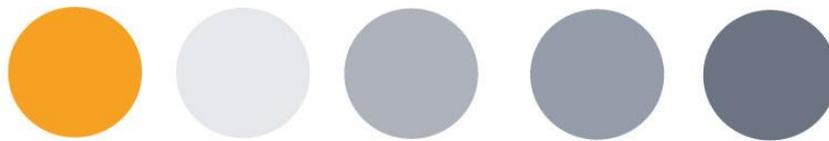


FOUNDED BY QUAID-I-AZAM MOHAMMAD ALI JINNAH

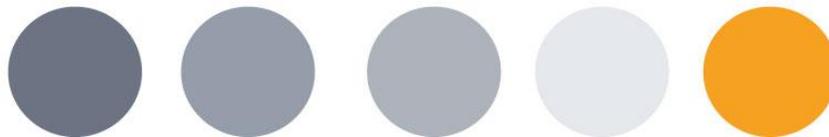
DAWN

[Year-2013]



FRIDAY

features



Note: The CSS Point is not responsible of any fact/information mentioned in this booklet. This Booklet is compilation of Editorials from DAWN Newspapers.

Main source: <http://www.dawn.com>

This Booklet is Compiled By: Mr. Ali Sikander

Copyright © All Rights are reserved to DAWN.COM



THE CSS POINT
Yes We Can Do It!

www.thecsspoint.com
www.facebook.com/thecsspointOfficial

Special Thanks to

Mr. Ali Sikander

Practice of patience

By Ahmad Raza

THERE come moments in our lives when we feel completely hopeless and helpless. But the Quran shows us the technique to manage such personal states of despair.

The Holy Book has termed this technique sabr or patience. Invariably, God expects human beings not to be impatient. When faced with turmoil and pain, He insists that we should seek help from prayer and patience. As it is mentioned in the Quran, the Almighty is with those who hold on to the practice of patience. Those who practice sabr become satisfied.

Patience can be of multiple types, but two types are very significant. The first is concerned with the physical and outward dimension of our existence. It may be connected with some physical illness, some financial and monetary crunch or some other material difficulties being faced by a person.

The Quran has narrated the incident of Prophet Ayub, wherein he was suffering from an incurable physical illness. The Holy Book has lauded the patience of the prophet, and declared him as one of the “men of purity and patience”, who achieve proximity to God through their acts of piety and patience.

In his acute physical state of pain and suffering, the prophet Ayub cried out to God for His help and mercy. The Almighty communicated to Ayub that he should hit the earth below his feet, and that he would find water pure and curative in nature gushing forth in the form of a spring. Ayub bathed in that healing, therapeutic water and was cured of his illness.

The second form of patience is connected to the emotional and psychological suffering of a person. It may be caused by several intangible sources within the life of a person. One significant cause of emotional depression is betrayal. When a person is betrayed by one’s friend, relative, or co-worker, one is shattered and cannot find a way forward. One experiences an inner darkness. One feels abandoned and lost. One’s self-confidence is badly shaken due to the betrayal by near and dear ones.

Backbiting is another prevalent source of psychological suffering. It becomes more painful when backbiting becomes a favoured practice, and people damage each other emotionally by indulging in backbiting. The Quran has symbolically compared backbiting to “eating the flesh of one’s brother” to indicate the severity of this moral defect.

The backbiter creates psychological pain and suffering in families, in organisations and in

societies. Backbiting leads to a sheer waste of energy. Valuable time is wasted by the backbiter, which could have been utilised in constructive pursuits.

This clearly shows that backbiters are in need of professional help from clinical psychologists so that they can experience true happiness and satisfaction and get rid of their destructive habit.

Hypocrites (munafiqun, in the language of the Quran) also cause a lot of disruption and pain in society. Instead of bringing people together and working to create harmony, hypocrites perpetually create divides. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) has said that a hypocrite is recognised by his habitual lying and untrustworthiness.

The hallmark of a hypocrite is the creation of doubts and the divisive use of language. By using his or her eloquence or scepticism, a hypocrite will create disharmony and chaos in the social order. The masked activity of the hypocrite unleashes negative forces in collective and organisational settings. This negativity causes despair and despondency amongst the members of society, and hence leads to their eventual collective failure. Those who are two-faced, in fact, have no real face.

Yet by cultivating the habit of patience, one can manage emotional stress and overcome physical suffering. Patience can also help an individual deal with the moral ills identified in this article. Patience is cultivated by building a thorough and committed personality, which helps one forgive and overlook weaknesses in others.

Such a person is open to learning and understands behaviour in different contexts. He or she is candid, generous and forgiving. Forgiveness is the key which opens the door to the city of patience.

In his famed book *Kashf al Mahjub*, Syed Ali Hujveri has reported an interesting incident in this regard involving the mystic Junaid Baghdadi.

One night when Junaid was busy offering his midnight prayer, a burglar broke into his house and stole some cloth. Junaid became aware of the presence of the thief, but did not intervene. The thief fled from the house.

The next morning, the thief was selling the same cloth in the market when Junaid approached him and insisted on buying back his stolen cloth. The thief recognised the mystic and felt repentant for his act of stealing. He sought the forgiveness of the great mystic. He was forgiven and thereafter, the thief joined Junaid's circle and led a life of purity and patience.

The writer is a social scientist with an interest in religion.

Sectarian scourge

By Khalid Zaheer

SECTS are created when people begin to develop differences in beliefs and practices and these become so strong as to demand distinct identities.

Whenever members of a religious group hold their views simply because their religious leaders hold them and no evidence is demanded in support of them, a religious sect has appeared.

The Quran condemns sectarianism in strong words. God tells the Prophet (PBUH) “As for those who have created schisms in their order, and formed different sects, you have no concern with them. Their affair is with God. He will tell them the truth of what they were doing” (6:159). In God’s eyes, it is a crime to be involved in sectarianism. He urges all Muslims to “Hold on firmly together to the rope of God, and be not divided among yourselves. ...” (3:103). He enjoins Muslims to come together as brothers.

Sectarianism has several causes, some of the more prominent of which are mentioned in the Quran. The main reason seems to be extreme attachment to religious personalities. Such individuals are revered to such an extent that whatever they believed in, whatever they said or did, is often considered to be the final word.

Asking questions of an elder who professes to be a religious individual may be tantamount to sacrilege. When people follow their own religious leaders to such extremes, they do not listen to any other point of view, and their perspective is likely to be clouded by emotions.

Such a phenomenon is not restricted to Muslims only. When God sent his messengers one after the other, essentially carrying the same message, the idea was that people would accept those messengers too who came later. God made some messengers different, or superior, to others in some ways.

As a consequence, people who followed these messengers were so impressed with them that they refused to follow any others. They disputed and fought with each other, despite the fact that each messenger had brought the same message. The fact was they had become completely besotted with the personality of the messenger whom they accepted first, and their own ego thereafter played a role in not allowing them to listen to any other message.

Another main reason for sectarianism to flourish is exaggeration. People exaggerate the virtues

of their beliefs and practices, and downplay and even badmouth other beliefs to the extent that strong prejudices for and against are created and no one is ready to listen to and reflect on an alternative point of view. God requires people to "... not exaggerate in your religious matters unjustifiably, and follow not the wishes of a people who had erred before, and led many others astray. ..." (5:77)

Sectarianism is carried so far that people begin to declare those who differ from them kafir, and at times even begin to believe that killing them is a religious deed. This is the biggest crime in Islam, for it is not only murder, but it is murder in the name of Islam, and those who commit this crime also commit the audacity to take upon themselves the task that belongs to God only.

The solution to sectarianism lies in taking a rational view of what religious people say, always searching for the truth, and letting go of what may or may not have happened in the past. The Quran says: "Those were the people who have passed away, theirs the reward for what they did, as yours will be for what you do. You will not be questioned about their deeds" (2:134).

The Quran also asks us not to force our views on others. "There is no compulsion in matters of faith. ..." (2:256). Others should not be coerced, directly or indirectly, into accepting a belief or a practice to which their hearts and minds do not relate.

When we speak about others, we should not use abusive or insulting language: "Do not revile those who invoke others apart from God. ..." (6:108).

If all sects decide that all are Muslims, despite their minor differences, and vow to discuss their views politely and with mutual respect, sectarianism may well be eliminated altogether.

Ironically, one of the important reasons proposed to justify sectarianism is a hadith which says that the Muslim ummah shall be divided into 73 sects, all except one of which are doomed. The sect promised salvation shall be the one that will follow the Prophet and his companions.

Many sects present this hadith to claim they are the ones who have been promised salvation. In truth, the hadith is condemning the same evil that the Quran condemned: sectarianism. The only group of Muslims who were free from even a shadow of sectarianism were the companions of the Prophet. They were known by no other name except Muslims.

The writer is a religious scholar. **Importance of reading**

By Amin Valliani

THE first command of Allah is about reading (96:1). Generally, reading means to make sense of a written text.

However, at the time of the revelation, there was no written text in sight. This gives us an idea that reading is not limited to written, printed or electronic text, but includes unwritten text spread all around.

The universe itself is a gigantic, cosmic book having divine signs to be read, reflected on, ruminated and comprehended. One can also read the human face or natural phenomenon appearing in time and space. This leads one to discover possible future trends and happenings.

Over the last many centuries, the sedulous reading of the unwritten text in nature has enabled humans to fathom the innermost mysteries of the natural world. This has also promoted many new branches of science.

The Holy Quran exalts those who have the ability to read. They are considered the cream of society having an additional responsibility on their shoulders to respond to the queries of those who do not know (10:94). For they know and comprehend matters more than others.

The Quran goes a step further, showing the importance of reading in the hereafter. It says that on the Day of Judgement people will be asked “Read your book. You yourself are sufficient as a reckoner on this day” (17:14). If a person does not know how to ‘read’ in this world, will they be able to read their account in the hereafter? This invites Muslims to acquire the ability of reading as part of the preparation for the ultimate accountability in the hereafter.

History offers evidence that the Holy Prophet (PBUH) used even the services of war captives of the Battle of Badar to make Muslims learn reading and writing as a condition to secure their release.

One of the fundamental aspects of Islam is the special emphasis on knowledge, and reading forms one of the basic means of gaining knowledge. The Prophet encouraged Muslims to read the Quran. In addition to its divine origin, the Quran has remained accessible in all ages; its reading invites believers’ reflection. It lights the path of spiritual development, enables one to differentiate between right and wrong. It develops forward thinking, piety and awareness of the present, past and future to meet any exigency. Believers become more conscious of the purpose of their life and accountability in the hereafter.

Later, many new books were written in the fields of exegesis, hadith, history, philosophy and

literature etc. The Muslims were enthusiastic in reading them and their intellectual development owes much to their reading and reflection.

The Quran itself encourages believers to read the Holy Book as it is the source of inspiration, spirituality and guidance. Following its revelation, it was accessible to every Muslim. Other branches of knowledge emerged later but were based on the Quran.

In every society, different forces — positive and negative — work against each other. In order to make society move in the right direction, development of progressive or reformatory material and reading thereof changes people's minds. It directs them towards development and motivates them to be ethical and conscious of others' feelings, contrary to the corrosive material that pollutes people's minds.

For example in pre-Islamic Makkan society, there was a poetic genre called hiju (satire) which contained slanderous propaganda against an enemy person or tribe, triggering the fire of war in society. The Prophet disliked such literature which caused rancour in society.

No nation can ever develop without inculcating the reading habit in its young ones. Reading complements and supplements the development process. A less-read person is often less capable of forward thinking, therefore, he cannot be an active participant in the development of his or her family, society or country. An educated and well-read person is an asset for the nation and can generate ideas for the solution of problems.

It is very unfortunate that we are witnessing the dying culture of reading in our society. People spend their leisure time in gossip, involving themselves in activities of questionable benefit, even though reading has vast benefits. A good book has the capability to change a person's outlook, personality and habits. A well-read person usually remains serious in dealing with society and its issues.

Our educational institutions need to take some serious steps to inculcate the reading habit at the school and college levels. Students are sometimes forced to read their course books to get good results in examinations, but many rely on 'guess papers'. Most students are not inclined to read any literature beyond their course books.

The young need to be motivated through incentives to read good books along with their course books and also draw messages for practical application. The reading of good books impacts students all through their lives.

The writer is an educationist who has written extensively on Islam. Hostility to Vaccine by Khalid

Zaheer

SOME people in our country are campaigning against polio vaccination on the basis of apparently religious reasons. It is important, therefore, that the reasons they are presenting are analysed on religious grounds to see if they are valid.

Two reasons are often presented: the campaign is a conspiracy of the non-Muslim world against Muslims to check their population growth by making their future generations impotent and infertile. It is said that Dr Shakeel Afridi's fake hepatitis campaign has lent further credence to this theory.

The other religious argument presented is that the disability of polio-stricken children is ordained by God as a test for a Muslim, one that he should face with patience.

Both arguments have apparent merits for gullible followers of religious leaders who the former rely on completely for spiritual guidance. Both should therefore receive a proper response if the anti-polio campaign is to succeed in our country.

As far as the conspiracy theory goes, the Holy Quran has suggested a clear solution to it which all believing Muslims must follow.

While talking about rumours spread by mischief-mongers during the time of the Prophet (PBUH), the Quran suggested this strategy: "Whenever these people receive information regarding peace or threat, they spread it across. Had they presented it before the Messenger and the ones in authority among them, those who have the ability to get to the truth of the matter would have verified it. ..." (4:83).

In other words, the Quran is suggesting that if there is disturbing information circulating in society relevant to collective matters, it must be verified by the rulers through experts in the field.

That is exactly what should be done in response to the apprehensions that are being expressed regarding the polio vaccination.

A team of experts in the field of medicine should be appointed by the government to look into the question of fake vaccination campaigns. To make the exercise credible, the government should have at least one member in the inquiry committee who enjoys the confidence of the clergy.

And it should be made known to everyone that the task is being done exactly in accordance with Quranic guidance. Once the report of the commission is made public, every Pakistani shall be bound to follow the decision of the government which will decide on the matter in light of the report.

As for the reason that this life is a trial and therefore we must face its difficulties as such, the truth is that the trial does not require us to be casual about our well-being and security. God expects us to do our bit as best as we can to protect ourselves from the dangers to our life and health and then trust Him. The Prophet said to a person who did not tie his camel, leaving it in God's care: "Tie it and then trust God."

The Quran mentions the fact that God has arranged for certain elements to cure diseases in nature. If polio is a threat to the healthy body, God desires that we should benefit from all scientific discoveries human beings have made to counter it. Doing so will very much be consistent with the will of God.

It also needs to be emphasised that the Quran makes it binding on the believer to obey the rulers. "Believers, obey God, obey the Messenger, and those in authority among you. ..." (4:59).

Religious leaders should not be allowed any authority to block a campaign which is approved by parliament and implemented by the executive. Parliament legislates on the basis of the Islamic principle of consultation (42:38). The executive implements the decisions on the basis of the authority they enjoy from God mentioned in 4:59.

God-fearing Muslims are under obligation to obey both divine rulings. If they have to say anything against the decision of parliament and the executive, they can influence parliament by presenting their arguments or have recourse to the judiciary which would satisfy the condition of the second part of 4:59, which says "...If you dispute in any matter, then refer it back to God and His Messenger. ..."

The result of the phenomenon of blind following of scholars in religious matters is that numerous mini-states within the state have emerged. The common man follows his religious leaders instead of the state authority whenever he is convinced that the matter under consideration is religious in nature and the state authority should have no say in deciding about what God and His Messenger have already decided.

The real solution to the problems like the one we are facing in the form of challenge to the polio vaccination drive lies in establishing the state's authority over all its citizens.

The writer is a religious scholar.

<http://www.dawn.com/news/1075241/hostility-to-vaccine> **The proactive approach**

By Muhammad Ali Musofer

CHALLENGES are viewed as an integral part of individual and collective life. However, it is pertinent to examine how emerging challenges are responded to in society.

