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Morteza Mutahhari

***RELIGION
AND THE WORLD***

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*In the Name of God
the Merciful, the Compassionate*

Religion and the World

The subject of the present discussion is the view of religion towards "the world". Of course, our discussion will be limited to the view of Islam and, in particular, to the line of logic with which this subject is treated in the Holy Quran.

That this line of logic be understood is crucial, for of all the subjects of religious sermons and lectures, the most common are those which relate to "the world", and which can be grouped under the headings "the evils of the world", "advices to reject and refrain from the world", and so on. Whenever a person feels the urge to become a preacher and deliver lectures to the people, the first thing that comes to such a person's mind is the need to learn a few lines of poetry or prose or a few holy sayings about the world.

Thus it is that the ears of mankind have listened to no subject as they have listened to this one. And, being linked to morals and ethics and to the way in which people must face their daily affairs, this is a subject of prime importance. It is a subject that, when properly interpreted in a reasonable manner, is effective in pro-

ducing a balanced ethical refinement that includes the blessings of self-respect, a noble outlook, prosperity, and good relations within society. When, however, it is misinterpreted, it becomes the cause of stupification and complete abandonment of the senses; the source of all kinds of misfortune, helplessness and individual and social misery.

Misinterpretations of Asceticism

It is a matter of great regret that it is the second of these two interpretations that has prevailed. Advices and sermons and historical poetry and prose on this subject have almost always been of the second form. And there are two reasons for this. The first is the influence of certain non-Islamic ideas and philosophies based on a pessimistic outlook towards the world and towards material existence and worldly affairs, which became prevalent amongst the Muslims due to the assimilation of so many different peoples within the Muslim community. The other consists of unpleasant historical events and particular social causes that have occurred throughout the Islamic environment over the last fourteen hundred years.

We must overlook all this, however, and directly inspect the logic of the Holy Quran. We must look to see whether these pessimistic philosophies are to be found in the Quran, or whether they are mere pretensions.

In the Holy Quran, "the world" has been introduced as a temporary abode not worthy of being made the subject of human hopes and aspirations. This verse for example, tells us that, *"Wealth and sons are an adornment of the worldly life, and the eternal – the good deeds – are better in the view of your Lord (as*

regards) reward and hope." (18:46)

Yet, although the world is considered by the Quran as being unworthy of human hopes and aspirations, still we are not told that all existence and all creation – the skies, the earth, the mountains, rivers, seas, plains, forests, deserts, the vegetable, animal, and human spheres of existence and all their systems, movements, and currents of development – are all bad, futile and in vain.

On the contrary, the Quran presents the systematic order that is creation as being a right and just order, and God tells us: "*We did not create the heavens and the earth and what is between them in play.*" (44:38)

Furthermore, oaths are sworn in the Quran by parts of the creation, and this stresses the point that the physical world itself is very meaningful. Oaths such as: "*By the sun and its radiance, and the moon which succeeds it.*" (91:1–2) "*By the fig and the olive, and Mount Sinai and this secure city (Meccah),*" (95:1–3) "*By the charger panting . . .*" (100:1) "*By the (human) self . . .*" (91:7). We are also told in the Quran, "*You see no incongruity in the creation of the All-compassionate (Rahman), so return your gaze; do you see a gap?*" (67:3)

Essentially, a pessimistic view of creation and of the currents and systematic order of the world is incompatible with the school of thought of Islam; i.e. with the essential essence of Islamic thinking, the principle of *towhid* (monotheism). These pessimistic theories can only be based either upon materialism and the denial of a source of truth, justice and reason, or upon the principle, maintained by certain philosophies, of dualism, i.e. of two opposing sources of existence, one the source

of good and the other the source of evil.

In a religion based on monotheism, however, on the belief in an All-compassionate and Merciful, Knowing and Sensible God, there exists no place for such pessimistic thinking, as has been made clear in many of the Quran's verses.

That which has been stated in the Quran about the world being finite and perishable, and the world's being likened to plants that spring from the ground after a rainfall and grow, then become yellow and dry and gradually disintegrate altogether, in reality, raises the value of the human being. In this method we are told not to situate the world at the pinnacle of all our hopes and aspirations. This material world does not have such a value as to be worthy of being our highest goal. But this provides no reason for anyone to suppose that the world is totally ugly and evil.

Thus it is that no Islamic scholar of merit has ever presented the Quranic verses about the world in terms of a pessimism towards the world, or towards its currents and movements.

Attraction Towards the World.

Regarding the Quranic verses about the world many interpretations have been made. One of these is the view that the world itself is not bad, since it consists of all the earthly and celestial things that are mentioned in the Quran and which themselves are not bad, for they are all signs of our Creator Who exalts us with them, and thus they cannot be bad. What is bad and reproachable, according to this view, is affection and desire for these things. Love of the world is bad, according to this view, not the world itself. And we know that

this interpretation has been expressed in poetry and prose to an extent that is beyond reckoning.

And this is the interpretation that has become the most prevalent. Most Muslims, if asked about the evil of the world, would reply that love of the world is bad, and that the world itself is good, for otherwise God would not have created it. However, when we examine this interpretation carefully, we find that, despite its popularity, it is not without its problems, and that it is not in exact accordance to the explanations of the Quran.

Firstly, we must look to see whether the attraction which man has for the world is a natural and instinctive attraction – i.e. an attraction that has itself been created and placed amongst man's instincts? Or whether it appears in man as the result of later, special causes like habit, inculcation and imitation. For example, parents love their children while children love their parents. Men and women are both attracted to the opposite sex. Everyone is attracted to wealth and riches, to respect, popularity and so on. Are these attractions and affections natural and instinctive for all human beings? Or are they the incidental effects of a bad upbringing?

