay. But is this all?

If we believe that Islam is not a mere culture among many others, not a mere outcome of human thoughts and endeavours, but a culture-producing force – a Law decreed by God Almighty to be followed by humanity at all times and everywhere – then the aspect changes completely. If Islamic culture is or was the result of our following a revealed Law, we can never admit that, like other cultures, it is chained to the lapse of time and limited to a particular period. What appears to be the decay of Islam is in reality nothing but the death and the emptiness in our hearts, which are too idle and too insensitive to hear the eternal voice. No sign is visible that mankind, in its present stature, has outgrown Islam. It has not been able to produce a better system of ethics than that expressed in Islam; it has not been able to put the idea of human brotherhood on a practical footing, as Islam does in its supra-national concept of the *ummah*; it has not been able to create a social structure in which the conflicts and frictions between its members are as efficiently reduced to a minimum as in the social plan of Islam; it has not been able to enhance the dignity of man, his feeling of security, his spiritual hope – and last, but surely not least, his happiness.

In all these things the present achievements of the human race fall considerably short of the Islamic programme. Where, then, is the justification for saying that Islam is “out of date”? Is it only because its foundations are purely religious, and religious orientation is out of fashion today? But if we see that a system based on religion has been able to evolve a



practical programme of life more complete, more concrete and more congenial to man's psychological constitution than anything else which the human mind has been able to produce by way of reforms and proposals – is not just this a very weighty argument in favour of a religious outlook?

Islam, we have every reason to believe, has been fully vindicated by the positive achievements of man, because it has envisaged them and pointed them out as desirable long before they were attained; and equally well it has been vindicated by the shortcomings, errors and pitfalls of human development, because it has loudly and clearly warned against them long before mankind recognized them as errors. Quite apart from one's religious beliefs, there is, from a purely intellectual point of view, every inducement to follow confidently the practical guidance of Islam.

If we consider our culture and civilization from this point of view, we necessarily come to the conclusion that its revival is possible. We need not “reform” Islam, as some Muslims think – because it is already perfect in itself. What we must reform is our attitude towards religion, our laziness, our self-conceit, our shortsightedness – in short, *our* defects, and not some supposed defects of Islam. In order to attain to an Islamic revival we need not search for new principles of conduct from outside, but have only to apply the old and forsaken ones. We certainly may receive new impulses from foreign cultures, but we cannot substitute the perfect fabric of Islam by anything non-Islamic, whether it comes from the West or from the East. Islam, as a spiritual and social institution, cannot be “improved”. In these circumstances, any

change in its conceptions or its social organization caused by the intrusion of foreign cultural influences is in reality retrograde and destructive, and therefore to be deeply regretted. A change there must be: but it should be a change from *within ourselves* – and it should go in the direction of Islam, and not away from it.

But with all this, we must not deceive ourselves. We know that our world, the world of Islam, has almost lost its reality as an independent cultural factor. I am not speaking here of the political aspect of Muslim decay. By far the most important feature of our present-day condition is to be found in the intellectual and social spheres: in the disappearance of our belief and our creativeness and the disruption of our social organism. The state of cultural and social chaos through which we are passing at present distinctly shows that the balancing forces which once were responsible for the greatness of the Islamic world are nearly exhausted today. We are drifting; and no one knows to what cultural end. No intellectual courage remains, no will to resist or to avert that torrent of foreign influences destructive to our religion and society. We have thrown aside the best moral teachings which the world has ever known. We belie our faith, whereas to our distant forebears it was a living urge; we are ashamed, whereas they were proud; we are mean and self-centred, whereas they generously opened themselves out to the world; we are empty, whereas they were full.

This lamentation is well-known to every thinking Muslim. Every one has heard it repeated many times. Is it any use then, one could ask, to have it repeated once more? I think it is. For there can be no way for us

out of the shame of our decadence but one: to admit the shame, to have it day and night before our eyes and to taste its bitterness, until we resolve to remove its causes. It is no use to hide the grim truth from ourselves and to pretend that the world of Islam is growing in Islamic activity, that missions are working in four continents, that Western people realize more and more the beauty of Islam. . . . It is no use to pretend all this and to employ casuistic arguments in order to convince ourselves that our humiliation is not bottomless. For it *is* bottomless.

But shall this be the end?

It cannot be. Our longing for regeneration, the desire of so many of us to become better than we are at present, gives us the right to hope that all is not over with us. There *is* a way to regeneration, and this way is clearly visible to everyone who has eyes to see.

Our first step must be the shedding of that spirit of “apology” for Islam, which is only another name for intellectual defeatism: only a masquerade for our own scepticism. And the next stage must be our conscious, deliberate following of the Sunnah of our Prophet. For Sunnah means no more and no less than the teachings of Islam translated into practice. By applying it as an ultimate test to the requirements of our daily life we will easily recognize which impulses from Western civilization might be accepted and which ought to be rejected. Instead of meekly submitting Islam to alien intellectual norms, we must learn – once again – to regard *Islam* as the norm by which the world is to be judged.

It is true, however, that many of the original intentions of Islam have been brought into a false perspective through inadequate but nevertheless

commonly-accepted interpretation, and those of the Muslims who are not in a position to go back, by themselves, to the original sources and thus to readjust their conceptions are confronted with a partially-distorted picture of Islam and things Islamic. The impracticable propositions which are today put forward by a self-styled “orthodoxy” as postulates of Islam are in most instances nothing but conventional interpretations of the original postulates on the basis of the old Neo-Platonic logic which might have been “modern”, that is, workable, in the second or third century of the Hijrah but is extremely out-of-date now. The Muslim educated on Western lines, mostly unacquainted with Arabic and not well-versed in the intricacies of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), is naturally prone to regard those worn-out, subjective interpretations and conceptions as reproducing the true intentions of the Law-Giver: and in his disappointment over their inadequacy he often draws back from what he supposes to be the Canonical Law (*shari‘ah*) of Islam. Thus, in order that it may once again become a creative force in the life of the Muslims, the valuation of the Islamic proposition must be revised in the light of our *own* understanding of the original sources and freed from the thick layer of conventional interpretations which have accumulated over the centuries and have been found wanting in the present time. The outcome of such an endeavour might be the emergence of a new *fiqh*, exactly conforming to the Two Sources of Islam – the Qur’ān and the life-example of the Prophet – and at the same time answering to the exigencies of present-day life: just as the older forms of *fiqh* answered to the exigencies of a period dominated by Aristotelian and

Neo-Platonic philosophy and to the conditions of life prevailing in those earlier ages.

But only if we regain our lost self-confidence can we expect to go forward once again. Never will the goal be reached if we destroy our own social institutions and imitate a foreign civilization – foreign not only in an historical or a geographical sense but also in the spiritual one. And the way has been pointed out to us in the words of the Holy Qur’ān:

لَقَدْ كَانَ لَكُمْ فِي رَسُولِ اللَّهِ أُسْوَةٌ حَسَنَةٌ لِّمَن كَانَ  
يَرْجُو اللَّهَ وَالْيَوْمَ الْآخِرَ .

“Verily, in the Apostle of God you have a good example for everyone who looks forward to God and the Last Day” (*sūrah* 33:21).