Generally, proactive and reactive approaches have been observed when responding to situations encountered by an individual or society. These approaches have different implications for society.

The proactive/thinking approach encourages taking responsibility for one's life or for society. Proactive people/societies recognise they are responsible for facing challenges to improve their situation and don't just sit around blaming external forces for the situation.

Proactive people/societies understand their strengths as well as their shortcomings. They celebrate their strengths and work to improve their shortcomings. They develop the insight to anticipate future challenges and devise doable strategies to deal with them wisely.

On the other hand, reactive thinking is often affected by external forces or the physical environment. Reactive individuals or societies react only when crises approach. Avoiding taking responsibility for the situation, the reactive approach sometimes leads towards blaming others for the challenges. At times, reactive people believe that conspiracies are hatched against them. They usually fail to understand their strengths and weaknesses. They find external sources to blame for their behaviour.

Like many other faiths, Islam stresses significantly on the importance of proactive thinking and action in order to respond to societal issues creatively. The Holy Quran extends lucid guidelines for taking responsibility for worldly and spiritual success. For instance, it is said "And there is not for man except that [good] for which he strives" (53:39).

Likewise, a nation's transformation depends on its social awareness and struggle for improvement, as the Quran says, "...God does not change the condition of [a] people until they change what is in themselves. ..." (13:11).

The life of the Prophet (PBUH) is the best example of how to be a proactive individual by taking social/moral responsibility. This proactive approach on the part of the Prophet was not on specific occasions or specific days. He conducted himself in such a way throughout his life.

The Holy Prophet dedicated his life to reflect on and seek solutions to the issues and challenges of the society he lived in. He actively participated in addressing the social issues confronting society by implementing the social and ethical principles of Islam.

Hence, there are ample examples in the teachings of Islam that stress on proactive thinking and action to develop a better society.

A quick look at the state of the Muslim world reveals that many Muslim societies, like Pakistan, are facing various internal and external challenges. The societies have shown considerable resilience to the challenges; however, it is observed that many of the persisting issues are the product of a reactionary approach to emerging challenges.

For example, in Pakistan issues like rampant violence, falling educational standards, the power crisis etc., have been neglected, which has created an emergency-like situation in the country.

It is observed that at times external forces are viewed as being solely responsible for the daunting challenges and little responsibility is taken to respond to the issues seriously. In spite of even an emergency-like situation little consensus is found on pressing issues. Conspiracies are seen behind every positive or negative event in the country.

In this scenario, there is a dire need to shift the frame of reference. Changing the reactionary culture in society requires educating people about how to take responsibility in order to develop society positively. In this regard, serious steps need to be taken at multiple levels such as through education, the media and the interpretation of faith.

Education is viewed as a powerful tool to reshape a society's thinking. To cultivate the culture of proactive thinking and approach, the education system needs to be reviewed in terms of policy, curriculum, teaching and learning in the classroom.

Students need to be provided opportunities to be engaged in the process of reflection in order to make them understand the challenges of society. The process of teaching-learning needs to be transformed from rote learning to action-based learning. Students need to be involved in different projects to instruct them about how to be engaged in solving the issues of society by taking responsibility.

The role of the media cannot be overlooked in educating the masses. In Pakistan, the media sometimes creates hype by focusing on conspiracy theories. In this regard the media needs self-reflection about how it can educate and motivate the masses to take responsibility in order to

respond to the challenges of society actively.

The media needs to focus on the real issues of society and educate the people on how they can contribute to society. Along with the challenges, positive activities need to be highlighted to provide examples of good practices in society.

Furthermore, religion as a strong social institution can play a vital role in shaping the attitude of people in society. In this regard there is a need to interpret faith so that it can help people mould their attitudes so that they get involved in the development of society as a religious obligation.

In sum, proactive thinking is an important approach to respond to societal challenges actively. The teachings of Islam stress on accepting responsibility for personal and social development.

There is a need to promote proactive thinking in Muslim societies like Pakistan. In this regard, social institutions such as education, media and religion need to play a significant role to inculcate the culture of proactive thinking.

The writer is an educator. **The true essence**

BOTH individually and collectively, we are often troubled by the question of how Muslim societies have developed into some of the most degraded and brutalized societies in the world.

They wage war not only on others but on each other, kill and rape their own and perpetrate horrendous crimes, ironically, in the name of Islam. They murder in the name of a book, yet hold the reading of books as an offence. They take lives; destroy wealth and dishonor men, women and children with impunity, in the name of a religion and the Holy Prophet (PBUH) who taught that tolerance, peace, mercy and forgiveness were best loved by God.

They wave the Holy Quran to show they are doing all of this to protect Islam, and they quote from the Sharia to prove they are justified. Even those who may not be militants abide by a set of rules that at times defy justice and fairness. So-called religious scholars offer rigid interpretations that differ from each other, and lay the blame for all the woes befalling Muslims on American and Jewish conspiracies (as well as on each other).

As this goes on, the world moves ahead, making quantum leaps in its knowledge and control of material and natural sciences. No one bothers to remember that Muslim scientists had laid the foundation of modern-day mathematics, physics and astronomy through their reasoning and logic. What happened? Somewhere along the way, Muslims lost the true message of Islam. The true message, enshrined in repeated injunctions to believers in the Quran to observe and reflect,

to read and to listen, has been set aside in favour of blind beliefs, senseless actions and baseless prejudices.

Where Islam taught forbearance, many Muslims developed grudges and enmity; where it called for fairness and justice, Muslims became the epitome of oppression and injustice against those they deemed of lower rank; where it asked for tolerance and temperance, Muslims became consumed with bigotry and fanaticism, and where Islam would spread its message through love and kindness, Muslims do it with hatred and violence. Many Muslims, indeed, have become the very antithesis of Islam. Today, a large number of Muslims have interpreted the Quran and Sunnah using beliefs that appear to justify many of the actions of the Taliban and people of their ilk around the globe. These interpretations have caused much misery to millions, often leading many to question the very basis of religion.

A few of the most damaging interpretations include: jihad means killing those that any group of Muslims perceives to be enemies of Islam, and any individual or group can take up arms against such a perceived enemy; women are only half as intelligent (and of value) as men and their evidence is half that of a man; anyone who is accused of saying or writing against Islam or the Prophet deserves death; anyone who leaves Islam also deserves death; the punishment for adultery is stoning to death; all education other than rote reading of the Quran is unIslamic; all `hadith` are to be believed and God wants Muslims to conquer and attain their past glory.

Some of these supposed injunctions were relevant for a certain group of people during a certain period of time, some for a specific issue. Most unfortunately have been so distorted and misunderstood outside of their wider context that they now form part of the national laws of some countries, including Pakistan.

They are widely and openly used to justify the smallest or the most terrible of crimes, and those who dare speak of even the possibility of revisiting their understanding and implementation are immediately suspected of blasphemy and of being anti-Islam. As one journalist put it, Pakistan is in a state of religious terrorism. It is not only non-Muslims but thinking Muslims, too, who find the country's air highly oppressive to breathe.

For those of us who are Muslims still despite the efforts of some of our fellow Muslims to turn us away from Islam, the recourse is to revert to the two true and basic Islamic sources: the Quran and Sunnah. We need to read the Quran with understanding of each verse, and with an aim to arrive at an answer to our questions.

As we reflect on the verses and the more objective interpretations (tafseers), we should keep our own logic and analytic powers alive, and where we find these at odds with what we read, we

should find learned scholars to interact with.

Non-Muslims, too, would benefit from such readings.

Equally important for us is to find ways of disregarding religious differences whether among Muslim sects, or among religions, and stand up to prejudiced and bigoted statements from and actions of so-called religious personalities. We should be able to pray in each other`s mosques and encourage people of other religions to visit mosques to reduce the sense of fear that has developed around them.

We should be able to denounce killers, whoever they are, and raise our voices against oppression, wherever it exists.

Above all, the ordinary Muslim should shed fear and awe of the scholar, and be ready to question him, politely, with a sincere desire to achieve understanding of the truth.

One of the great scholars of contemporary times, Maulana Amin Ehsan Islahi, who has written the excellent Taddabur-iQuran, opening a whole new vista of Quranic understanding, once said: `There is no blessing greater for a human being than the true religion, and no evil greater than a false religion.` • The

writer is a freelance contributor.

http://epaper.dawn.com/DetailImage.p...2_2013_006_011

The value of good deeds

HUMAN life is mortal. However, it can be made immortal by performing lasting good deeds.

According to the Quran, life on earth has three phases. Allah says that it is “He Who created you in (a state of) weakness, then gave you strength after weakness, then after strength, gave you weakness and grey hair. ...” (30:54).

The first phase is of weakness. It starts immediately after birth and is called infancy. The infant grows into childhood and then enters the early teenage years. These stages are characterised by naivety, innocence, playfulness and lack of understanding.

Further, during these periods, a person is usually free from all encumbrances. He or she does not share any major family responsibility, while no religious or national duties are obligatory.

Almost totally dependent upon the family for food, clothes and all other basic necessities, a child

needs specific training and an enabling environment in the tender years to grow and learn the art of living to become a responsible citizen. This is a formative phase when a person needs attention from seniors to strengthen his body, develop his mind and spirit in order to shoulder responsibilities in the next phase.

Education starts from the moment a child is born, and continues throughout his life. It does not stop as a person moves from one phase to another.

The second phase starts when a person enters adolescence and subsequently becomes an adult. He also comes under obligation to perform various religious acts to win the favours of the Almighty.

It is an active part of life where the person takes charge of his affairs. This is one of the most delicate phases of life when peer pressure is strong. Most young people want to be like others of the same age group. If the peer circle is good, the person would be on the right path; conversely, a misguided peer circle can derail one from the right course.

In most cases, a person visualises his future, selects his profession, starts earning and then enters into marriage. This is the phase characterised by overwhelming energy, vigour and independence. It also makes a person aspire to goals and ambitions with planning and struggle. Man leads a busy life and becomes answerable for whatever he does.

Most people in this phase take their health for granted or are captivated by material considerations, forgetting the eternal. They need to be reminded that overindulgence in material things accelerates entropy. It causes restlessness and alienation from one's actual life goals.

This phase may consist of 15 to 20 years; following this starts the gradual decline. As time goes by health shows signs of weakness, hair turns grey, eyesight becomes weak and the voice quavers. This is the final phase characterised by all kinds of weaknesses. Generally in old age, a person realises that life is a bubble that can burst anytime.

The human body in advanced age is beset with all kinds of frailties; loss of strength, worsening health and onset of disease become the order of the day and the person ultimately depends on others' help.

Life is short and active life is even shorter. But indeed it is a great gift from the Almighty. Life provides many opportunities to leave a positive impression on society. One can enhance one's value in society by performing good deeds with eternal blessings or conversely, devalue oneself by breaking others' hearts.

A person is mainly answerable for whatever act he or she has done intentionally in waking condition, as the famous hadith of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) says, “Deeds are the result of the intention”. All acts are to be judged in accordance with conscious intentions.

Islam places great emphasis on good deeds. Certain deeds and services continue to benefit humanity and these acts make a person immortal. According to the Quran “... (long-lasting) good deeds are better with your Lord. ...” (19:76).

In every period of history, Muslims have contributed to their societies by establishing a number of welfare institutions to benefit society. We have examples of companions of the Holy Prophet visiting far-flung areas to serve people of their time, Sufis providing succour to the masses and scholars writing books on eternal values.

They have lit up their times like beacons in the night. They have given us the message that one can achieve immortality through living ethically, rationally and by rendering lasting service. Service in the welfare of others is the best way of achieving immortality.

Similarly, as per a saying of the Prophet, “When a person dies, his deeds come to end, except for three things — sadaqah jariyah (ceaseless charity), knowledge which is beneficial and virtuous descendants who pray for him [for the deceased]” (Muslim, Book 13, Hadith 8).

The essence of the above-mentioned hadith clearly indicates that a mortal can become immortal through his selfless lasting services. The field of service is vast and wide, but the best of all is to leave a legacy of beneficial and virtuous descendants in the world, who become a source of salvation for parents and also assets for society.

We are confronted with numerous challenges. These can be surmounted by following Islam’s perennial teachings. Those of us who are parents can turn their children into assets for society by cultivating good habits in them. This will make their mortal life immortal and society will own them forever.

The writer is an educationist.

valianiamin@gmail.com

<http://dawn.com/news/1059222/the-value-of-good-deeds>

Definition of a shaheed

THE word ‘shaheed’ has assumed a common place in the lingua franca of the subcontinent, particularly of Pakistan, often used as part of the name of the deceased who has been killed in pursuit of an honourable cause, or in an accident.

More recently, it has assumed greater significance and created even more confusion in the minds of many, as it is being used for Hakeemullah Mehsud, the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan commander who was recently killed in a US drone attack.

Some religious and political leaders have proclaimed him a shaheed. Muslims and non-Muslims, in Pakistan and abroad, are questioning the meaning of the term. It is indeed an appropriate time to reflect a little more deeply on what we say publicly and the connotations our words may have, particularly in the religious sense.

The Quran uses the word and its variations (shaheed, shahid, shuhada) several times in its discourse. In ‘Surah Fath’, it addresses the Holy Prophet (PBUH) thus: “We have sent you as witness (shahid) of the truth, and harbinger of good news and a warner” (48:8).

The same expression has been used by God for the entire first generation of the companions of the Prophet in ‘Surah Baqarah’: “We have made you a (middle) people that you act as witness (shuhada) over man, and the Prophet as witness (shaheed) over you” (2:143).

The word is used for the entire ummah in several places in the Quran. In ‘Surah Nisa’, it says “O you who believe, be custodians of justice, witnesses (shuhada) for God. ...” (135:4).

The word is used for one who is witness, of God and His religion. The term as used in the Quran implies that the one who is referred to as shaheed understands and comprehends God’s religion in the manner in which it should be, practises it, and is so clear in his actions and conduct that the rest of mankind sees him as a witness of God.

He spends his entire life being a witness to God’s teachings, and would easily give his life in pursuit of the same aim. He is so devoted to the true path that he would not hesitate to lay down his life in order to bear witness to his convictions.

As human beings pursue the path of spiritual purification and development, they achieve various levels of excellence. God describes these as those of the anbia, siddequin, shuhada and saaleheen. The four groups have been seen as people who are blessed by God.

In one verse of ‘Surah Aal Imran’ God refers to the word in the sense of those who have been killed in the battlefield: “...We alternate days of glory between men so that God may know those

who believe, taking some as witness (shuhada) of truth from your ranks, for God does not like those who are unjust” (3:140).

Shahadat, as a status after death, is one of the highest honours, comparable to and categorised with that of siddiqiat and sualehiat. One must live one’s entire life according to the highest principles propounded by Islam and be prepared to lay down one’s life in a manner that testifies to the same principles. In that case, God may decide to include the person in the group of shaheeds.

There is ample evidence, therefore, in the Quran that the status of a shaheed is one to be bestowed on a Muslim by God alone, and not by fellow human beings.

As a word that has come to be used in an emotional sense, the matter takes on a different hue. In Urdu (and Hindi and Bengali), it is used to honour a person who is dead, in a war or an accident. The purpose is to soothe and provide some comfort to the bereaved, and is probably meant as a prayer to God.

It has no relationship with the actual, religious meaning and with what the Quran says. When we attach the term to the name of any dead person, the most we can expect is that we are praying to God to have mercy on him and to grant him the status of a shaheed.

We must also note that the word has crept into contemporary times and did not exist during the time of the Prophet. The best of men, whose lives were exemplary and who were martyred as well, have not been mentioned as shaheed following their names as frequently in the scholarly texts of the first few generations of Muslims.

Once we understand the context of the usage of the term, does it apply to Hakeemullah Mehsud, an individual who was known and who took responsibility for attacks that killed several innocent Muslims and non-Muslims? Giving a known criminal and offender a status of excellence at par to that of siddequin and sualeheen is self-contradictory and unfortunate.

People, especially those who present themselves as religious personalities, need to be careful in what they say, since their statements are too often taken to be representative of their religion.