These attractions and affections are without doubt both natural and instinctive. How, therefore, is it possible for them to be bad and evil? And how can it be our duty to put them aside? These attractions are inherent in the human soul and, in the same way as it cannot be said that any part of the universe around us is essentially bad or evil or that its creation was without Divine wisdom (*hikmah*), in the same way that it cannot be said that any part of the human body is essentially evil

or that its creation was without the same wisdom — since no tiny vein or limb or even a hair can be found that is excessive or futile — so it is with the forces, instincts, parts of the human soul.

Of all the human desires and attractions, no natural, instinctive desire or attraction exists that was created without wisdom, that has no point or purpose. All natural, instinctive desires exist according to Divine wisdom. Love of one's parents, love of one's children, love of one's husband or wife, love of wealth and riches, love of progress and advancement, love of respect and popularity; all of these accord to Divine wisdom, and if they did not exist, the basis for all human life would fall apart.

Furthermore, these affections are mentioned as being signs of the Divine wisdom, or *hikmah*, in the Holy Quran itself. In one surah, for example, amidst the creation of man, sleep and some other things being mentioned as signs of the Divine wisdom, we are told: *"And of His signs is that He created for you from yourselves spouses, for you to find comfort in them, and placed between you love and affection. Verily in this are signs for a people who reflect."* (30:21)

If love for one's husband or wife is a bad thing, it would not have been mentioned in this verse as being one of the signs of the glory of God.

It is obvious that these affections have been placed in human nature, and it is also clear that they are the means for worldly affairs to have their order and systematic currents. If these affections did not exist, neither would generation succeed generation, nor would life and civilization ever advance, nor would there exist in the

instincts of man any reason for work, industry, or struggle. In short, mankind would not have remained on the face of the earth.

Deliverance

Having looked at these two interpretations and views about the world – one, the view of those who see the world with its pleasures as being evil and corrupt, the other, the view of those who consider the world itself to be good but attraction to it and love of it to be bad – let us now look at what means they provide for the felicity of man and his deliverance from misery.

Those who have a pessimistic view of the world and existence as a whole, considering existence and life to be evil and corrupt, have no solutions to offer except the despair of nihilism and suicide. This is the weakest of views and the most miserable people in the world are those who hold it.

On the other hand, those who see the world as being good, but view attraction and love towards it as being bad, say that building and burning, construction and destruction, is all the same and futile and that the road to man's happiness and deliverance lies in him combating his desires and affections, and plucking them out of his being by the roots. According to this view, the human then becomes freed from the jungle of vice and corruption and the bearer of happiness in his breast.

The first of these views needs scant reply, but the answer to the second is that, firstly, according to a precise philosophical theory that has lately been confirmed by the science of psychology, the natural, instinctive desires and loves which exist in the human soul

cannot be suppressed or eradicated. The most that can be achieved is that, by the process of self-mortification, they can be driven to the depths of one's inner consciousness to appear later in a dangerous form through an unnatural channel, producing as a side-effect serious disorders of the nerves and soul. Secondly, even if it could be done, to do so would be hundred percent harmful, exactly like any unnecessary amputation of a limb or organ.

Each and every natural, human instinct is a force that has been placed within us to stimulate action and movement. There is no play or futility in the creation; for what reason should these generators of energy be ignored, ruined or destroyed?

The Quranic Logic

That which is derived from the Quran is that desires and affections towards the world are not essentially bad, and neither has the Quran appointed any path to felicity entailing that our natural desires and attractions be pummelled and crushed.

What the Quran criticises and reproaches is such an overwhelming affection the reality of which would mean being totally dependent on the material world and content and satisfied solely with it. The Quran tells us: *"Wealth and sons are an adornment of the worldly life while the eternal – the good deeds – are better in the view of your Lord (as regards) reward and hope."* (18:45) And the word "hope" at the end of this verse makes it clear that the verse is about aims and ideals.

The Holy Quran describes worldly people in these terms: *'. . . those who have no hope in Our meeting and*

are satisfied with the worldly life and find peace with it; and these are they who are mindless of Our signs." (10:7). This verse reproaches being content and satisfied with only material existence, sparing not a thought for the hereafter or for God, and finding peace solely in the material life. So these are the qualities of worldly people in the reproachable sense.

In another place we are told: *"So turn away from whoever turns his back on Our Reminder and who desires nothing except the worldly life. That is their extent of knowledge."* (53:29–30). Again, the people who are discussed and reproached are those who desire nothing and have no goal other than the material world, and whose thinking goes no higher than this.

Or yet again: *"Love of desires are made attractive for man; (desires) of women, of sons, of gold and silver in hoarded treasures, of finely bred horses, cattle and farms. These are the provisions of the worldly life; but the best destination is towards God."* (3:13) This verse, too, does not simply reproach natural desires and loves, it reproaches the fact that love of the objects of desire are made beautiful in the views of some people, and have been presented as greater and more beautiful than they really are, and have fascinated and totally occupied some people, and have become some people's sole ideals. Similarly, we are told: *"Are you content with the life of the world instead of the hereafter? The provisions of the worldly life compared to the hereafter are but little."*

The point of all these verses is to criticise and reproach being satisfied solely with worldly attractions.

There is a difference between love of wealth, children and other factors of worldly life on the one hand, and

being content and satisfied with them alone and with placing them at the centre of one's hopes and aspirations on the other. When it is the aim to prevent mankind from being monopolised by worldly aspirations, from being limited to worldly aspirations, the solution does not lie in condemning, attacking and trying to uproot all the natural, worldly impulses of the human being. On the contrary, the solution lies in freeing and benefitting from another chain of natural desires which come to the surface later than material desires, and which are in need of being brought into life and instigated.

The purpose of religious teachings, therefore, must be to awaken these higher feelings of man, feelings which are themselves high and noble and originate from a high and noble source in the human being, and, because of this, manifest themselves later than material feelings and need to be provoked. These feelings are spiritual feelings and the instigation and provocation they need must be provided by religion.

Each and every love and affection is like a spring flowing from the soul. The purpose of religion is not to block the springs of material attractions; the purpose of religion is to open and set flowing other springs, spiritual springs. In other words, religion must not limit and reduce the sensual forces that have been created, along with the rest of creation, with Divine wisdom. What religion must do is free a different chain of spiritual forces which are in dire need of being freed.

This matter can be clarified with a simple example: assume that a man has a son whom he sends to school, and then he sees that all his son's interests lie in playing and eating. In such a case, the man naturally becomes

unhappy and gives his son a good talking to. He reproaches him, and perhaps calls him a glutton and a good for nothing. He does this because he wants his son to be interested in lessons and books, in reading, writing, arithmetic, and so on. And interest in these things, as a matter of human nature, manifest themselves in children later than interest in playing and eating.

In addition, these higher interests are in need of instigation, of encouragement. An instinctive desire for knowledge exists in each and every human being, but until it is awoken, it lies helplessly dormant. However, there is no reason to suppose that the father wants his son to give up playing and eating. If one day he was to discover that his son had lost all interest in games and food, he would quickly feel disturbed and would assume his son's state to be the manifestation of some illness, and would probably refer him to a doctor. The father realises that while his son is healthy, he must take an interest in school and in books, but must also have happiness, play and food at their proper times.

The Quranic Logic and its World View

The line of logic that the Quran displays towards the world and the prohibition of devoting all one's interest to the world is the cause of a certain type of Quranic view towards the world and towards the human being. About the world, the view of the Quran is that the happiness of existence is not limited to material, worldly existence. While admitting the magnificence of this world to the proper degree, the Quran maintains the existence of another, far greater and more extensive sphere, in comparison to which this world is almost nothing.

Similarly, about the human being, the Quran maintains that life is not limited to this finite, worldly existence, and that the human being also has a life in the hereafter. According to the Quran, the extent of human life stretches beyond the life of this world to infinity. In the light of this, therefore, it is clear that the human being must not place the world before his eyes as the pinnacle of all his aspirations.

So, just as one branch of the Islamic world view and philosophy, i.e. monotheism, does not, as previously stated, allow us to look pessimistically at the world and at sensual existence, so there is another branch of Islamic thinking which necessitates that the highest goal and hope of the human being be above the world and worldly affairs; and this is the branch concerning knowledge of the hereafter.

Materialism and Ethics

Besides this, another important branch of Islam's school of thought also necessitates the diminution of the importance given to the material world, the branch of ethics and moral refinement.

Also accepted by other schools of thought, this branch holds that in order for human society to become civilized society, there must be some means of neutralising greed and of persuading people to adopt spiritual, ethical aspirations. The stronger the fire of lust and greed becomes, not only does it add nothing to the strength of society, but society also becomes easier to be ruined and destroyed.

As for felicity, although the individual should not go to extremes and, like some philosophies, imagine that

happiness and prosperity lie in refraining from almost everything, still there is no doubt that a natural disregard of the world and its pleasures is a prime condition of any real felicity, both of the individual and of the society.

Here we must deal with another point that needs to be explained. From what has been stated about preventing human desires and attractions from being limited to the material world, it is possible that someone will conceive the misgiving that both the world must be loved and also God, that the ideal of the well-balanced human being must be the material world and also God; a kind of polytheism.

Certainly not! This is not the aim of Islam. The aim of Islam is that the human being has a chain of attractions for things. Attractions that God has created within the human according to His wisdom. The Prophets and Imams were blessed with these same attractions, and they thanked their Lord for them. These feelings are neither capable of being stopped nor would it be good to stop them if they were.

A human being has another capacity which goes beyond these worldly affections; the capacity to have ideals. The material world must not become the human being's ideal. This is the type of love and affection which is bad. Desires and affections are a kind of talent which are at the level of being one of the necessary means of life. The talent of having ideals, however, is a special talent which finds its source in the profound essence of humanity, and is uniquely human. The Prophets did not come to destroy desires and affections, nor to dry up their source. What they came to do was to displace the

material world from its position at the pinnacle of man's ideals and present and establish in its place God and the hereafter. In reality, the Prophets worked to prevent the world and sensual existence from leaving their natural position as the subject of interest, attraction and desire – which are kinds of links between the human and the things around him – and being transferred to that sacred location which is called the human heart, that nucleus of a human being's existence and his very capacity to be human. The Prophets came to prevent the world and material existence from occupying that holy place and, as a consequence, blocking man's flight towards the perfect infinite.

So when we read in the Quran that "*God has not made for man two hearts in his body*" (33:4) we must not assume that the verse signifies that we must either be attracted to God or to things other than God such as one's husband or wife, children, wealth, and so on. No, the point is that man must have one, high aim and one focus for his aspirations. Having affections towards several things in one essence is certainly possible, and this is self-evident, but two things that cannot possibly accompany one another is having God as the centre of one's hopes and aspirations and also the world.