The situation is worsened by the declaration that this has been done in retaliation against the US.

Let us remind ourselves once again of God’s message, where he instructs us to be careful, lest either our desires or our hatred stand in the way of justice. He says in ‘Surah Maida’: “...And do not let the hatred of a people ... lead you to aggression. ...” (5:2) and “...Do not let the hatred of

a people deviate you from justice” (5:8).

In summary, no one should be called a shaheed. This judgment shall be made by God, on the Day of Judgement.

The writer is a religious scholar.

kzuiuk@gmail.com

<http://www.dawn.com/news/1057801/def...n-of-a-shaheed>

The criterion of Karbala

By Qasim A. Moini

TODAY, there are various schools of thought each of which claims to represent the `real` Islam or the `spirit` of Islam. There is essentially nothing wrong with groups claiming to be the truest representatives of religion, as each is entitled to its own opinion and interpretation.

However, matters get problematic when adherents of violent philosophies, who resort to mass murder and bloodshed to impose their beliefs on others, start masquerading as the `true` representatives of Islam. And many ordinary Muslims, taken in by their frequent recourse to quoting scripture and other outward displays of faith, start accepting that these individuals and groups actually know Islam better than anyone else.

This is troublesome as it not only distorts the message of Islam, but also creates acceptance driven by fear and ignorance of militant schools of thought, as many ordinary people, as well as some of those who claim to be religious scholars, start condoning or justifying atrocities committed in the name of religion. The militant thus sanctifies his bloodshed under the cloak of religion.

However, in this writer`s view there is a very simple way to avoid falling prey to such confusion. Those claiming to represent Islam must be judged by some criteria; without this, we open the door to allowing individuals to mislead the public and abuse religion. And perhaps the single most emphatic criterion cutting across sectarian and doctrinal boundaries to judge who is abiding by Islamic values and who is not is Karbala and the heroic struggle of Imam Hussain bin Ali. Centuries after Imam Hussain took the field against the Syrian forces, Karbala is a byword for strength of character, bravery and steadfastness. And if these virtues are absent, one can easily differentiate between those who are inspired by faith, and those seeking purely worldly aims in the name of religion.

While many of us are familiar with the epic of Karbala the sufferings of Imam Hussain, his family and companions, the barbarity of the Syrian horde and the valour of Hussain on the battlefield we must ponder over what led him to leave his hometown of Madina and make his way with his family and small band of supporters to the desert of Karbala.

Some have argued that Imam Hussain was motivated by political considerations to take the caliphate from Yazid.

However, this appears to be a very superficial analysis. For if Hussain`s aim was conquest, he would not have taken the field with a force of under a hundred, which included women, children and the elderly. Instead, he would have gathered a large army to confront the Syrians.

Imam Husain`s decision to confront the Yazidi force was motivated by much loftier aims. In Husain`s own words, as quoted by acclaimed scholar Ayatollah Murtaza Mutahhari, he sought to `enjoin what is good and forbid what is evil and follow the traditions of my grandfather and my father`. This was Karbala`s mission statement.

Imam Hussain further clarified his intentions in a sermon at Mina, en route to Karbala: `O God! You know that everything we did was not prompted by rivalry for political power, nor for a search for wealth and abundance; rather it was done to demonstrate to men the shining principles and values of Your religion, to reform the affairs of Your land, to protect and secure the indisputable rights of Your oppressed servants, and to act in accordance with the duties You have established and the norms, laws, and ordinances You have decreed.

In this passage, Hussain beautifully encapsulated the core values of Islam. Obedience to Allah, reformation of society and struggle for the rights of the oppressed are the main features of religion as taught by Hussain, and it was for the protection of these values that Hussain faced the Syrians at Karbala.

On the other end of the spectrum, the Yazidi force was motivated by purely base concerns, ie pleasing the ruler of the day while casting aside all moral, spiritual and ethical ideals.

So today, when militants or extremists claim to fight for the glory of Islam, we must ask if they are living up to the Karbalai ideals. The answer is self-evident. For at Mina, Imam Hussain castigated the scholars saying they had `neglected the rights of the oppressed and the lowly`. Today`s holy warriors care little for the oppressed and lowly, slaughtering them in bazaars, mosques, imambargahs and churches.

Let us not be fooled by outward appearances. Let us refer to Karbala as a criterion for what Islam

and humanity is truly all about. For at Karbala, Hussain took a stand for righteousness, braving hunger and thirst, sacrificing all that he held dear and prostrating before the Almighty as the ruthless Syrian horde fell upon him after he had been left alone in the field.

The name Hussain is symbolic of liberation and freedom, and perhaps the divine plan is to rouse the conscience of all the world's oppressed through the retelling of Imam Husain's struggle year after year. In the words of renowned exegete of the Quran Abdullah Yusuf Ali, delivered at a Muharram majlis in London in 1931, Imam Husain's `blameless and irreproachable life was in itself a reproach to those who had other standards.

They sought to silence him, but he could not be silenced`.

Perhaps that is why the tyrants of the day still brutally target all that symbolises Husain and his struggle. • The writer is a member of staff.

qasim.moini@dawn.com **The discovery of the self**

AHMAD RAZA

THE human self constitutes the fulcrum of human identity. The synthesis of biological, psychological and social attributes differentiates it from other living creatures.

It is unique and complex. The self creates and destroys simultaneously. It is deeply structured and shaped by the cognitive, linguistic and cultural contexts of human experience. Those who attempt to unravel its mysteries are bewitched by its complexities and varieties.

The Quran has described the threefold structure of the human self in addition to the soul and heart as a source of knowledge. These are nafs al-ammarah, nafs al-lawwamah, and nafs al-mutmainna.

The ammarah state is reflected in man's attachment to material corruption. It perpetually motivates a person to commit evil. Uncontrolled indulgence in sensuality and lust, and desire for power, food, and fame are all symptomatic of this evil state of the self. It seeks to satisfy its desires and emotions at any cost, without any restraint or boundary.

In short, sheer hedonism characterises the ammarah state of the self. It is a boundless fire, which if not controlled can destroy a stable and peaceful human personality.

The lawwamah state of the self is revealed when a person takes critical stock of attitudes and behaviour. Every human act has moral consequences. These must be carefully examined before

any action is performed. The human self has attained the lawwamah state when it starts watching over its acts and thoughts.

Every human act has an ethical consequence. For example, overindulgence in physical pleasures, food, and alcohol can have severe health and life consequences for a person.

Similarly, what goes on inside the human mind also causes ethical aftershocks. Backbiting, unverified allegations, jealousy, lying, spying etc, have serious psychological effects on the emotional health of a person. These activities also have social and cultural implications.

The most important effect of such behaviour is dissonance created at the workplace, in the family and in organisations at large. However, when a person starts examining his or her behaviour and actions in a critical and reflective mode, it is definitely a sign of better psychological well-being. One has to clean one's emotional centre in order to improve one's self.

But the human self is like a chameleon. It can take on many behavioural colours in order to satisfy its base emotions. So one must continuously be on guard.

The human body reveals more than it conceals. It reveals the people who are still stuck in the ammarah or lawwamah state. It also exposes the hidden brain activity of power seekers and money-makers. To this effect, I am reminded of a story narrated by mystic Ali Hujveri in his Kashf al-Mahjub.

There was a man who had a lot of money and owned gardens. Once while on a visit to one of his gardens, he came across a beautiful woman working there. He madly wanted her to be with him. He sent his messenger and invited her to meet him at a far-off and lonely place outside the city, where nobody would witness their meeting.

The woman declined the offer and sent a message to the rich landowner that she was willing to meet him if he could manage such a place where God could not witness their meeting. After receiving this reply from the woman the rich landowner repented and sought forgiveness from God for his evil thoughts.

The second test to judge and differentiate between the power seeker and those who are empathetic and humble resides in the choice and use of their language. Language, like the body, also reveals more than it hides. One would come across people who say 'I am the best' and others who say 'We are the best'.

These are two simple statements. But a world of meaning is hidden in their usage. Those who

apply 'I' in their discourse are arguably power hungry and dominating where others are concerned.

On the other hand, those who use 'we' are humble and show empathy towards their fellow beings. People feel comfortable working with those who apply a pluralistic idiom compared to those who display egoistic idioms in their language.

The mystic Syed Roshan Ali Shah has proposed a therapeutic strategy for the sick and suffering selves who are wandering in the forest of ammarah and lawwamah. He has said that every night a person should take stock of one's thoughts and actions performed during the day. This activity is called 'vacating of the self'. When the self is cleansed daily, it attains the status of mutmainna (the satisfied self).

The writer is a social scientist based at the University of Management and Technology, Lahore.

The principle of 'qisas'

NIAZ A. SHAH

THE law of qisas is derived from the primary source of Islamic law: the Quran. The Quran uses the term 'qisas' in the sense of 'equality'.

Let us briefly look at the principle of qisas, its objectives and the exceptions to the principle of qisas, and objectives of such exceptions. Let us also relate qisas to the Pakistan Penal Code and argue that the PPC is reflective of the true letter and spirit of qisas, but further argue that the law needs proper interpretation and stringent application through robust judicial oversight.

The grand norm of the Quran is that life is sacred and it cannot be taken away. Life, however, can be taken for dispensing justice: "...Take not life which Allah has made sacred except by way of justice and law. ..." (6:151).

Within the justice system of Islam, equality is the cardinal rule in cases of murder and hurt. The Quran (2:178) allows qisas in cases of intentional murder: "O you who believe, qisas has been prescribed for you in cases of murder ... But if any remission is made by the brother of the slain, then grant any reasonable demand, and compensate him with handsome gratitude, this is a concession and a mercy from your Lord. After this whoever exceeds the limits shall be in grave penalty."

The essence of the principle of qisas is human equality (affirmed in the Quran, 5:45) and security of life in society. The context of revelation (shan-i-nazool) sheds ample light on the objectives of

qisas: the aim was to curb the pre-Islamic practice whereby the blood of some influential tribes and individuals was considered more precious than the blood of poor and weaker segments of society.

The blood of women and slaves was also considered less precious compared to the blood of men and freemen. The Quran prohibited this practice, by making the blood of everyone equally precious: life for life, but allowed an exception, ie forgiveness for merciful objectives. The Quran warns of painful punishment for those who transgress these rules.

The Quran provides two options to deal with someone who is found guilty of intentional murder: qisas (ie that he/she be killed in the manner in which the victim was murdered) and forgiveness by the heir/s of the victim. The conditions for the second option are that the victim's heir/s are required to ask for 'fair' diyat (blood money) and the guilty person is obligated to pay diyat in a 'good' way. To make sure that diyat is fair and that it is paid 'in a good way', jurists have agreed on judicial oversight over the matter of demanding and paying diyat as leaving it as a private matter was risky.

The heir/s of the victim may forgive diyat as well, which is sometimes considered the third option, ie forgiving the guilty in the name of Allah.

The option of diyat is an exception to the rule of qisas (ie life for life) and a reduction in the punishment. The Quranic (2:178) basis for this reduction is 'mercy and relief' from Allah. Human equality and the protection of life are overriding aims of qisas; forgiveness is an exception, and aims at achieving merciful objectives. Therefore, diyat should be paid in deserving cases in order to achieve merciful objectives. Diyat must not be used to buy the blood of the poor and weak in society, negating the essence of qisas.

The relevant sections of the PPC, as inherited from the British, were declared incompatible with the Quran and Sunnah in Gul Hassan (PLD 1980 Peshawar 1). The Supreme Court upheld the decision (PLD 1989 SC 633) thus forcing the government to incorporate qisas in the PPC.

The current law (Sections 302, 309) of qisas is reflective of the Quran: it allows qisas and the waiver of qisas with or without compensation, ie diyat. Judicial oversight over sulh (ie forgiveness with or without diyat) is provided in Section 210.

The PPC (Section 311) wisely provides further safeguards by allowing the court to award punishment as tazeer in cases with aggravating circumstances, eg circumstances amounting to fasad fil ard (spreading corruption on the earth) even if the victim's heir/s have forgiven the guilty person.

Judicial oversight has two main functions: firstly to make sure that the victim's heir/s demand fair diyat and that the guilty person pays it in a good way and, secondly, to determine whether aggravating circumstances exist demanding additional punishment as tazeer.

To sum up, the law exists but it needs proper interpretation in line with the essence of the Quran, and a more stringent application in order to achieve the aims of qisas as laid down in the Quran.

Without robust judicial oversight, the law will be used by rich and influential members of society for their own ends, which not only goes against the essence of the Quran, but takes us back to the pre-Islamic Arab society where the blood of victims such as Shahzeb Khan seemed less precious.

The writer is a senior lecturer in law at the University of Hull, UK. **The greatest gift**
By AMIN VALLIANI

ALLAH has blessed humanity with innumerable bounties to be grateful for. But the most important of them all is the human body itself. A body with all its organs intact and working efficiently is the greatest wealth of all.

The human body carries the Divine Spirit; but it is fragile in its constitution. It needs continuous care, protection and nutrients to remain healthy and in working order. It consists of many intricate systems whose proper functioning is fundamental to a happy and satisfactory life.

A healthy body enables one not only to enjoy all the bounties of Allah but also to strive for realisation of all inherent qualities and capacities bestowed by Him.

With a healthy body, one can pray with full concentration and submissiveness, thus cultivating spirituality in his or her life.

The Holy Quran enumerates a number of stages of development of the human body. It says: "He it is who has created you from dust, then from a nutfah, then from a clot, then brings you forth as children, then to reach the age of full strength and afterwards to be old, though some among you die before. ..." (40:67).

This shows the human body is progressively constituted through multiple stages and every stage needs specific precautions. For example, a would-be mother has to remain careful throughout her pregnancy, and when a baby is born, the Quran directs that mothers should suckle their children for two whole years (2:233). This makes the baby's body strong enough to survive the onslaughts of various diseases in the initial years of life.

The Quran also provides general guidelines to maintain health in all stages. It says “O you who believe! Take care of your own selves. ...” (5:105). It emphasises that one should always live in harmony with nature.

The fact is that we are what we eat. The notion of health and wellness is all-encompassing. The human body depends fundamentally upon a daily diet but also requires simultaneous mental, spiritual and emotional nourishment.

If a person eats unhygienic food or remains stressed for a long period, this would have adverse effects on his entire body, mind and spirit. The Quran says: “O mankind! Eat of that which is lawful and good on the earth and follow not the footsteps of Shaitan. ...” (2:168).

The famous saying that a healthy body breeds a healthy mind is instructive. A healthy body is not something that can be achieved without effort. The fitness of the body depends on constant efforts, care, protection, nourishment and maintenance. Many of us tend to lead an easy life, not caring about the body till some affliction strikes. We then get depressed and question why it had to happen. Therefore, what is essential is to remember that prevention is better than cure.

A healthy diet, constant struggle for development and living in harmony with nature are important wellness principles. A body with less movement is more likely to deteriorate rapidly than a body in constant struggle.

Presently, every Pakistani faces severe challenges on the health front. Internally, many of us are least concerned about health precautions while overeating, lack of exercise and excessive consumption of oily and fatty foods is common in households.

Besides this, unhygienic food is freely available at roadsides, and in local markets. All this poses serious health hazards and is sure to affect people later in life.

On the external level, no city of Pakistan can claim to be pollution-free. The smoke-emitting traffic, garbage dumps, overflowing gutters and cesspools are making our health precarious, the atmosphere toxic and life miserable. The efforts of local authorities in this connection are perfunctory and inadequate. Therefore, it is for the citizens to take care of their own health.

Keeping in view modern research in medical sciences, there are many unhealthy patterns prevalent in society that need to be re-examined. For example, a person becomes obese if he continues to depend on junk food. There are various incurable diseases that have become increasingly common due to easy lifestyles and heavy intake of oily food as part of the daily diet.

Similarly, leading a sedentary lifestyle is a sure invitation to disease. A person, after having a hearty dinner rich in fats and sweets settles himself for hours in front of the television screen with a remote in hand and keeps munching on potato chips and chocolates all the while he is awake. His body copes with such a situation for some years but afterwards rebels and succumbs to one or more killer diseases.