Respecting Rights and Despising the World

From the content of Islam's regulations about the justice and loyalty of individuals towards one another, about the justice and duties of leaders and officials, about judging and the other duties of magistrates and arbitrators and the problems related to their tasks, and about witnesses, it becomes clear to what extent in this religion the rights of the individual are to be respected and to what extent their observance is considered obligatory.

And this prompts questions and misgivings as to how these rights can be so respected in Islam while the whole Islamic theory is clearly based on contempt of the world and its delights. The rights of people toward one another are related to the circumstances of life in the world; related, for example, to one person not seizing and consuming the property of someone else. When it is a person's view that a certain object is worthless, all the other things which are related and dependent on that object will also seem worthless. Therefore, since in the view of Islam the world itself and the worldly life are worthless, how can Islam consider the rights related to

the world and to worldly life to be valuable and worthy of respect?

Intrinsic Values and Relative Values

In reply to this question, it must firstly be said that the actual meaning of the world having no value in the view of Islam must become clear. Ambiguity in this subject leads to many doubts and misgivings. If the worth or worthlessness of objects is considered in light of the objects themselves, they will all be valuable. In other words, everything is valuable for itself because everything is a part of creation and creation for itself is the essence of value. Existence, say the philosophers, equals merit.

However, when we consider a thing in the light of its relation with another thing, in the light of the effect it has on that other thing, we see that it is possible for an object, in relation to that other object, to be quite without value. That is, it is possible for it to have no effect on that other thing, neither in benefit nor in loss. On the other hand, it is equally possible for it to have a value in that it has an effect. If it has a positive effect, then we say that it has a positive value, and if it has a negative effect, then we say that it has a negative value. Looking at the positive value, which is a relative value – the value of a thing for another thing – we see that it can be one of two types: it can be considered alone; meaning that we say, for example, that money has value for a human being. Or we can consider its relative value compared to the relative value of a third thing. How much value, for example, does money have for a human being compared to health, knowledge, and ethics.

The value of a grain of sand or of a fly or a mosquito in the human view is absolutely nothing; its existence having no effect on the human at all. It follows, of course, that just as the thing itself is worthless, so the rights which pertain to it are also worthless in the human point of view. Money, on the other hand, has value for a human being because it can be useful for his condition and can finance his ideas and plans. When, however, it is compared to health, knowledge, or honour, it loses its value and becomes worthless; not simply of little value, but of no value. It is not such that if the sum of money is large enough it is worthy of comparison to honour. No. A person who likes money, and who at the same time has a high and noble character, will strive to earn money only for as long as his honour and self-respect remain intact, and the moment that money causes injury to his honour and self-respect he will overlook it, whether it is a little or a lot. Even if all the wealth of the world was offered to such a person, still he would not be ready to pay for it the price of his honour and self-respect. In the view of such a person money has a value, but not one which is equal to those of self-respect, honour, and ethics. When compared to such values, the value of money simply fades away. There is no question of a small amount being incomparable but a large amount being comparable. On the contrary, even a lot of money is incomparable to a little honour and respect.

Ali (a.s.) expresses his mentality like this: *"By God! If I were (to be) given the seven regions with what is under their skies to rebel against God by robbing an ant of a husk of barley, I would not do it!"*

This means that the whole of existence in the view of Ali (a.s.) is not worth an act of injustice to an ant.

By this sentence, Ali (a.s.) does not belittle the value of the world and of what pertains to it. On the contrary, he raises the value of justice. He does not intend to tell us that because the world and all that is under the skies is so worthless he, in exchange for a small action, the committing of injustice to an ant, does not want it. Not at all. What he is telling us is that injustice is such a serious affair that all that pertains to existence is nothing compared to the minutest form of injustice; the injustice of robbing a husk of barley from an ant.

Thus we see that the world having no value in the view of religion is true according to the meaning of comparative value. In other words, the world does not have such a value that one gives up all ethical and social principles — lying, breaking one's word, committing injustice, trampling the rights of others, and so on, all for the sake of worldly, material gains. It doesn't have such a value that we unjustly cause distress to others for its material delights and comforts, or even that we trample on the rights of an ant.

Human Logic

Human logic is an extremely good way of thinking and looking at things; sublime. It is a mistake to think that the view of religion is that the world has such little value that not even a lie should be told for its sake; that not even a single act of deceit or injustice be committed for its sake. The truth is that religion gives so much importance to rights and principles, to belief, faith and ethics that it considers that for the sake of these things the world and what it contains must be overlooked.

And this is the reality. If we perceive the nature of the human being and of humanity and of spiritual values we cannot come to any other conclusion. Throughout the whole world, even materialists are forced to give importance to rights and principles and to consider material comforts and pleasures as lesser things than beliefs, principles and rights. The fact remains, however, that this matter has been perfectly expressed only in the language particular to expressing the worthlessness and unimportance of the world; the language of religion. Only on the basis of religion can this logic be given to mankind, can mankind be made to believe that beliefs, principles, and rights are a level above material comforts and pleasures. When the basis of religion becomes lost to mankind, the basis for the acceptance of humanity being superior to worldly benefits is also lost.¹

On the other hand, whenever we consider the world itself — overlooking the fact that for its sake sins are committed, principles are opposed, rights are trampled on — we see that the world has a positive value for us. In the terminology of the Holy Prophet, *"The world is a farm for the hereafter."* Or, in the words of Ali (), *"It is a place of prostration for the lovers of God, a place of prayer for the angels of God, a place of descension for the inspiration (wahy) of God, and a 'market place' for the Guardians² of God."*

The religion of Islam with this, its sublime system of logic, does not lessen the value of the world from what it is and what it is understood to be. What it does is raise and publicise the values of spirituality, of the caution of acting virtuously for God (*taqwa*), and of social rights, all of which are understood by fewer people.