Consequently, one can observe that all major or minor hospitals in and around the cities are full of patients. Thousands visit them daily to seek cure for their diseases. Some of the diseases, which were unknown in the past, have recently emerged and thousands of people are affected by them.

If a single family member is sick the whole family comes under pressure and suffers. Every family spends huge amounts treating members who are unwell. Though the medical sciences have progressed and are successful in identifying the causes of major illnesses, people at large have yet to realise the importance of health. They must be motivated to be careful in avoiding the triggers that cause illness.

It is our national duty to create a health-conscious society so that future generations may be healthier than the present one.

The writer is an educationist. **The Quran and art**

By AMBREEN SHEHZAD HUSSAINI

THE Holy Quran has been approached from many perspectives: linguistic, liturgical, historical, exegetical, sociological, psychological, anthropological, aesthetic etc.

The more perspectives one brings to the study of the sacred text, the better and richer our understanding of it becomes. People approach sacred texts from their own perspectives, their reading fed by their needs, interests and experiences. This article aims to highlight the artistic approach towards appreciating the Quran. This may enable the readers to see how Muslims have explored and experienced the Quran through art.

Art is a powerful tool for communication and the expression of feelings and thoughts. It is an integral part of any religion to beautify and create a sacred environment for the followers. For example, artistic expression based on beliefs can be observed in Christianity, Hinduism and Islam, among other world faiths.

Art has always been part of Islamic societies, expressing faith and belief through different mediums.

Muslim artists have perceived and used art forms to appreciate the Divine words in their own unique ways. The most obvious expression of art forms in Islam probably started with the Muslims trying to write the Quranic text in the original Arabic, which lends itself so beautifully to different art forms such as calligraphy.

A craftsperson in Persia and a carpet weaver in Afghanistan used artistic expressions from the same source of inspiration, but their expressions were different. Though both artists are from different contexts, yet they are focused on the same key concepts of the Divine word, producing their artworks according to their contextual inspiration.

Moreover, the intention of producing an artwork may also vary; some might have economic and financial need in mind, while for others it might be the appreciation of the text, passion and love towards art. Yet both are producing something that has to do with the central images of Islam.

Also, artistic expression may be a tool for spiritual elevation for some artists, while for others there may be a political reason, like inscribing sacred text on coins and official flags artistically.

Quranic expressions/words or verses have been extensively used for different purposes using different materials. Today, most shops selling decorative items are full of a spectrum of artistic pieces which feature various Quranic words or verses. Similarly, the Quranic text itself has been decorated, for example with fantastic floral decorations, geometrical designs, etc, on the margins of the holy book, all reflecting the artist's desire to employ art to decorate the Word of God.

Muslim artists have also used Quranic inscriptions to draw images of animals, such as lions, or other representations such as natural scenes.

There are many renowned artists who have worked passionately and offered new perspectives regarding understanding the Quran through art. In Pakistan, Sadequain and Gulgee are two prominent artists who extensively used the Word of God to express many concepts through their art. Their works can be seen in Karachi's Frere Hall and Islamabad's Shah Faisal Mosque, apart from other specimens of their painting found in different contexts and places.

Many artists have attempted to beautify small or large objects, ranging from a grain of rice to the huge walls or minarets of mosques or other public buildings, like universities or even hospitals, by inscribing on them the Quranic text in a beautiful manner.

Yet another art form with regard to the Quran, very popular in Muslim societies, is the melodious recitation (tilawat) of the Holy Book. The knowledge/art of reciting the Quran in beautiful ways is called ilm al-qira'at wa'l-tajweed. Often, in many Muslim countries there are recitation competitions among different reciters and it is culturally a very powerful means to celebrate the Quran.

Going beyond the traditional pedantic pedagogical methods, schools, colleges and universities can use art forms to teach their students the way the Quran has been approached in Muslim societies.

Art is used to beautify things. There are special art forms that professional artists may appreciate more than common people, but there are art forms that even common people can appreciate. Due to public appreciation and demand, decorative art — with regard to the beautification of the Quranic words or verses or even the entire text — has now become a huge industry in the world through commercial production of art pieces, in various markets in practically all Muslim countries.

These pieces are bought for various purposes including to show people's personal spiritual attachment with the Word of God, to decorate public buildings, educational institutions, commercial places, shops, vehicles, factories and, last but not the least, homes, for blessings (baraka).

While interpreters of the Quran have mostly relied on intellectual discourse to disentangle its meanings, artists have tried to do this through their brush, colours and canvases. Both ways enrich human experience of the Divine; one through reason and the other through the eyes because beauty is supposed to lie in the eye of the beholder.

Both approaches lead us to the enlightenment of the heart and that of the eyes, through which we experience the beauty of all that is beautiful.

The writer is a freelance contributor. **Work of God**

By Jan-e-Alam Khaki

THE Quran has been the focus of attention for people across the globe for centuries as they have tried to disentangle the network of meanings contained in it.

Because of that, as well as its fascinating linguistic beauty and poetic flow, it has remained captivating for both scholars and common people alike.

Closer reading of the Quran shows that its major focus lies in another dimension, and that is nature (fitrah). The study of nature is one of the central themes of the Quran as a means of appreciating God's powers of creation. It is perhaps because of this overwhelming focus of the Quran on nature that Sir Syed Ahmad Khan juxtaposed two key concepts: the Word of God and the Work of God.

He argued that there is harmony between these two realms of knowledge. He was pejoratively called a 'naturee' (follower of nature), for consistently following this line of reasoning for Quranic interpretations. Sir Syed gladly accepted the accusation, saying that even God talked about it strongly in the Quran. He argued that nature is another term for religion; nothing in religion is against nature.

Following him, Dr Ghulam Jilani Barq titled one of his books Do Quran (Two Qurans), referring to the book and nature as two divine books. He maintains that we learn about God as much from the Quran as from nature. Many other scholars have also adopted the same view, directly or indirectly.

This argument promotes the view that as the Quranic verses (the Word of God) act as 'signs' (ayaat) pointing towards God, similarly, nature (the Work of God) is God's 'sign' (ayat) that helps believers understand the Divine.

Nature is a storehouse of symbols, where both God's immanence as well as transcendence intersect; a space that connects the divine and the human in fascinating ways. Pertinent to quote here is a hadith which reports God as saying: "I was a hidden treasure and when I wanted to be known, I created creation."

The Quran shows Allah's existential proof not just from the metaphysical world, but consistently from the physical world as well. The powerful symbol the Quran uses extensively for His proof is ayaat (signs).

A verse that shows how much importance the Quran gives to these 'signs' as reflections of God's proofs in nature says: "Indeed, in the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the alternation of night and day — there are signs for those who understand (Ulul al-Baab). Those (Ulul al-Baab) celebrate the praise of Allah standing, sitting, and lying down on their sides, and contemplate the (wonders of) creation in the heavens and the earth. ..." (3:190-191).

This verse not only commands the remembrance of Allah at all times, but also reflection on the world around us as an integral part of the practice of faith. A Muslim leader once rightly

remarked: “The man of faith who fails to pursue intellectual search is likely to have a limited comprehension of Allah’s creation.”

In another verse, Allah refers to even more mundane things — animate and inanimate — as His signs: “Then do they not look at the camels, how they are created? And the heaven, how it is raised? And the hills, how they are set up? And the earth, how it is spread?” (88:17-20).

All these verses point towards the Work of God, the universe, to see how He has created the magnificent heaven and the earth and everything in them, which Sir Syed calls the Work of God. The Word of God inextricably is linked with the Work of God. The whole edifice of faith is situated in the natural world; prayers and rituals, good deeds, the entire religion of Islam (and previous faiths) unfolded in this very world.

In an Islamic context, any diminishing of the importance of this world and its study is bound to undermine the very purpose of religion. This is not to underestimate the other world; but we should not forget that this world, as a hadith tells us, is the cultivating field (mazr’atul aakhirah) for the other world.

Tragically, many of us tend to ignore this aspect of faith — the Work of God (nature). The height of this attitude is reflected in an Urdu verse that Sir Syed himself, with disdain, has quoted, which says, “Knowledge is only the knowledge of religion, fiqh, hadith and tafseer. Anybody who reads other than these becomes impure”.

Probably the Boko Haram movement in Nigeria follows this trend of thinking, where they believe that studying books other than of the religious kind is haram.

We need to ask ourselves: what is ‘religious’ knowledge in Islam? According to the discussion above, one can easily argue that in Islam, ‘religion’ covers practically all aspects of human life, therefore, useful knowledge of all realms of human life and nature is ‘religious’ in the widest sense.

In sum, the Word of God commands us to reflect on the Work of God by education, contemplation, and experimentation, leading to all sorts of discoveries about the mysteries of the ‘hidden treasure’ of God, and ‘harvesting’ more yield from this field of actions.

Today, thankfully, we benefit from so many wonderful discoveries that many scientists have made by reflecting on the Work of God. Muslims need to pay greater attention to this aspect in more serious ways through research and exploration.

The writer teaches Histories and Cultures of Muslim Societies at a private university in Pakistan.

The worst of times

NIKHAT SATTAR

A CHURCH in Peshawar gets blown up by suicide bombers sent in by religious militants, killing over 80 worshippers. In their view, by killing non-Muslims these suicide bombers would go to heaven and through this vile act, the American government may be forced to reconsider its policy of drone attacks.

Around the same time Al Shabaab, a militant organisation based in Somalia, guns down nearly 70 people in a Kenyan mall, where a children's event was being held.

In Pakistan the Council of Islamic Ideology sits in judgment on whether DNA is acceptable evidence for cases of rape, while failing to differentiate between rape and adultery, and often causing blame to shift to the victim rather than the perpetrator.

The implementation of the Hudood, Qisas & Diyat and blasphemy laws make a mockery of a religion that is supposed to stand for peace and tolerance for all humanity and for all times to come.

And amidst all this, while so-called religious scholars and clerics claim that Islam is in danger, a smaller but increasingly visible group puts the blame squarely on the intrusive manner in which religion has been forced into each and every sphere of life.

Today, more than ever, Muslims are in a state of moral, social and intellectual disrepair and decrepitude. Those who claim to be religious have closed their minds to thought and reflection, follow traditions and rituals set down by their forefathers blindly and have assumed an arrogance of proportions similar to the peoples who were destroyed by God in earlier times.

Those who claim to be secular, modern and liberal see religion as an anti-rights, anti-justice set of rules that may have some relevance to an individual privately, but none at all to the collective growth of society.

Many have debated the causes due to which Muslims find themselves in their present state. Some point fingers at Western conspiracies, some at the lack of education, others at lack of internal solidarity and still others at lack of religious piety and failure to observe the tenets of Islam properly.

Our clerics are vocal, giving sermons about empty mosques, unveiled women, coeducation, ‘obscenity’ in the media and so on. A frenzy of home- and hotel-based duroos (lectures) begins. And suddenly, one observes an increase in the number of beards and burqa- and niqab-clad women.

In reality, Muslims took the decision to stagnate hundreds of years ago, when some put a stop to ijtehad. Since then, rigidity, blinkered visions and the tendency to fragment into groups added to a general intellectual lassitude and led to acceptance of rituals that were easy to perform, and interpretations that were made by others who were perceived to be learned men.

Instead of turning to the Quran and Sunnah to seek clarity on what is essential according to Islam, and what has been left for its followers to determine according to the social and economic characteristics of the times, Muslims have found it easier to consider somewhat unproven sayings to be the final word for all times to come.

Instead of following the Quranic injunction to reflect, consult and decide, it has been found more expedient to take certain decisions that had been taken at the time that Islam was revealed, as a given. Any debates, arguments or discussions have been considered akin to blasphemy. The Quran — that ultimate book of wisdom — has been kept aside and relegated to rote recitation, or literal translation at best, while oft-quoted sayings attributed to the Prophet (PBUH), some of which may be questioned for their authenticity, are used to prove a point.

It seems that God has sent His punishment on Muslims for the manner in which they have misused and abused His Book and His Prophet’s Sunnah, for they commit the very crimes He has warned against, and claim to be His chosen few, just as those who perished even when prophets such as Nuh, Lut and others warned them. The difference is perhaps that the destruction wrought on earlier peoples came swiftly, and the Muslims today are going through a long-drawn-out process of self-destruction.

In this era of darkness, there may still be hope for a renaissance. Scholars of the calibre of Javed Ahmed Ghamidi, for example, are among several in Pakistan who have been engaged in conducting in-depth research and writing on contemporary issues and Islamic teachings, and presenting solutions.

Civil society, the Pakistani intelligentsia, the government and those religious scholars who seek the truth and not personal power need to pay attention to these analytical and thoughtful writings that could lighten a path that appears dark and troubled. Consider, for example, what Mr Ghamidi says about religious extremism:

“We will also have to seriously repent for using religion for achieving our political ends ... the monster of extremism is in fact the vile product of the religious thought that is taught in our religious seminaries under the topics of implementation of the Sharia and armed jihad and for the eradication of disbelief, polytheism and apostasy.”

Mr Ghamidi presents a three-step formula to eradicate extremism: religious seminaries should be bound by law to give admission only after students have gone through a compulsory 12-year period of general education, as is the standard for anyone who wishes to take up science, arts or commerce; private holding and management of Friday sermons and mosques should be banned and all mosques should come under the single management of the government; sect-specific mosques should not be encouraged.

Society needs to seriously ponder over these suggestions.

The writer is a freelance contributor. **Debate vs dialogue**

By MUHAMMAD ALI MUSOFER

HUMAN interaction or communication is viewed as a complex process involving multiple factors. Historically, debate and dialogue have been among the significant approaches used for human communication and argument.

Debate and dialogue are seen as two different paradigms with different purposes used by individuals or societies to interact. These two distinct approaches have different implications and outcomes for human societies.

Debate is generally seen as an oppositional approach in which two sides attempt to win by disproving each other. Debate affirms a participant’s own point of view, at times defending assumptions as truth.

In debate, one defends one’s own position and tries to exclude other solutions. In debate, differences are highlighted with the purpose to search for flaws and weaknesses in the other’s position. Being an exclusive approach, debate at times leads towards polarisation and conflicts.

On the other hand, dialogue is viewed as a collaborative approach in which two or more sides work together to find common ground to achieve an understanding of diverse views. In dialogue, listening to others is considered more important than talking in order to find common meaning.

Dialogue helps the participants to enlarge and possibly change their points of view. Dialogue

encourages the participants to search for strengths in the other's position; therefore it is viewed as an inclusive approach.

Historically, debate has been the dominant approach for argument, mostly influenced by Hellenistic logic that encourages the hard argument with the approach of 'I am right, you are wrong'. In the mediaeval period, the Muslim theologians used Hellenistic logic considerably in interpreting theological concepts, at times with the aim to approve one's point of view and reject others' viewpoints.

This polemical attitude largely influenced Muslim societies and even today this is used predominantly in theological debates. Due to this approach, sometimes Muslim societies have witnessed polarisation and violence.

Today, we live in a multicultural and globalised world. Technological advancements and rapid communication have shrunk the distance between different societies and cultures. Plurality of expressions has become the most common phenomenon of societies, including Pakistan.

In this scenario, enforcement of a particular way of thinking leads toward polarisation and conflict. Therefore, our society demands a paradigm of thinking that can appreciate multiple perspectives. In this context, we need a different frame of reference for interaction.

The debate approach would be less helpful in dealing with complex and diversified societies that require nurturing of harmony and peace. Hence, dialogue could be an effective way to find common ground for coexistence in a diversified society.

There are ample examples in Islamic teachings and history that encourage people to adopt dialogue to respond to issues. For instance, the Holy Quran clearly says that there is no compulsion in faith (2:256). Plurality in human society is viewed as a natural process (16:93, 10:99) while the Quran stresses on dealing with people fairly and speaking with kindness.