Therefore, the worthlessness of the world is a comparative worthlessness. And its comparative worthlessness is in no way incompatible with maintaining the rights which pertain to it.

So, the firm Islamic regulations about rights which were mentioned at the beginning of this discussion are an indication of the fact that the worthlessness of the world in Islam is a comparative worthlessness.

Justice and the Fate of Society

Secondly, in reply to such questions I would ask whether Islam wants the Islamic society to remain in existence or not. Of course, it is obvious that it does. I would then ask whether it is possible for a society to survive without revolving on the axis of justice and securing the rights of its members.

Has not our sublime Prophet told us, "*Property survives with disbelief and does not survive with injustice*"? That is, when a society is fair and just it can remain intact even if its members are disbelievers, whereas when injustice overtakes a society as a result of class distinctions it will not remain intact, even if its members — as far as their beliefs are concerned — are Muslims.

The Quran is full of verses which inform us that the reason for the destruction of this people or that people³ was their own injustice. Yet in one place we are told, "*Your Lord is not such that He destroys a township for an injustice while its people are righteous.*" (11:117) Most of the commentators are agreed that what is meant by "an injustice" is the injustice of polytheism (*shirk*), for polytheism is one of the types of injustice: "*Polytheism is definitely a great injustice.*" (31:13) And thus

it becomes clear that what we are told is that God the Sublime and Almighty does not destroy civilisations for their disbelief and polytheism if, as far as their social rights and relations are concerned, they are just and righteous. So, this is the second reason why Islam contains its regulations about temporal rights and justice.

The Role of Justice and Social Rights in Spirituality

Thirdly, let us suppose that the worthlessness of the world is not relative and comparative. Let us suppose that the world in the view of religion is an unqualified evil. If we have such misgivings, however, still there is one thing we cannot doubt about: the reason and goal for which God's Prophets were sent to us. They came to teach a chain of pure beliefs with which to purify the souls of mankind. "*I was sent to complete the perfection of ethics*", declared the Holy Prophet. The Prophets came to encourage people to do good and to stop them from doing bad. In the view of Islam, one group of things are good and another group of things are bad, and the Prophets came to call humanity to the good and to eliminate the bad.

It is clear to all that the instructions of Islam are in three parts: beliefs (*aqā'id*); ethics (*akhlaq*); and commands (*ahkam*) regarding actions. Beliefs include belief in God and His Oneness, in the Prophets and in the rewards and punishments of the hereafter. The ethical instructions tell us, for example, to be humble, to have cautiousness of God (*taqwa*), satisfaction with God, gratitude, patience, forgiveness and kindness, to be loving, in agreement and united with others, to have pure spirits free of malicious jealousy (*hisādat*), spite, fear and miserliness, not to be unjust and malicious,

and so on. The commands of actions are also known. Some regulations are grouped under the heading of worship (*'ibādat*), which centre on the various types of formalized prayer, on fasting, ḥajj, jihad, and commanding to what is recognised-as good and prohibiting from what is rejected-as bad (*amr be m'aruf wa nahyan al-munkar*) and others. There are more which deal with inter-social relations such as the prohibitions of lying, backbiting, abusing, murder, alcohol, gambling, usury, hypocrisy and so on.

So, if we have doubts and misgivings about anything else, these aspects of the teachings of religion are perfectly clear. It is irrefutable that the point of Islam is that what it considers good is to take place and what it considers bad is not to take place.

Having established this, let us now ask ourselves a question. When the rights of the people are observed and the society is just, with no discrimination, no deprivation and no feelings amongst the people of being cheated, will pure beliefs, ethics, hearts, and actions become more prevalent in that society, and the grounds for crime, corrupt ethics and perverted beliefs decrease? Or is its opposite the unjust society the better place for the purification of the soul and the refinement of the self — the more extremism, injustice, deprivation, disagreement and conflict the better? Which of these two views is the correct one? Or is there another possibility, the possibility that the conditions of society, whatever they may be, are not at all connected to the ethics of the individual and that the reckoning of ethical matters is totally separate?

No sane person would state that the more society

becomes confused regarding justice and rights, so the ground for purity of belief and refinement of the self and for righteous actions becomes more fertile. The most that can be said is that the existence or non-existence of social justice, the observance or non-observance of people's rights, makes no difference to the ethics of the individual. The opinion of many religious people of today is that these are two separate spheres which are in no way inter-related.

However, anyone who thinks this way must be told: Bravo for your obscure perception! Bravo for your absurd way of thinking! General conditions and the existence or non-existence of social justice definitely have an effect on human behaviour, on human ethics, even on human thought and belief. These things effect all three levels; the level of thought and belief; the level of ethics and morality; and the level of behaviour and ethics.

Social Justice and Thought and Belief

Firstly, let us focus on the level of thought and belief. Whenever we turn to our literature and view the works and ideas of the great Muslim writers and poets, we notice that while many of them had become aware of great realities, had discovered sublime manifestations of Divine Wisdom (*hikmah*) and had very subtle thoughts and ideas, still at times a pollution is to be found in their thinking that leaves us amazed. We see, for example, that they have given importance to the subject of luck. The thing which of all things they have unduly sensationalised the most is luck, saying that "man himself may sleep, provided his luck is awake!" In their view,

once luck appears, all other things become worthless. Knowledge, reason, struggle, skill, ability, craftsmanship, the strength of the arm — when compared to luck, all these are nothing coming to nothing!

Thousands of verses and lines have been written by greatly famous men about luck, yet if they were to be asked the exact nature of luck, whether they could possibly define it, or whether, since they had so often mentioned it and must therefore know it well, they could produce some evidence to prove its existence or define it, not one of them could answer.