It is evident from history that the Holy Prophet (PBUH) adopted the way of dialogue many times in his life to solve issues, even though at times such an approach was seen as a compromise. In short, Islamic teachings put emphasis on dialogue among people and societies.

Developing a culture of dialogue in a society is not an easy job. Serious steps need to be taken at multiple levels to inculcate the culture of acceptance and appreciation of plural views and interpretations. In promoting the environment of dialogue the role of the government, media, educational institutions and civil society cannot be overlooked.

A comprehensive policy is required at the government level which encourages acceptance and appreciation of the rich, diverse cultures in the country. Any form of violence needs to be discouraged strictly. Serious steps need to be taken to discourage polemical speech and literature which can easily be found at some bookshops/stalls. Furthermore, political parties need to inculcate the culture of tolerance within their ranks by appreciating diverse views.

The media can be another important source in promoting the culture of dialogue in society. Diverse views and cultures need to be explored and appreciated with the purpose of creating harmony in society. The culture of creating hype on minor issues needs to be avoided.

Education is viewed as an effective instrument to inculcate the culture of dialogue in the younger generation. In this regard serious steps are required in different aspects of education.

First, textbooks and teacher learning material need to be reviewed in order to include materials that are inclusive in nature. Multiple methods need to be used during the teacher learning process in order to explore multiple views of students. The current examination system confines the student to rote learning; therefore examinations need to be revamped in order to broaden the perspectives of the students.

Civil society can be another instrument in nurturing the culture of dialogue and peace in society. In Pakistan, civil society is not well rooted; however, it is growing with the passage of time. Civil society can provide platforms for people from different backgrounds to come together for the cause of peace and harmony in society.

In sum, our current thinking pattern is stimulated by the mediaeval thinking pattern. Therefore, at times our conversation takes place in the form of debate. Our faith interpretations are also influenced by such thinking, which sometimes leads towards polarisation and violence.

In today's pluralistic world, we need a paradigm that encourages exploring and appreciating multiple views — that could be achieved through dialogue. Hence, a comprehensive effort, with the help of government, media, educational institutions and civil society, is required to shift our collective thinking from the debate to the dialogue paradigm.

The writer is an educator. muhammad.ali075@yahoo.com **Nature of life**

By Amin Valliani

ELABORATING on the nature of human life is one of the important themes of the Quran. Life is not all happiness, nor all sorrow, but it presents us with its own educational

curriculum in the shape of painful and pleasurable experiences.

Perhaps the trials of life can be compared to a few grains falling to the ground if one cooks rice in a cauldron. Similarly, while filling water in a pitcher, a few drops may spill on the ground. Hence crying over spilt milk is of no use.

One should not be upset over unavoidable happenings. Rather, we should learn lessons for future development. Many of us face trials, tribulations and difficulties. No one lives life on his or her own terms and therefore, adjustments are required throughout life.

There are countless people who think themselves unlucky. However, it is said in the Holy Quran that no one is burdened with more than his or her capacity to bear (2:286). Islam also wishes one to work as a perspicacious judge of circumstances.

Therefore, every one of us has to bear a certain portion of trials and tribulations in worldly life to prove our worth. Even the great saintly personalities also had their share of tests.

Difficulties have a salutary effect on life, allowing us to move on the path of improvement. It is Nature's way of making people reform their life. It provides us with an opportunity to go through intense introspection enabling us to reform our attitudes and behaviour.

One has to accept, learn and adjust to circumstances accordingly. A reasonable person adapts himself to the world, while the unreasonable persist in trying to adapt the world to themselves.

The Holy Quran likens human life to water. It says "... Verily the likeness of (this) worldly life is as the water which We send down from the sky. ..." (10:24). Water has many qualities, including adaptability; it shapes and adapts itself to the vessel that contains it. Similarly, a reasonable person adapts himself to circumstances.

Most of us plan and fix targets but untoward circumstances obstruct us from meeting these targets. The Quran is very clear in this regard that "... You cannot will, unless Allah wills. Verily, Allah is ever All-Knowing and All-Wise" (76:30).

Life consists of problems but there are many ways out. One should not behave like a pigeon that closes its eyes when it sees a cat trying to devour it. It thinks that not seeing the problem will wish away the danger. The best way is to confront the problem.

This requires mental maturity, maintaining composure and pondering over the solution instead of creating a fuss. Serious thinking, adjustment and above all divine help is essential in solving

difficult problems. Every adversity carries the seeds of success and these bear fruit only after a designed process of maturity.

One should not react with anger over disappointments as this may exacerbate the situation. Expressing sorrow or despondency over problems to gain others' sympathy is also not the right way of addressing issues. This may aggravate the situation.

One can manage to extricate oneself from a crisis if one follows the Islamic value system of patience, constant struggle, adjustment and flexibility and, last but not least, prayer.

There are a number of Quranic verses which suggest that adjustment and fluidity in hard circumstances enable one to find satisfaction and survival. The Holy Quran narrates the story of Hazrat Yaqub who lost his beloved son Hazrat Yusuf, though temporarily. At that very moment, Yaqub says that patience is most fitting (in odd circumstances). "May Allah bring them all (back) to me. ..." (12:83).

The Holy Prophet (PBUH) visited the city of Taif with the hope of conveying the message of Islam to its residents. But contrary to his hope, the people there turned hostile and attacked him severely. But he never gave up and pursued his mission consistently till the end.

Again in Hijri 8, he wished to perform Haj and travelled towards Makkah. But the native Makkans did not allow him to enter the city. He did not react nor lose hope but concluded a peace treaty to ensure a future visit. This shows that the Holy Prophet remained flexible and ready to adjust to the circumstances.

The world can best be described as unpredictable. Situations change in moments. Therefore, human life needs to be adjustable, flexible and adaptable to all circumstances. Those who remain flexible in their attitude can achieve balanced and harmonious living.

Every one of us wants happiness and therefore, nurtures hundreds of thousands of desires, thinking that the fulfilment of these desires would bring happiness. But most desires remain unfulfilled.

Striving day in and day out for the fulfilment of desires should be our motive. But success should be left to Divine will. It is no disgrace if one fails to achieve his or her goal, rather it is an opportunity to re-plan and reassess the situation.

During interactions with others, one should not expect smooth dealing at all times. One has to confront odd situations and be ready to adjust accordingly. One has to accept difference of

opinion, divergent views and sometimes strong opposition.

Every individual interacts with others during his lifetime on earth, but the nature of life is subject to vicissitudes. Islam emphasises some perennial values to overcome differences.

The writer is an educationist. **Calendar anomalies**

Vaqar Khamisani

PRACTICAL utilisation of the Islamic calendar has always been challenging, especially due to the unscientific way in which we manage Islamic dates in Pakistan.

In particular, the way it is managed locally makes it very difficult to schedule future appointments since there is no surety on what day a particular date will actually fall. It is entirely dependent on the 29th of each lunar month when a decision needs to be made based on moon-sighting whether the next day will be the first of the next month or the last day of the current month.

The most common manifestation of this confusion is typically witnessed every year during the end of Ramazan when Eid is celebrated on distinct dates by different groups of people.

The social importance of celebrating Eid on the same day by the entire country cannot be undermined. Its significance and the positive impact it creates on the collective psyche of the nation has already been discussed by several writers and journalists. However, the subject of this write-up is to point to a major repercussion of this controversy which has not been aptly highlighted.

Without going into the religious merits or demerits and without assigning fault to any particular group, I believe the key challenge that is completely overlooked is that the decision by any group or provincial government to celebrate Eid on a different date perpetually introduces ‘multiple’ calendars in the country. In fact, depending on whom you speak with, the first day of Sha’aban will fall upon a different day and to make matters more complicated, the entire annual calendar could perpetually diverge.

It is also not difficult to understand that existence of multiple calendars will lead to anomalies which will cause a further dent in the practical usage of the Islamic calendar by ordinary people as well as organisations.

Consider an example: a newsworthy incident that occurs in the country will be archived and

reported on different dates by different local newspapers. Newspapers following the provincial/local government's directive will publish the news on the dates based on the calendar being maintained by them, whereas newspapers following the central government's directive will follow a different date. How could one ever go about reconciling such an inconsistency?

In actuality, the list of anomalies in terms of the Islamic calendar will be more than plentiful. Hence, if it were not up to our usage of the Western calendar system, we would probably be buried in a sea of anomalies.

How can we as a country or a community cope with managing such multiple calendars? Even if it were possible, how would organisations and systems manage themselves with making all the calendars compatible within the same country?

At the turn of the century, a relatively minor date issue had caused the global millennium bug problem that took huge amounts of global investment to be aptly addressed. The leap-year bug is a common occurrence that happens every four years in systems with no provisions for Feb 29.

These bugs are miniscule in nature when compared to the investment and the effort it will require to consolidate, integrate and synchronise perpetual multiple dates and calendars.

It is also interesting to observe that this particular controversy seems to visibly crop up during the time of Ramazan. Although Eid has been celebrated on multiple days since many years leading to different calendars, the dates are conveniently and quietly merged during the rest of the year and the controversy is brought to the forefront once again before the start of Ramazan and Shawwal.

This topic is also of immense interest globally as several Islamic countries have attempted to address this issue in different ways. The core difference in the various approaches is the extent of scientific and astronomical calculations that are allowed to be used to manage the Islamic dates.

A few countries, including Pakistan, discourage the use of calculations and put a lot of emphasis on receiving testimony of moon sighting as the core requirement to decide on the end and beginning of each month. On the other hand, Turkey's Presidency of Religious Affairs has extensively used astronomical calculations to precisely determine the Islamic dates several years in advance.

Saudi Arabia's approach at best can be described as a hybrid one as they tend to use moon-sighting testimony to determine religiously 'important' months. However, for administrative purposes they also rely on the Umm al-Qura calendar, which is entirely based on modern

astronomical calculations.

This difference in approach has led to different Hijri calendars being managed by different countries. A notable effort at unification and standardisation has been proposed by the Fiqh Council of North America and European Council for Fatwa and Research.

They have proposed approaching this issue scientifically and have laid out precise astronomical calculations to determine the Islamic dates in advance. Although several countries have evaluated their proposal, they are yet to develop a consensus and agree on its adoption.

Irrespective of which precise approach we adopt for Pakistan, there is a need to resolve this issue at the earliest, since, if it is not resolved, historically speaking and as a nation we will all disagree on the dates of important events.

We will also disagree on how these events will be archived, retrieved and reported by coming generations. In addition, IT systems will never be able to cope with these anomalies which will make it impossible to practically use the Islamic calendar.

The writer is a freelance contributor. **Light and enlightenment**

Jan-e-Alam Khaki

THE symbol of light (noor in Arabic) in human tradition evokes a fascinating feeling. When we focus our gaze on a burning candle or a fire, it silences us and awakens our mind. The roots of this symbol lie very deep in the history of religions, including Islam, and its branches have spread to modern times.

Even in the physical world, light continues to dazzle scientists, thinkers, as well as mystics. Let us look at the key usages of this metaphor in selected traditions to show how this concept is one of those shared and experienced with multiple expressions in human history.

In Islamic tradition, the Quran describes the notion of light (noor) in many ways; a whole surah (chapter) has been named ‘Surah-i-Noor’, in which lies, like a jewel in a crown, the ‘ayat-i-noor’ (verse of light, 24:35). Often employed by Sufis and Muslim philosophers, the verse testifies that Allah is the “Light of the heavens and the earth”.

The beauty of the verse is that it is “both visual enough to be grasped by anyone, and yet suggests ... meanings beyond any literal reading of the Book”. This verse is also seen as the primary source of one of the 99 names of Allah, Al Noor. Many interpretations have been

offered by commentators of this verse, yet an enquiring mind still feels something lacking in all these interpretations, searching still for a subtler, richer and more satisfying interpretation.

The Quran encapsulates a wide range of concepts within the orbit of the symbol of noor, such as Allah as noor (24:35); the Prophet (PBUH) as noor (5:15); the Quran as noor (64:8); the Torah as noor (5:44); the Gospel as noor (5:46) and the believer as noor (57:13).

Signifying the need to search for a personal light, Allah says, "...On the day ... their light will run before them and on their right side; (they would say) Our Lord! Perfect our light for us. ..." (66:8).

The common symbol of noor has been used for God, the prophets and the divinely inspired books perhaps because they perform the same function as that of light — they enlighten the path of their followers. Allah brings believers out, as the Quran describes, "from darkness towards light", while the negative forces take people "from light towards darkness" (2:257).

From early in history, Muslims have been fascinated by the way noor is described in the Quran. For example, Imam Muhammad al-Baqir, Imam Jafar al-Sadiq, Sahl al-Tustari, Ibn al-Arabi and Imam al-Ghazali have extensively dealt with the notion of noor.

Imam al-Ghazali, for example, has written a separate book (Mishkat al-Anwar) on the interpretation of the verse of light. Also, the esoterically motivated traditions have more frequently used the metaphor of noor in their discourses to show the link of this noor to what they call the Noor-i-Muhammadi (PBUH).

It is in this sense, again, that the mystic tradition has used noor to show how a spiritually enlightened imam, shaikh, pir or murshid, following the way of the Prophet, can enlighten the path of mureeds, or disciples, to reach spiritual heights.

It is not only in Islam that we see the notion of light or enlightenment; it dates back thousands of years in ancient history. For example, the Zoroastrian tradition is one that has engaged with the notion of light. When Zoroastrians built no temples, possessed no religious imagery and had no books on the teachings of the faith, light served as a comprehensive notion to help them comprehend their religion.

Light and fire were/are also seen as essential elements for sustaining life. In Greek tradition, fire was seen as one of the four basic elements. This theory continued for a long time in many traditions till the atom was discovered.

We see the significance of light in Buddhist tradition as well. We know how Siddhartha became the Buddha under the bodhi tree, by attaining enlightenment (or awakening) which transformed his life forever.

The notions of light and enlightenment are found, though in a different form and meaning, in the European movement known as the Age of Enlightenment, also called the Age of Reason. This age has been seen as the journey from darkness to light. “Dare to know” being the essential slogan, this movement has been seen as a journey also from superstition towards enlightenment.

It has been characterised as “a rational and scientific approach to religious, social, political and economic issues, promoted a secular view of the world and a general sense of progress and perfectibility”.

In this age, knowledge was seen not as an end in itself, but as a tool for liberation from darkness, or coming out of the ‘Platonic cave’ and being exposed to the dazzling light of the sun.

In Lao Tzu’s terms, knowing others is wisdom, knowing the self is enlightenment. As carrying a fire into a dark place dispels the darkness, similarly, when knowledge and wisdom reach a nation it dispels the darkness of ignorance. Light thus has been used frequently as a symbol for knowledge and wisdom.

Thus, light — noor — symbolises life in the physical world, and in the metaphysical/mystical world, enlightenment, which is a process of self-transformation from one state of being to that of another. Light is a metaphor also for knowledge and wisdom which, like light, enlighten the path of a seeker towards self-discovery.

The notion of noor thus, has been dazzling our eyes, enlightening our hearts and illuminating our souls from time immemorial.

<http://dawn.com/news/1039376/light-and-enlightenment> **Rejuvenation of fiqh**

Sabir Badr Jaffery

IN the article ‘Is a new fiqh possible?’ (July 12) published in this space, Ahmad Raza has touched the ailing nerve of Islamic jurisprudence — fiqh.

Since fiqh is based on the Quran and Sunnah (ijma and qiyas are secondary sources subservient to the Quran and Sunnah), to aspire for a ‘new’ fiqh would be tantamount to compiling, God forbid, a new ‘Quran’ and ‘Sunnah’.

Therefore, what is needed is the rejuvenation and reinforcement of fiqh, which can be undertaken only through ijtehad.

People not aware of Islamic teachings and having no substantive knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence, who may otherwise be highly educated, suffer from gross misunderstanding as regards ijtehad. They refer to every “conceptual distraction and meditative bewilderment” as ijtehad, and manoeuvre to brand it as Islamic. Toiling under this mindset they give the ruling that ijtehad should continue.