These great men have simply noticed a strange ambiguity, and from here their belief in luck was formed. What did they notice? They lived in a society and saw, on the one hand, individuals spending lifetimes in struggle and effort yet living all the while in deprivation. On the other hand, they saw that, for no apparent reason, idlers were being esteemed and were enjoying the comforts of luxury and success. What they saw were the ignoble being honoured and the reasonable being treated with contempt. What they saw was the absence of any balance between struggle, skill and expertise on the one hand and gratification, profit, and one's individual rights on the other. Because this was what they saw in their society, gradually their observations of society took the form of a kind of philosophy that can be called the "philosophy of luck". The name that they gave to all the instances of the chaos of injustice, whether they understood them or not, was the word luck; and sometimes they have extolled it like idiots. Luck, the idea and philosophy, has no source at all except in the chaos of injustice and unjust divisions within society.

Overlooking this source, there are no more than two other sources of inspiration for the idea of luck to have sprung from. One is religion, and poets have sometimes taken inspiration from verses of the Holy Quran and the traditions of the Holy Prophet and, occasionally, the traditions of the Immaculate Imams. However, throughout the whole of the Quran and the content of the Prophet's traditions and those of the Imams, a mention of luck is nowhere to be found. The other possible source of inspiration is reason, knowledge or philosophy. Yet from the earliest times whenever luck has been mentioned in such circles or books it has been discussed as being a mere superstition.

Where, then, has this extraordinary idea about luck and its amazing power arisen, for the power of luck to be perceived of as being far superior to reason, knowledge, work, effort, skill, industry, strength, and, in fact, everything else?

The basis of inspiration for this satanic thought is nothing other than the disorder of society, the system of the privileged few and deprived masses, the system of discrimination without merit. Whenever the justice of society becomes shaky, whenever merit and rights are not observed, whenever the considerations of personality and the recommendations of this party or that party are influential over and above the considerations of ability and merit, whenever this happens, ideas about luck and suchlike are bound to gain strength and popularity. And this is because luck means no one thing being a condition for any other.

What a difference there is between a person who maintains that there is a result to effort and struggle, who believes that, "*the human has nothing but what he*

strives for". (53:39), and the person who says that all efforts are futile and that nothing in life is a condition for anything else? How much difference there is between the belief that "*Verily God does not change the conditions of a people until they change their own conditions*" (13:11)⁴ and the belief in luck! This, then, is one example of how the quality of social justice has an effect on thought and belief.

Pessimism towards Providence

Again, if we look into Muslim literature, we find another example. We notice a line of thought that can be called "feelings of complaint about providence", by which is meant the currents of the creation that affect the individual's material life. What abuse providence has been subject to! It has been called a tyrant, a cruel oppressor, and each and every name that tells a story of oppression, persecution, treachery and deceit has been given to providence. And this reached the stage where providence has been maintained to have a special spite and hatred towards the good and pure.

However, the providence complained of was not the seven heavens, the time and space of creation. On the contrary, it was the social environment of the complainers themselves. Whatever they said was a reflection of their personal, inner, spiritual selves. In addition, the words of a poet reflect not only his own feelings and condition but also the feelings and condition of his era and society as a whole. When the poet looks around him and sees everywhere injustice and oppression, whether he fails to perceive the cause or whether he understands it but cannot say anything, it is quite likely that

he will vent his feelings on what he sees as "the crooked wheels of providence". As a result of these conditions, a kind of pessimism and suspicion towards the currents of creation is developed. The idea strengthens that providence is based on injustice towards the good of mankind, and that between providence and the good there exists a kind of ancient enmity and spite. In such conditions, people definitely become pessimistic. They express pessimism towards creation, and even towards the Creator.

So, one of the direct effects of the disruption of social justice is the disruption of orderly thought, accompanied by a belief in a system of chaos and in the futility of the true factors of prosperity and which appears in the form of a belief in luck, the effects of which we find even in Muslim literature. Another is a pessimism and suspicion, "having a chip on one's shoulder", towards the creation and its holy Creator. These are two effects of injustice on thought and belief.

Social Justice and Ethics

Let us now see how a prevailing social system of injustice causes ethical corruption and disturbance of the soul. Good and bad ethics, like every other thing in the world, have a cause. Neither good ethics manifest without a cause nor bad ethics. The individual's mould and nature is effective, the conditions and suggestions of the environment are effective, and one of the things that definitely has an affect in corrupting the individuals ethics and poisoning his soul is deprivation and a sense of being cheated. Malicious jealousy, spite, enmity and malevolence all begin from here.

Exceptions

Of course, there are exceptions; there are people upon whom deprivation and acts of injustice do not have these effects. Such people, however, are outstanding in that their souls are immune to such evils; the power of their faith is such that these effects are checked. Exceptional people are a level above the level of thought of general people – let us cite an example:

Imagine a family consisting of a mother and father and their children. In their household food, fruits, sweets and clothes are all divided amongst the family. The thoughts, opinions, and feelings of the children on such occasions are not the same as the thoughts, opinions and feelings of the parents. They are not on one level, they are on two levels.