Continuance of ijtehad is a complex issue. On the one hand, there is the modern, educated class which, without visualising the complexities of ijtehad, thinks that it should continue. Suffering from this self-styled philosophy, they either themselves resort to what they consider is ijtehad, or brand every untoward notion as ijtehad.

On the other hand there are people who don’t want this pinnacle to be scaled by anyone else. Both these extreme views carry hardly any substance.

What is true about ijtehad is that it cannot be undertaken on nusoos, ie matters on which categorical injunctions of the Quran and specific versions of the Sunnah are available. Ijtehad on matters other than nusoos should continue incessantly.

In the modern age when all facets of life have undergone massive changes and when changes are continuous, the existing scope of Islamic jurisprudence falls short of covering all facets. Hence the need for ijtehad has become all the more necessary.

Economic, political, commercial, and social issues relating to all aspects of human life termed as muamlat have assumed vast magnitude that need to be covered by Islamic laws, which is possible only through ijtehad. Of the Islamic tenets, ethics is yet another area that should be targeted by ijtehad.

The writer of the article has asked: “who can interpret fiqh — an individual mufti of a traditional madressah, a nominated council or the elected representatives of the public?” As a matter of fact, the job is not that of interpretation. It is stretched to include in its fold the concepts of mutabeqat (conformity), talab-o-justujoo (urge and research, efforts and endeavours in corroboration with and subservient to the Quran and Sunnah), and ittiba (following). All these concepts are embodied in the term ijtehad, which is a task befitting of a mujtahid, and not that of so-called muftis.

Reproduced below are some of the parameters of ijtehad. I now leave it to the reader to evaluate who is able to meet the underlying challenges.

Eminent jurists have defined ijtehad differently, in their own style. All definitions, however, include the following basic ingredients of ijtehad.

Mujtahid ie the person who undertakes ijtehad: the qualifying conditions for a mujtahid are sulbi (integral traits of his personality), and iktisabi (derived or acquired knowledge). Under the former, he should be Muslim, adult, wise, intelligent, and capable of digging deep into matters under consideration.

With regard to acquired knowledge, he should be highly proficient in Arabic and other languages. He should possess firsthand and in-depth knowledge of the Quran's teachings, vast and perfect knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence and workable knowledge of divine commandments associated with other religions.

A mujtahid may be proficient in any one of the major schools of fiqh but he should have functional knowledge of other schools also. He should also be fully aware of the findings of ijma. And finally, the purpose of Sharia should be well-known to him, and his endeavours should conform to that purpose.

Like a person willing to dive deep into the ocean in search of pearls, he should be the perfect diver and also fully proficient in the required skills so that he may not take pebbles for pearls and pearls for pebbles.

Hypothesis or problem under consideration: this may be an issue on which there is no explicit guidance from the Quran or Sunnah. Issues that have been discussed threadbare by the Quran and Sunnah are called nusooos, which cannot be subjected to ijtehad.

Sharai dalayil (reasoning acceptable to Sharia): these may be naqli (taken directly from the Quran and Sunnah) and aqli (based on ijma, qiyas, or istehsan).

Obviously, what is produced by traditional madressahs doesn't come up to the mark. Those associated with most such institutions cannot visualise and accept anything different from what has been implanted into their minds as the 'last word' on the subject.

These people, with their particular appearance and speech devoid of substance, have given the world at large a highly distorted message of Islam. They are simply unable to take up any serious or sophisticated assignment. I would, therefore, most humbly suggest that modern scholars who

have the urge to take up the arduous task of research and also possess the drive to explore the truth, are the types who should come forward to dedicate their lives to undertake the uphill task of ijtehad.

The future generations of Muslims shall be deeply indebted to them. **The mystery of 73 sects**

By Jan-e-Alam Khaki | 8/9/2013

ONE of the enduring topics of Muslim sectarian polemic has been the hadith attributed to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) according to which he had predicted that his ummah would be divided into 73 sects, but only one would be saved.

All Muslim sects happily claim that their sect is the `saved one` (naji) and the `others` are destined for hell. This hadith, if we were to follow the traditional line of argument, divides the Muslim ummah into two sections: the saved ones and the hellbound ones.

Few people ask why the number 73, and where it comes from. Luckily, there is now a tendency to see this hadith in a more objective way, beyond sectarian interpretations. There is an attempt to see the sects more in a pluralistic and inclusive light than in exclusive ways. In recent times, attempts have been made to unravel the context of this hadith and examine its implications.

The most frequently cited hadith regarding the 73 divisions of the Muslim faith is reported as: the Jews are divided into 71 sects (firga), the Christians into 72 sects, and my community will divide into 73 sects (Ibn Majah, Abu Daud, alTirmidhi and al-Nisa`i). The hadith also occurs in many other versions as well.

This hadith has two parts: one is the number of sects that are to emerge, and the other the salvation part. Often, it was understood that the 72 sects would be condemned while one would be saved. As opposed to this, we have another version of the hadith which tells us a different story. Muqaddasi (a 10th-century geographer), according to Roy Mottahedeh (Diversity and Pluralism in Islam), tells us that `72 sects are in heaven and one in hell, according to what he considers is a more sound line of transmission (isnad)`. This shows that there is variation of the hadith reported on the 73 sects.

According to Mottahedeh, Fakhruddin Razi (d. 1209) reports that some have questioned the authenticity of this tradition, saying that if by 72 they mean the fundamentals of religious belief (usul), then they do not reach this number and if they mean the practices (furu), then the number passes this number by several multiples.

The other view of this hadith is that the figure 73 is not meant literally, but is a relative and figurative number, identified because of a context. Mottahedeh gives extensive historical examples wherein the figure was used as a symbolic number. The author says that `70 meant `a sizeable number` and 70-odd meant `a sizeable number and then some` is fairly clear. In many cases, the expressions are meant to be pictorial numbers and not exact `head counts` .

He further adds that 70 assumed the role of a metaphor for numerousness and thus is `rhetorically significant`. The author cites a hadith that says, `He who helps a believer in distress, God will remove him from 73 afflictions` Here again, probably what is meant is a generous indication towards God`s reward. Religious language is often couched in symbolic language and not meant to be literally understood.

Two famous personalities, al-Baghdadi (d. 1037) and alShahrastani (d. 1153) give different accounts of the sectarian numbers and their backgrounds. There is no standard explanation; each, according to his background and time, has highlighted the sectarian beliefs and backgrounds as they understood them in their times.

Talking about the quarrelling of sects, Hafiz (d. 1389-1390), a great Muslim poet, says, `Forgive the war of the 72 sects; since they did not see the truth they have struck out on the road to fancy`.

Hafiz regards the sectarian quarrels as afsana that preoccupies those who fail to understand the diversity of faith.

Similarly, Mowlana Jalaluddin Rumi, according to Mottahedeh, thinks that the `deeper religion is the transreligious mystery of love of God ... This manifests itself in many (ie 72) `madnesses` and takes the soul beyond the world of being. Ultimately, we not only accept pluralism among Muslims, but among all the mysterious paths of the love of God` (Diversity and Pluralism).

Truth cannot be contained and constrained by communities` quarrels among themselves. When we step outside the narrow confines of our communities, we realise that there is so much to learn from others. This point is reinforced by Abdul Aziz Sachedina in his remarkable book *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism* by demystifying the mystery of different religions and sects, and how Islam views this diversity.

Throughout history, communities have learnt much from each other. Today as well, there is an increasing global trend to learn from and celebrate the diversity of faiths in many ways.

This discussion leads us to the realisation that sectarian numbers and who `owns` the truth are complex issues. We need to look at Muslim diversity with respect, humility, responsibility, and celebration rather than through the prism of sectarianism.

Let there be no bloodshed just because one sect believes and practices its faith in a particular way. All are seeking the truth. The Quran refers to this positive outlook in many verses and an example is: `... if thy Lord willed, all who are in the earth would have believed together. Wouldst thou (Muhammad PBUH) compel men until they are believers? It is not for any soul to believe save by the permission of Allah. He hath set uncleanness upon those who have no understanding` (10:99-100).

The writer teaches Histories and Cultures of Muslim Societies at a private university in Pakistan.

The quest for questions

By JAN-E-ALAM KHAKE

PROPHET Ibrahim is a prophet of great significance for all the three monotheistic religions — Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

The Quran regards his example as “exemplary” (60:6). Many historical events and practices are attributed to him, like the building of the Kaaba as well as being put in fire by Nimrod, and having been saved from it. In this piece one such Abrahamic tradition — the ‘tradition’ of frequent questioning about the universe and of his Lord — will be discussed.

The Quran portrays Ibrahim as an inquiring prophet who kept on searching for knowledge related to life and death. Let us pick two key parables from the Quran which will reveal sufficiently how the great prophet used to search for various answers to fundamental questions about the Creator and the created.

The first is about his experience of the cosmos and baffling questions about the search for his Creator. The Quran narrates, “When the night covered him (Ibrahim) over, he saw a star; he said: ‘This is my Lord’ [haza Rabbi]. But when it set, he said: ‘I love not those that set.’ When he saw the moon rising in splendour, he said: ‘This is my Lord’ [haza Rabbi].’ But when the moon set he said: ‘Unless my Lord guides me I shall surely be among those who go astray.’

“When he saw the sun rising in (splendour) he said: ‘This is my Lord [haza Rabbi]; this is the greatest (of all). But when the sun set he said: ‘O my people! I am free from your (guilt) of

giving partners to Allah' ” (6:76-78).

The second parable is about his questioning, now directed towards God, to show him how He gives life to the dead. “And when Ibrahim said: ‘My Lord! Show me how Thou givest life to the dead,’ He said: ‘Dost thou not believe?’ Ibrahim said: Yea, but (I ask) in order that my heart may be at ease [li yutmainna qalbi]” (2:260).

These Quranic verses reflect how Prophet Ibrahim kept on asking questions till he got answers. Sometimes he used his inductive logic to reach the conclusions (as in the case of the celestial bodies) and sometimes he asked his Sustainer (Rab) to inspire him for answers.

The interesting thing we might notice in these verses is that God, at no point, shows any indignation at being asked questions. Worrying about questions may be a human problem, not of God. In fact, God wants human beings to ask questions and learn more about His creation.

He rewards it, as can be seen from this verse again about Prophet Ibrahim. “[Similarly], we showed Ibrahim the kingdom of the heavens and the earth, [so] that he might be of those possessing certainty” (6:75).

The verse clearly shows that this favour was bestowed upon him not as reward for prophetic work, but to give satisfaction to his heart so that he could “possess certainty”.

In strict ‘religious’ families and schools, questions are discouraged lest they may lead to going astray. If questions are not to be asked about the self, the universe around us, the heavens and the Creator, how can an inquiring mind just ‘accept’ everything without asking questions?

Why would the Quran ask us to ‘reflect’, ‘to ponder’ on God’s creation? Is reflection possible without genuine and honest questions? Is creation of knowledge possible without asking discerning questions? After all, what is the value of faith accepted with fear and without understanding?

Lamenting the blind following of Muslim tradition, Allama Iqbal rightly said, “Had blind following been such a good thing, the Prophet [PBUH] would have followed his ancestors’ path.” (Kuliyat-i-Iqbal)

When the Prophet (PBUH) asked the people to follow him, they used to say, “...Enough for us are the ways we found our fathers following. ...” (5:104), the verse obviously referring to their attitude of traditionalism.

If one were to look at the Quranic methodology of dealing with questions, one will not fail to notice that it adopts an engaging and discursive style. Never is a question asked ever rejected. God responds to even 'private' questions regarding men and women (for example 2:222).

The Quran never shies away from responding to questions. If one were to ask questions that the Prophet and God were asked of any of our teachers today in schools/madrasahs, one would simply be scolded for asking such 'taboo' questions.

Does this mean that we have adopted a different attitude towards asking questions than the one encouraged by the Prophet and God Himself?

Today good educational institutions, from schools to universities, encourage critical thinking skills. Should we stop our children/adults from asking questions? When people are stopped from asking questions, what happens? At least four consequences follow: breeding of hypocrisy (hiding of questions); alienation (from faith, because there is no real engagement); conflict between faith and reason; and finally, blind following.

Are these consequences worth having in a faith that commands us to 'read', and 'reflect' and 'ponder' on practically everything from the Heavens to the Earth as an integral part of its guidance?

Intelligent, responsible, constructive, reflective questioning enriches the human mind and soul. The quest for questioning is not simply a destination, but a journey.

As God's creation is limitless, so is learning. And following the Abrahamic tradition, so should be our quest for questioning. We should develop enquiring minds to create new knowledge and insights about the marvellous creation around us, thus fulfilling God's command of reflection and contemplation.

The writer teaches Histories and Cultures of Muslim Societies at a private university in Pakistan.

Is a new fiqh possible?

By Ahmad Raza

ISLAMIC fiqh is divided in two broad domains of legal studies. The part which deals with theoretical and conceptual foundations of Islamic law is known as usul-al-fiqh.

The other part is concerned with concrete interpretations and applications necessitated by the changing historical and social circumstances of the Muslims living in different parts of the

world.

There is no doubt that the framework for legal reflections and interpretations started with the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) himself and then was followed by his companions and the scholars of the later ages. The Prophet showed a very simple methodology to formulate sound opinions about difficult and new matters faced by the Muslims.

There is a well-known hadith of the Prophet about arriving at legal decision-making and opinion-making in general. While appointing Muaz bin Jabal as administrator of Yemen, he asked Muaz how would he decide among the people. To which Muaz replied that he would decide on the basis of revealed commands of the Quran.

The Prophet asked what if he did not find relevant insight from the Quran. To which Muaz replied he would decide on the basis of his knowledge of the Sunnah (the Prophet's practice and conduct). The Prophet asked him what if he did not find an answer from the Sunnah? Muaz said he would look for guidance from the ijma (legal consensus, opinions and agreements) of the Prophet's pious companions in order to decide on matters of public concern.

Lastly, the Prophet asked Muaz what he would do if he did not find an appropriate answer in the lives of the companions, to which Muaz replied he would use his own qiyas (conjecture, reason) to respond to the needs of the people.

Based on this hadith and Quranic instructions, Islamic jurists from the times of the pious companions down to the colonisation of Muslim territories in the 18th and 19th centuries have identified four sources of Islamic law. These are: Quran, Sunnah, ijma and qiyas.

But what is found in the books of fiqh is mostly concerned with the theological disputes, ablution and bathing, purity and impurity and problems related to belief and unbelief. The theological crust has grown heavily over the body of Islamic fiqh. The use of ijma and qiyas became confined to the legal opinions of the individual imams of the leading fiqh mazahib (schools of thought).

This has proved detrimental to the dynamic growth of Islamic civil law spanning the last seven centuries or so. The Muslims stopped applying social principles of consensus and reason in an institutional and collective manner. They stopped following the practice of the Prophet and his pious companions who would always hold council (shura) to arrive at common legal opinions.

The Muslims became oblivious of this wise practice because of peculiar political hegemonies of Muslim kings and sultans for many centuries. History does provide us individual examples of

juristic endeavours, but hardly any proof of institutional and collective efforts needed for the evolution of fiqh for an ever-changing Muslim society.

Society and culture moved on, faced with new and dynamic forces of internal and external change, while fiqh remained firmly rooted in the epistemological imperialism of the middle and late Middle Ages. This legal and cultural stagnation is characterised by a deep and complete silence towards the contemporary social, economic, cultural and political needs of Muslims across the globe.

The spirit of fiqh articulated by the Quran, the Prophet and his pious companions became hostage to a historical illusion of Muslim imperial domination of the world.

According to new historical conditions of Muslims, particularly in the modern world, the juristic authority must shift from the hands of a few self-styled muftis of madressahs to the broader institutions of lawmakers who are due representatives of the public. These lawmakers must reinterpret and apply the rules of the Quran and Sunnah to the evermore complex social and cultural circumstances faced by the Muslims.

These new reinterpretations can vary from Asia and Africa to Europe and North America. The lawmakers should spend more time on the study of new developments in economics, sociology, genetics, mathematics, business and information technology, in order to arrive at the new codification of Islamic civil law for the smooth and orderly functioning of complex modern social systems.

Similarly, civil codification of law must be separated from the theological classifications of fiqh connected to the domain of Muslim beliefs and rituals.

There are certain areas which require urgent new legal codification of Islamic civil law. For example, is the new knowledge economy managed by electronic financial transactions permissible? Can individuals get themselves insured when the state is not ready to provide them risk cover if they become sick, jobless and fall victim to accidents? Is biological research on infant stem cells permissible in order to enhance the quality of human life? Can a retired lady teacher deposit her pension in a bank to receive a secure income on a monthly basis when she has children and a family who are dependent on her income?

Who can reinterpret fiqh — an individual mufti of a traditional madressah, a nominated council or the elected representatives of the public? Who should hold political authority over Muslims —

an elected body based on adult franchise, or a hereditary king? What is the Islamic legal position on stocks and share markets and investments?

These questions are the product of new cultural practices and require new answers.

The writer is a social scientist based at the University of Management and Technology, Lahore.

ahmadelia@gmail.com **Earning a livelihood**

By AMIN VALLIANI

HUMAN life is made up of problems. Every one of us faces various issues, but perhaps the greatest problem one is faced with is when all doors of livelihood are closed and he or she is rendered unemployed.

A person without means of subsistence is always down in the dumps. His days are clouded and nights sleepless; the mind thinks about nothing except how to keep the kitchen stove burning. In short, unemployment is not a condition anyone wants to be in.

In order to concentrate on prayers a person needs a square meal. It is difficult to worship God on an empty stomach. A reasonable livelihood is a prerequisite to becoming a contributor to society.

In Pakistan, poverty is rampant, as is unemployment. Many social problems are directly and indirectly linked to unemployment. For example, we see swarms of beggars in our cities and towns. Some onlookers fling a coin to aid them while others turn their faces.

Islam has deep solicitude for human welfare. It wants believers to be materially well-off in order to be supportive and contributory to society. Many religious obligations like Zakat and Haj can only be performed when a believer is well above the subsistence level.

Islam does not have any provision for mendicancy. It discourages begging and urges believers to strive and search for Allah's bounties on earth. The Holy Prophet (PBUH) is reported to have said that one who earns by struggle is a friend of Allah (al-kasib habibullah). Our planet contains enormous resources sufficient to fulfil the needs of all of humanity and the rest of God's creations. For Allah says: "It is He who created for you all that is on earth. ..." (2:29).

In order to be materially well-off in this world Islam declares 'striving' to be an essential aspect of life. To paraphrase the Quranic injunction, those who sit at home are not equal to those who strive (4:95). The Holy Book further says that man can have nothing but what he strives for. The Quran repeatedly urges people to seek and search for Allah's blessings.

Many people with special needs toil long hours and work hard. These individuals are exemplary in society, particularly for those who avoid hard work.

Without human effort nothing is achievable. Hence seeking Allah's blessings in terms of material wealth or spiritual uplift has been made a fundamental belief for Muslims.

Pakistan faces tremendous challenges at present. It faces soaring prices of essential goods and mismanagement of its economy and vital resources. It has a weak economic base and providing jobs to all citizens is a marathon task.

Also, our youth population is bulging, which can prove to be the most significant capital where nation-building is concerned if it is nurtured carefully. But the relevant authorities have yet to come up with solid plans and implementation techniques to harness the potential of the youth.

On the other hand, we are combating lawlessness, terrorism and militancy at the national level, and many experts believe that unemployment of youth is one of the root causes of these problems. They suggest that the energies of the youth need to be channelised towards nation-building. In case the youth are not engaged in healthy and productive activities, they may take the route of waywardness.

Some younger people have a tendency to look towards the government for providing them with jobs. Some appear in competitive exams but are shocked to find that in many cases recruitments are made on the basis of favouritism and nepotism while merit is grossly violated.

Others knock on the doors of political leaders, ministers, MNAs and MPAs to get their recommendations to enter government service. Some even pay hefty amounts to secure jobs in government departments. These tendencies need to be reviewed and changed.

Our education system needs total revamping. Besides academic knowledge, education should be made life-oriented, skill-oriented and job-oriented in such a way that the youth get hands-on vocational training during their schooling.

All public and private schools and colleges should have linkages with service providers, industrial and agricultural sectors and business houses, and students should be exposed to a variety of fields. They should get their degrees after they spend a stipulated time period in the practical sphere.

The youth need to be prepared for self-employment. They should opt for undiscovered fields and

strive to innovate and create something new. They should visualise their future goals and strive to achieve these. This will prompt them to be creative and problem-solvers.

Along with academic and practical activities, the youth should also be engaged in extra-curricular activities through a system in which every union council should have sports boards. They should pick students from their area's schools and colleges and encourage them to initiate sports activities.

Islam preserves our identity but there should be nothing exclusive in terms of what we do professionally — all legally permitted economic fields are open. Hence the youth must partake wholeheartedly in the nation's development.

Providing employment opportunities to the youth and engaging them in healthy activities will not only solve the problem of social disorder, it will also change the destiny of Pakistan.

The writer is an educationist. **Text and interpreter**
FROM THE NEWSPAPER

WRITING, reading and interpreting a text are complex processes. What is meant by text here is a wide range of things — a written text, an oral rendition, a phenomenon, an art piece, or a form of architecture. For the purpose of this article, we will focus on written texts.

Often, reading/interpreting of a text is seen as a simple exercise, but it is not. It involves very complex processes. If beauty lies in the beholder's eye, surely the meanings lie in the interpreter's mind. What this means is that interpretation is a human process.

The same text can be interpreted in many different ways. It is a process, not a product. The traffic of meaning flows from the interpreter to the text and back to the interpreter. The journey may be seen as 'circular'. There is a dynamic, organic, not a static, relationship between a text and a reader.

The study of the art/science of interpretation of texts (hermeneutics) has entered a new phase in postmodern times from a simple traditional linguistic analysis to complex social, sociological, psychological, political and historical processes.

Today, texts — sacred or profane — are seen as complex things, not 'facts'. The richness of the interpretation of a text is directly proportional to the richness of the interpreter's background

knowledge about the text, and his tools or skills of interpreting a text.

For example Farid Esack, a South African scholar on Islam (Quran, Liberation, and Pluralism) quoting Hazrat Ali says that the Quranic interpreters were/are people, human beings (implying that they were not angels and hence were bound by human weaknesses).

People's orientations are predicated by the circumstances of their time and place, personal choices, and therefore, what they choose to tell is not necessarily the 'absolute truth', but how they see the truth in their contexts, from their perspectives.

In Esack's terms, all interpreters reflect their times, their needs. He rightly suggests, "Indeed, each and every generation of Muslims ... carrying its peculiar synthesis of the human condition, has produced its own commentaries on the Quran and various kinds of interpretations with every generation".

Esack concludes by arguing that the present generation of Muslims, like the many preceding ones, faces the option of reproducing meaning intended for earlier generations or of selectively appropriating traditional understandings to reinterpret the Quran as part of the task of reconstructing society.

Right from the beginning of the Islamic faith, Muslims have approached the Quran in diverse ways. Hence there are today so many translations and exegeses, reflecting these tendencies. These developments have enriched our understanding of the Quran.

The Quran itself generously invites its readers to "reflect" and "contemplate" on the verses, both written and living (in Sayyid Ahmad Khan's terms, reflect on the "word" of God, the Quran, and the "work" of God, the universe). If the process of interpretation would have been so simple, why would the Quran require us "to reflect" on its verses?

How important it is to understand a text's context may be gauged by an example from the Quran. Glorifying the blessings of God to the people of the time, in the Holy Book it is stated, "And the cattle hath He created ... wherein is beauty for you, when ye bring them home, and when ye take them out to pasture ... And horses and mules and asses (hath He created) that ye may ride them, and for ornament. ..." (Surah an-Nahl).

These verses tend to reflect the aesthetic values of the 6th/7th century Hejaz where the cited animals were seen as markers of social status and even 'beauty'. Take these verses out of this context and situate them in another context, say, Beijing, Cairo, Karachi, Paris, Toronto or Tokyo and the verses assume different meanings, where animals today are no longer a sign of

wealth, but things like bungalows, cars, mobile phones, laptops and iPads are.

The Quran, therefore, is inextricably linked to the contexts in which it was revealed. This does not mean it is frozen in time, but the words are eternal in the sense that they will remain the same. We the readers/interpreters, have to see how we can understand them in our own contexts.

Alluding to this need, Islamic scholar Fazlur Rahman argues that interpreters, often ignoring these contextual factors “...Began to confuse the issue; and the strictly legal injunctions of the Quran were thought to apply to any society, no matter what its conditions, what its structure and what its inner dynamics. ...” (Islam).

He further argues that “There is a good deal of evidence to believe that in the very early period, the Muslims interpreted the Quran pretty freely. But after a period of juristic development during the late 1st/7th and throughout the 2nd/8th century ... the lawyers neatly tied themselves and the community down to the ‘text’ of the Holy Book until the content of Muslim law and theology became buried under the weight of literalism”.

Scholars today suggest taking a multidisciplinary approach to studying texts, involving disciplines like hermeneutics, semantics, linguistics, sociology (particularly the critical discourse analysis), politics, besides many others.

The process of interpreting a text is complex. The text, the interpreter and the reader meet at the crossroads of enormous complexity. They counteract in dynamic ways, influencing each other.

Gross misunderstanding is the result when these complexities are ignored and a text is interpreted and applied blindly. Some of the issues in Muslim societies regarding sectarian interpretations stem, to my understanding, from this miscalculation.

The writer teaches Histories and Cultures of Muslim Societies at a private university in Pakistan.

Text and interpreter

FROM THE NEWSPAPER

WRITING, reading and interpreting a text are complex processes. What is meant by text here is a wide range of things — a written text, an oral rendition, a phenomenon, an art piece, or a form of architecture. For the purpose of this article, we will focus on written texts.

Often, reading/interpreting of a text is seen as a simple exercise, but it is not. It involves very

complex processes. If beauty lies in the beholder's eye, surely the meanings lie in the interpreter's mind. What this means is that interpretation is a human process.

The same text can be interpreted in many different ways. It is a process, not a product. The traffic of meaning flows from the interpreter to the text and back to the interpreter. The journey may be seen as 'circular'. There is a dynamic, organic, not a static, relationship between a text and a reader.

The study of the art/science of interpretation of texts (hermeneutics) has entered a new phase in postmodern times from a simple traditional linguistic analysis to complex social, sociological, psychological, political and historical processes.

Today, texts — sacred or profane — are seen as complex things, not 'facts'. The richness of the interpretation of a text is directly proportional to the richness of the interpreter's background knowledge about the text, and his tools or skills of interpreting a text.

For example Farid Esack, a South African scholar on Islam (Quran, Liberation, and Pluralism) quoting Hazrat Ali says that the Quranic interpreters were/are people, human beings (implying that they were not angels and hence were bound by human weaknesses).

People's orientations are predicated by the circumstances of their time and place, personal choices, and therefore, what they choose to tell is not necessarily the 'absolute truth', but how they see the truth in their contexts, from their perspectives.

In Esack's terms, all interpreters reflect their times, their needs. He rightly suggests, "Indeed, each and every generation of Muslims ... carrying its peculiar synthesis of the human condition, has produced its own commentaries on the Quran and various kinds of interpretations with every generation".

Esack concludes by arguing that the present generation of Muslims, like the many preceding ones, faces the option of reproducing meaning intended for earlier generations or of selectively appropriating traditional understandings to reinterpret the Quran as part of the task of reconstructing society.

Right from the beginning of the Islamic faith, Muslims have approached the Quran in diverse ways. Hence there are today so many translations and exegeses, reflecting these tendencies. These developments have enriched our understanding of the Quran.

The Quran itself generously invites its readers to "reflect" and "contemplate" on the verses, both

written and living (in Sayyid Ahmad Khan's terms, reflect on the "word" of God, the Quran, and the "work" of God, the universe). If the process of interpretation would have been so simple, why would the Quran require us "to reflect" on its verses?

How important it is to understand a text's context may be gauged by an example from the Quran. Glorifying the blessings of God to the people of the time, in the Holy Book it is stated, "And the cattle hath He created ... wherein is beauty for you, when ye bring them home, and when ye take them out to pasture ... And horses and mules and asses (hath He created) that ye may ride them, and for ornament. ..." (Surah an-Nahl).

These verses tend to reflect the aesthetic values of the 6th/7th century Hejaz where the cited animals were seen as markers of social status and even 'beauty'. Take these verses out of this context and situate them in another context, say, Beijing, Cairo, Karachi, Paris, Toronto or Tokyo and the verses assume different meanings, where animals today are no longer a sign of wealth, but things like bungalows, cars, mobile phones, laptops and iPads are.

The Quran, therefore, is inextricably linked to the contexts in which it was revealed. This does not mean it is frozen in time, but the words are eternal in the sense that they will remain the same. We the readers/interpreters, have to see how we can understand them in our own contexts.

Alluding to this need, Islamic scholar Fazlur Rahman argues that interpreters, often ignoring these contextual factors "...Began to confuse the issue; and the strictly legal injunctions of the Quran were thought to apply to any society, no matter what its conditions, what its structure and what its inner dynamics. ..." (Islam).

He further argues that "There is a good deal of evidence to believe that in the very early period, the Muslims interpreted the Quran pretty freely. But after a period of juristic development during the late 1st/7th and throughout the 2nd/8th century ... the lawyers neatly tied themselves and the community down to the 'text' of the Holy Book until the content of Muslim law and theology became buried under the weight of literalism".

Scholars today suggest taking a multidisciplinary approach to studying texts, involving disciplines like hermeneutics, semantics, linguistics, sociology (particularly the critical discourse analysis), politics, besides many others.

The process of interpreting a text is complex. The text, the interpreter and the reader meet at the crossroads of enormous complexity. They counteract in dynamic ways, influencing each other.

Gross misunderstanding is the result when these complexities are ignored and a text is

interpreted and applied blindly. Some of the issues in Muslim societies regarding sectarian interpretations stem, to my understanding, from this miscalculation.

The writer teaches Histories and Cultures of Muslim Societies at a private university in Pakistan.

The wisdom of Noah

By AHMAD RAZA

THE Prophet Nuh (or Noah) is considered to be the ‘second Adam’ according to Quranic and Hadith sources.

He was sent to his people to invite them to worship one God. Surah al-A’araf reports the significance of his message and the purpose of his prophethood. He asked his people to believe in one true God and not to submit to any other false deity. In case of refutation of his invitation, Noah remarked that this might attract divine displeasure.

According to the Quran the leaders of his people replied in the negative to his invitation to monotheism. The chiefs of his people said that Noah was in error, to which he replied that he was not misguided, but a prophet sent by the Lord of the Worlds.

Noah then spoke to his people and said that his basic task was to deliver the message of God and be their well-wisher.

He asked his people why they thought it strange that a man from amongst them brought them the message of God as well as remembrance of God so that they could attain awareness of one God (monotheism), become pious and in return receive divine mercy.

But the Quran has reported that many of his people refused Noah’s invitation to monotheism, except a few who believed. Noah and a small group of believers were delivered from the subsequent deluge. The prophet had built an ark for his followers due to which he and the believers landed safely on land after the great flood and rainfall.

Elsewhere it is reported that Noah’s invitation to monotheism spread across almost 900 years. This means that he preached to his people for almost a millennium but without much success. He elucidated to his people that monotheism leads to peace and tranquillity.

Noah asserted to his people that monotheism is the original state of awareness for every person. When a person realises monotheism, he or she in turn becomes an effective, useful and thankful creature of God.

In Surah Nuh, Noah invites the attention of his people towards the infinite mercy and blessings of God. These include rainwater, wealth and children, fertile gardens and rivers. He then asks his people why they do not expect honour from God who has created them all in a diverse fashion.