Firstly, the feelings that the children have towards one another: whenever one of the children sees that his share of the food, fruits, sweets, or clothes is less than that of another, he will become upset, will sulk, will cry, and, because he will have the sense of being deprived and of being subject to injustice, he will form the intention to take revenge. Thus, the parents who want their children to be happy and healthy in body and in soul, find it necessary to refrain from all kinds of discrimination right from the beginning. Discrimination is the seed of conflict, the seed of malicious jealousy, the seed of revenge. Discrimination becomes the cause both of pressure, torment and unhappiness in the deprived child's soul, and of the favourite child becoming selfish, reliant on others, weak-willed, quick to take offense, and, in a word, spoilt. Most parents, when their children become physically unwell, refer them to a

doctor; while they pay little attention to the health and soundness of their children's souls. These they count as insignificant, while really the importance of spiritual health is no less than the health of the body; in fact, it is infinitely more.

My point is that, because children think on one level, the deprivation of one in relation to another has a bad effect on them. The parents, however, whose thought and reason is on a higher level, think in a different way and have a special type of kindness. They do not suffer these types of deprivation. Whether they receive less food, or less fruit or fewer sweets than their children, or none at all, they do not become unhappy, they do not become rankled.

It is exactly the same as this in society. Exceptional individuals, who are like the parents of the nation, are not effected by being deprived. In conditions of deprivation and injustice they are exactly like those parents who want the best for their children; wanting what is best for their nation.

The Holy Prophet, at the battle of Ohud, when his enemies had thrown a rock at his blessed forehead and had broken his tooth, raised his hands in supplication saying: *"Oh God; Guide my people (and forgive them) for truly they are ignorant."*

Similarly, when speaking about the orchard Fadak, Ali (a.s.) said: *"A group were greedy for it and another group were liberal with it – what am I to do with Fadak or (property) other than Fadak – when tomorrow the sign of the self is a grave; its remains disintegrating in its darkness."*

Effects of Discrimination on Ethics

These, then, are exceptional individuals; while the other individuals who make up the nations of mankind are like the children of the family. Those of them who are deprived are subject to pressure and torment in their souls and become spiteful and vengeful, while the souls of the pampered few from amongst them become spoilt, selfish, indifferent, impatient, idle, extravagant and wasteful. Malicious jealousy, spite, vengefulness, enmity and hatred are developed amongst one class, while amongst the other indifference to work, extravagance, and wastefulness. So we can easily see the general conditions that appear amongst the people as an effect of injustice.

There is a famous supplication (*du'ā*) of the Prophet which begins with this line: *"O God; grant us a fear of You that will intervene between us and disobedience of You."*

Islamic supplications are amongst the best kinds of ethical and spiritual teachings. What great spiritual and social subtleties have been expressed in the language of the supplication! In this supplication we find the line: *"And direct our revenge towards those who were unjust to us."* This phrase has a subtle point which needs explaining. The Holy Prophet did not ask God to take revenge from our oppressors, he asked God to direct our revenge towards the people who have actually oppressed us.

The word revenge (*thār*) or (*tha-ar*) has the meaning here of desire for revenge, the sense of vengeance. The Holy Prophet is saying that as an effect of being the object of injustice our souls are subject to pressure and

torment, and desire revenge. Whenever our souls enter this condition — wherever, whenever, and however it occurs — its effects will also occur. It is like the spark of a fire that is going to burst into flame. The psychologists and psychiatrists of today have ascertained that feelings of spite and enmity, once they appear in a person's soul, can possibly be temporarily suppressed and relegated to the depths of the soul and be forgotten as far as the consciousness is concerned, but in reality they cannot be completely done away with; they remain active in the depths of the soul, unknown to the external consciousness, until they find a way to come to the surface and manifest themselves. The Holy Prophet is asking God for that spark, which is in our hearts and which will one day burst into flames, not to burn others; if it is going to burn anyone let it burn those who treated us unjustly and who were the cause of the spark in the first place. If a system is unjust to a person and it is such that, with his reason and will, he consciously takes revenge, he doesn't revenge himself on another individual. If a crime is committed by the butcher, the punishment is not carried out on the baker. When, however, a person follows not his free reason but those feelings relegated to the depths of his soul, he does not take into account such considerations.

The Holy Prophet was asking God to make us such that our revenge and spite be just enough for us to smite our enemy; for a heart of thorns and a wild desire for revenge not to appear within us as a result of injustice and deprivation that in turn would torment and put pressure on our souls, making us proud, head-strong, malicious and unjust. He was asking God not to make

us such that we take pleasure in being unjust and in trampling the rights of other people.

Just Ethics in a Just Society

Superb ethics consists of just and balanced ethics. It is both obvious and certain that if a society is not just and well-balanced, if social organisation and social regulations and social rights are not just and well-balanced, the ethics of the individual will also remain unjust and unbalanced. The effects of an unjust society are not only to be found amongst the common people who are deprived but also amongst the privileged class who allocate most of God's blessings for themselves. The common people are subject to pressure and become nervous, while the others manifest idleness, dependence on others, thanklessness, indifference and extravagance.

About this special class, in his famous order to Malik ibne Ashtar, Ali (a.s.) writes that: For a governor, no one is more extravagant in times of ease, less help in times of difficulty, more hateful of equity and justice, more expectful, ungrateful and unforgiving, and less enduring in emergencies than this special class, and that the axis of religion and the real central-point of Muslims and the source of success over the enemy is the general population; and that Malik's attention should always be towards the common class, not towards the privileged few.

How well Ali (a.s.) has explained the mentality of the privileged class who are the unduly favoured of society!

There is a tradition from the Holy Prophet who said: *'Be equal, your hearts will be equal.'* Meaning that we

are to be fair and just, and that there should be no differences or discrimination amongst us, in order for our hearts to become close and on the same level. From this we realise that if there is an unjust rift in responsibilities and the blessings of God, there will also exist a gap between our hearts, and we will not be able to be compassionate with one another or think along the same lines or be united on one front.

The Holy Quran tells us: *“And hold fast to the rope of God together and do not become disunited, and bear in mind God’s favour to you when you were (deadly, spiteful) enemies and He joined your hearts in affection, that by His blessing (of Islam) you became brothers.”* (3:102)

As is perfectly clear, the content of this verse is about the unity that Islam brings to mankind.

The Secret of Islam’s Success

If Islam only had the one ethical aspect like some ethical school the aim of which is only to give ethical suggestions, advices and admonitions, and itself only deal with sermons and admonitions and had nothing to do with forming and organising society, it would have been impossible for it to build the new society, united both in thought and in heart, that was to change the course of history.

There is no doubt that which united the Muslims’ hearts was the belief and religiousness of Islam. The Holy Prophet introduced the greatest cause of this unity which was unity of belief; he brought the people under the standard of *la ilaha illallah* (There is no god except God). But he did not content himself only

with faith and belief. He was also attentive to the obstacles to unity. He removed those barriers, those difficulties — the numerous causes of the disunity of people's hearts, the causes of spite, malicious jealousy, and desire for vengeance, those discriminations in the matter of social and individual rights. And when the circumstances are appropriate and these barriers are no more, when there is faith and belief and no unfair discrimination; the effect of all this, which is unity and brotherly love and cooperation, itself comes into being automatically. And this it cannot do if the appropriate circumstances exist but the barriers also exist, or if the barriers do not exist but neither do the appropriate circumstances.

So it must not be thought that Islam united the people solely through introducing a single belief. No. In addition, it also removed the barriers of unfair discrimination and social rifts and differences. If it is said, *“Come to an expression equal between us and you: that we worship only one God and associate nothing (in belief or worship) with Him.”* (3:64), meaning that we should come towards a belief which is the same to all of us in that it is good, in that it is the truth and beneficial, so it is followed by *“and that some of us do not take some (others) as Lords other than God”*, and equality is also proposed.

The Holy Prophet on his farewell hajj told us: *“O people! Truly your Lord is One and truly your father is one; all of you are from Adam. And Adam is from earth. Arabs are not superior to non-Arabs, (there is no superiority) except by (measure of) one's having care and virtue before God (taqwa).”* Superiority is only, only

attained by *Taqwa*. Then the Prophet () added: "*Have I propagated?*"

"Yes", his listeners replied.

"*Then the present must propagate to the absent.*" the Prophet told them.

The Effect of Justice on General Behaviour

So now we can take it for granted that the existence or non-existence of justice also has an effect on behaviour, because, when one's thought, belief and ethics are affected, one's actions will definitely be affected as well. The Quran tells us, "*Say: everyone acts according to his personality.*" (17:84) Each person acts according to his thought, his belief, the state of his or her soul, the root of all human actions lies in the human's soul.

Besides social injustice, unfair differences, discrimination and the sense of being cheated and deprived having the effects that they do, which we have mentioned, the condition of poverty and need, whatever it is caused by — whether by injustice or something other than injustice — is itself amongst the motivations of corruption. And if it is coupled with the feeling of being cheated and deprived, it becomes worse. And if it is coupled with a grudge caused by the luxury of certain groups, it becomes even worse. Then it will be said:

*The truth I do declare
I will never see the day
I sit outside and stare
while rivals feast and play.*

This feeling of "I will never see the day" becomes the cause of theft, of taking bribes, of embezzlement of public wealth, of sins, of fraud, of deceit and trickery

in business, of people stealing, taking bribes, overcharging and underpaying, and all for the sake of climbing a social class and so on.

Ali (a.s.) spoke about poverty to his dear son Muhammad ibn Hanafiyah, saying: *‘O dear son! I fear for you poverty, seek refuge with God from it. Truly it is a deficiency in religion, the frightener of reason, the cause of hatred.’*

Firstly, what does it mean *“A deficiency in religion”*? Is poverty a sin? No, poverty is not a sin, but it quickly delivers those who do not have firm faith to sin. Many are the sins that arise from poverty and need. Thus the Holy Prophet has said: *“Poverty is near to being disbelief.”* Poverty can make a sinner of the human soul and weaken human resolution.

Another effect of poverty is that it is *“the frightener of human reason and common sense (‘aql).”* Reason and thought lose their equilibrium as the effect of poverty, need, and the non-existence of the means of life. In such circumstances the human can no longer think well or draw proper conclusions. In the same way that disasters produce anxiety, so does the condition of poverty and need.

Of course, there are again exceptions who are not this way, events do not affect them, their tragedies and disasters do not affect them this way, but these exceptions are few.

The third effect of poverty is that, *“it is the cause of hatred”*, i.e. the cause of spiritual distress and the ranking of the human being. Or perhaps what is meant is that the poverty-stricken will hate other people, considering them responsible for his own poverty.

Islam, then, with its regulations ensuring the firm establishment of social justice and the adherence to social and individual rights, is not a religion of self-contradiction and paradox. It simply realises that these regulations and their observance are absolutely necessary for the blossoming of mankind. A blossoming which it intends to be spiritual and ethical and, partly as a result and partly as a condition, material.

Footnotes:

1. It is interesting to reflect on this point in the light of the near-religionless societies of the west. There, despite "official" claims to advanced humanity and the observance of principles and rights, we see that the general tendency is to value material comforts and pleasures to the almost total seclusion of beliefs, principles, rights and all the other human values. Transferring this...

Murteza Mutahhari

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IN ISLAM
AND IN THE WESTERN WORLD**

**Translated and Edited with an Introduction by:
*Muhammad Khurshid Ali***

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Selected and with a Foreword by

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