Noah then invites his people to ponder over the natural signs and natural order as proof of the presence of one God. He asks them to reflect upon the seven skies (Verse 15), the brightly shining moon and luminous sun (Verse 16), the creative process of man from mud (earth) (Verse 17), death of man and resurrection (again from earth) (Verse 18), and the earth as a resource and the pathway for travel (Verses 19 and 20).

When a person reflects upon the natural order of things, he or she inevitably ends up with monotheism. The fully fledged awareness of the great and profound presence of God and His connection with human beings as well as all of creation leaves one awestruck.

One cannot ignore the overriding evidence of natural complexity and cultural diversity in favour of the monotheistic experience. The Truth is one and indivisible. The history of nature and the history of civilisations bear irrefutable testimony to this fact.

Then Noah advised his people not to submit to and worship idols, which were five in number, named Wadh, Suwa, Yaghuth, Yauq and Nasr. According to the Quranic commentary of Allama Syed Naeemuddin Muradabadi, there were many idols which they worshipped but these five were considered to be exceedingly majestic by them. They were in the form of a male, a female, a lion, a horse and a vulture.

One can look at these idols in a symbolic and anthropological way. The symbols reflect that the society in which Noah preached was essentially an agricultural one. The symbols of male/female deities speak to procreation, fertility and the productivity of crops. The symbols of lion and horse represent the political power and authority of the society while that of the vulture may have a connection with the occult. From the symbolism of the idols, Noah appears to have lived and preached in Mesopotamia.

These idols and their mythology were later on transferred to Arabia and each one of them was adopted by the polytheist tribes of Arabia for the purpose of worship (Kinzul Iman).

The most stunning aspect of Noah's invitation to monotheism resides in his art of persuasion and patience. He would keep inviting his people to the path of Truth and piety day and night, morning and evening.

His people would ridicule him. They would hurl insults upon him. They would harass Noah and his disciples. They would threaten him with a social boycott. They would abuse him and warn him of dire consequences for negating their idols.

But Noah and his followers would stick to their faith. They would not budge an inch for fear of insult, abuse and boycott. Noah would consistently, patiently and peacefully persuade his people to become monotheists and abandon their polytheistic practices. Noah's wisdom lies in the technique of persuasion when faced with falsehood.

The writer is a social scientist based at the University of Management and Technology, Lahore.

Rumi and humanity

MAN has been trying to find meaning in human life since time eternal. Every human being attempts to associate some meaning with his or her life.

However, historically, some individuals have developed very powerful concepts of humanity and moved millions of people by articulating their thoughts creatively.

The eminent Sufi and Persian poet Mowlana Jalaluddin Rumi (1207-1273) has been one such figure who has not only given an inspirational meaning to human life but has also expressed his thoughts through poetry and inspired countless people across centuries.

Rumi, who was born in Balkh (present-day Afghanistan) and later settled in Konya (present-day Turkey), has been highly admired for his poetic thoughts and expressions. His poetry has not only been widely received in Muslim societies but has also been appreciated in other cultures. For example, he was declared one of the most popular poets in the US in 2007.

Though all of Rumi's work is admirable, his famous Mathnawi has received perhaps the greatest attention. The powerful allegorical and metaphorical expressions within it have transcended time and context. Even after the passage of several centuries his poetic message is still considered relevant.

Building on the spiritual tradition of the Abrahamic faiths, particularly focusing on Islam, Rumi developed some universal concepts of human life.

Rumi has started his Mathnawi with the story of a flute symbolising the human soul. According to Rumi the human spirit was part of the divine soul before it descended to this world. Because of its separation from the divine soul, the human soul feels restless and is eager to seek reunion with

its origin.

Rumi asserts that for reunification with its origin, the human soul needs to develop a strong relationship with God and human beings. To love the Creator one needs first to learn how to love His creation, ie human beings.

Without loving mankind, one cannot achieve divine inspiration. In short, according to Rumi, love for God and His creation is crucial for human salvation. While Rumi says that all human beings are from the same origin, in this physical world they appear diverse in many ways.

He states that all the conflicts and polarisation among human beings are because of focusing only on the physical aspect of human life.

He stresses that if human beings want to avoid conflict and create harmony in society they need to accept the physical differences and must delve deeper into the soul in order to find the commonality of humanity which bonds all of mankind.

Rumi has given interesting examples of how contextual differences such as language, culture, etc pose challenges in understanding simple things that cause conflicts between people.

For example, in one of his parables he narrates that once four travellers a Persian, a Turk, an Arab and a Greek were on a journey when the pangs of hunger overcame them.

Upon discovering they possessed a single coin between them they argued about how to spend it. Each one wanted to buy grapes, but kept referring to the fruit in their own respective language, causing disagreement.

A linguist was passing by and heard their argument. He understood their problem and asked the men to give him the coin so he could satisfy their desires. Taking the coin, the linguist went to a nearby fruit shop, bought four bunches of grapes and then gave each of the men a bunch.

It was then that the four realised they were arguing over the same thing, but had been unable to express themselves due to linguistic differences.

Rumi asserts that understanding each other requires openness and humility. He discourages scholastic vanity which leads to stagnation. Rather, the great sage prefers the disciple to explore commonalities among people.

According to Rumi, negative thoughts that lead to hatred, violence, greed, etc hinder the human

potential to actualise.

Therefore, negative thoughts, considered the darkness of the human heart, need to be removed in order to understand the inner meaning of human life.

Today, many Muslim societies such as Pakistan are facing acute challenges in terms of polarisation and violence. Sometimes, such conflicts are the result of diverse religious interpretations. It is observed that at times diverse views are less accepted and tolerated, and therefore conflict and violence grip society.

In this situation there is a dire need to highlight the literature that promotes peace and harmony in society. In this regard Rumi`s powerful poetry can be relevant to respond to the challenges of violence and polarisation.

Rumi`s thoughts are important for different reasons. Firstly, they provide bonding threads for human relations based on love. Second, they encourage intraand interfaith harmony.

Third, they provide a sense of dignity to humanity by considering all humans to be from the same origin, ie divinity.

Furthermore, his thoughts also offer a base for the concept of human equality. To promote the thoughts of Rumi in our society requires conscious efforts at multiple levels. For instance the media, being an influential social institution, needs to develop programmes that promote the diverse literature by eminent scholars who encourage harmony and peace.

Secondly, the curriculum of schools, particularly the madressahs, needs to include different content to enhance tolerance for diverse views.

In sum, Rumi`s poetry contains powerful concepts related to the value of human life and humanity. His thoughts can be instrumental in creating peace and harmony in our society.

There is thus a dire need to promote such literature which advocates harmony and cohesion between people and societies. • The writer is an educator. **Spirit of brotherhood**

By Amin Valliani

THE Muslim ummah makes up a sizeable chunk of the world population. It is spread widely across the globe but faces multiple challenges on the internal and external fronts.

Among the internal challenges, the most serious and pernicious is the division within.

The Holy Prophet (PBUH) conveyed the message of Allah in toto. After arriving in Madina, his first and foremost act was the constitution of a Muslim community based on the principle of brotherhood.

During his remaining life on earth he continued to promote the spirit of brotherhood at every level. In his last Haj sermon he reminded Muslims that they are brothers in faith.

In fact brotherhood became the fundamental concept of Islam at the social level. As per the principle of oneness, all Muslims are globally one in their loyalty, devotion and obedience to the teachings of Islam. Geographical boundaries, cultural diversities and political inclinations are secondary vis-à-vis the Islamic faith and its value system.

Brotherhood makes it incumbent upon Muslims to have mutual respect for each other and be united in upholding Islamic values. It is a permanent spiritual bond among all Muslims.

Muslims — guided by the sense of brotherhood — progressed materially within a short span of time in the early days of Islam. They spread the eternal message of Islam in the known world as members of one great spiritual family.

They followed the examples set by the Prophet in social, political, ethical and economic disciplines and showed compassion to others, took good care of their neighbours and guaranteed protection of the life and property of Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

However, after the Prophet left for his eternal abode the Muslim community stood divided. The spirit of brotherhood vanished and constant frictions and disharmony became the order of the day. At the beginning the division was minimal but later it became much deeper and continues to grow.

It has made common Muslims' lives miserable and has caused infighting, killings and warfare in Muslim lands around the globe. Muslims' blood has become cheap and is frequently shed by their co-religionists.

Thus the Muslims' faith has come under severe attack and criticism. It is not in the interest of Muslims to remain divided. Rather, it is the responsibility of every Muslim to promote and practise brotherhood, try to overcome differences and build new bridges based on Islamic ethics.

In the world of faith, Muslims are united by Shahada (the declaration of faith) and the need is to

practically demonstrate unity in societies where they live.

They are to realise that the division within has caused much pain and damaged their foundations during the long and chequered history of the Muslim ummah.

In order to steer the ummah out of the divisive crisis, the concept of brotherhood needs to be put into action at every level. In this connection it is essential to devise certain parameters which must be adhered to.

First, all segments of the ummah must be allowed to remain true to their doctrines, history and interpretation of faith. No one must be allowed to declare others wrong or infidels. Muslims of whatever persuasion should remember that Allah says He "... Will judge between them concerning that wherein they differ. ..." (39:3) and that "Your Lord knows best who has gone astray from His path and who is rightly guided" (68:7).

These verses enlighten us that humans are not to become judgemental in matters of faith. It is purely the domain of Allah to judge who is guided and who is not. We, as humans, try to understand His guidance with the limited capacity of our mind. The Holy Quran leaves the door open for different interpretations without any one interpreter being able to accuse another of being non-Muslim.

Therefore, all Muslims should pray that the Almighty, in His infinite mercy, may forgive any mistaken interpretation, stemming from ignorance or misunderstanding of the Holy Book.

Secondly, Muslim history consists of great achievements of the past centuries, but it also narrates some bitter events and recalling them can generate caustic feelings.

Therefore, in the larger interest of the ummah the avoidance of such bitter pages of history is the need of the hour.

The Muslim ummah is not a monolithic entity but pluralistic in nature. This means countless Muslim communities around the globe are of varied types. They affirm the Shahada and declare Islam as their faith but practise according to their cultural contexts. All seek Allah's blessings and pray for His guidance to move forward on the siratal mustaqeem (straight path).

Islam's central message is peace, which is possible only when the notion of brotherhood is translated practically on the ground at the grassroots level. History proves that a sense of brotherhood has helped Muslims weather difficult storms.

As we advance further into the 21st century, we need to revitalise the idea of brotherhood and

apply it in our lives for reasons of nation-building, economic prosperity and political stability. The ulema, teachers and media persons have a special role in this regard.

Our national curriculum should have special emphasis on brotherhood. Students should be made aware that when Islamic brotherhood is not practised, the entire nation suffers.

The writer is an educationist. **Disenfranchising women**

BEFORE the advent of Islam the position of women was not enviable, neither in Arabia nor in other parts of the world. In many of the older cultures women were looked down upon and treated as inferior beings.

The position was much the same in cultures that have made significant contributions to the intellectual and artistic wealth of mankind. In the ancient Greek civilisation a woman had almost the status of a slave: belonging to the father in her childhood, to the husband in adulthood and as a widow to her sons.

In the flourishing civilisation of ancient Rome too fathers and husbands had full control over their daughters and wives.

Even in the Jewish and Christian religions as they developed subsequently the woman was supposed to be a source of pollution while some Hindu texts also considered women helplessly dependent on men.

Pre-Islamic Arabs often indulged in infanticide of girls, in whom they normally took no pride. To many of them women were not companions who participated fully in the lives of their husbands but merely objects of pleasure or slaves to carry out their commands. Women had no right to personal property and no safeguards against ill-treatment by their menfolk.

The first thing that Islam did was to declare that there is genuine equality between the sexes and no people or community could build upon the fabric of life when their mutual relations were not rightly ordered. Men must learn to treat women with respect and consideration as well as a sense of justice in economic and social relations. As women have been the `weaker` sex throughout history, men have been especially enjoined to see that they receive their due rights. In the final sermon before his passing the Holy Prophet (PBUH) said, `...He is the best of believers (before God) who is courteous and treats his dependents gently. ...` The Prophet allowed women free disposal of their property and improved their position with regard to inheritance.

The laws of Islam cover a wide range of freedoms for women.

These include the freedom for widows to remarry and to divorce the husband under certain conditions. This was aimed at discouraging slander and unpleasantness and to ensure a proper standard of social conduct between men and women.

Says the Quran (2:229) `...The parties should either hold together on equitable terms or separate with kindness.

Islam also assured women of some economic independence through the right to inherit property, the obligation on the part of the husband to pay her the dower (mehr) at the time of the marriage and, last but not the least, by making the husband responsible for her maintenance.

Compassion for all God`s creatures is the basis of decent, civilised and God-fearing life in Islam. Any attempt by fanatical Muslims or prejudicial and ignorant non-Muslims to eliminate this essential element from the message of Islam is perhaps the biggest danger that the religion faces.

For example, some years ago a senator stunned the upper house, the nation and indeed the world when he reportedly defended as `part of our culture` the alleged burying alive of five women in Balochistan for wishing to marry of their free will.

Political life in Muslim states has been disfigured by dictatorial regimes, frequent coups d`Ã©tat, political murders and, not infrequently, insensitiveness to the interests of all segments of society. Take, for instance, the banning of women voters from casting their ballots in certain areas of the country in the recent general elections.

It is well-known that the conservative clergy and sometimes genuinely misled scholars have taken the view that women should have no freedom and should not be permitted to participate in the life of a nation. In this case not only religious and sectarian parties but even mainstream parties, who will soon take over the reins of governance in the country, reportedly supported the decision of disenfranchising women voters.

Nearly one half of the population of the world consists of women. It is therefore necessary that any religion or social theory that concerns itself with the good of mankind should also be concerned with the welfare, rights and progress of women.

Islam has laid down in most social, economic and other matters the broad principles which should govern the relations of individuals and groups. If the Holy Prophet had proclaimed for women of the seventh century the kind of freedom which they enjoy today and the full

participation which they have in national life, it is doubtful if it would have had a vivid impact or been understood at the time.

At the same time Islam indicated clearly enough the direction of advance and left it to the intelligence of its interpreters and scholars to redefine the position of women in the evolving pattern of society through later centuries. There is nothing in Islam or Muslim history to suggest that it is averse to change.

In fact the ease with which Muslim societies adapted themselves to new material and psychological conditions shows that they always possessed this adaptability. **‘Muslim’ vs ‘Islamic’**

By Jan-e-Alam Khaki

WHEN writing about the history of Muslims or history of issues related to Muslim societies, there is nowadays a tendency to call this entire area of study ‘Islamic’ without much thought as to the use of this important epithet.

For example, in modern times, particularly in the Indian subcontinent, there is a strong tendency to call all Muslim histories ‘Islamic history’. Noted scholars have contested this subtle subversion leading to radicalisation or to an attitude that is characterised by exclusivist tendencies.

Interestingly enough, when classical historians wrote histories, they tended to use more neutral titles than ‘Islamic’ or even ‘Muslim’ in their history texts.

For example, the pioneering historian Ibn Ishaq termed his history book Kitabul Magazi al-Nabawiyya (The Book of Wars of the Prophet PBUH) without the use of the word ‘Islami’ or ‘Muslim’.

Similarly, take the example of Al Baladhuri’s Ta’reekh al-Buldaan. It translates as ‘The conquests of cities’ not ‘The Islamic conquests of cities’. These and many other examples of history texts tend to demonstrate that historians were very careful about how to title their works and showed great care in making these decisions.

However, in contemporary times, particularly in the Indian subcontinent, there has developed a tendency to show all caliphs and sultans, governors and generals as ‘Islamic’ heroes.

This leads us to ask: what exactly is the difference between calling something/somebody Islamic

or Muslim? And how does this make a difference?

Islamic denotes something/ somebody as mandated by Islam or having Islamic credentials to reflect Islamic character. The word Muslim, on the other hand, denotes an individual who happens to be a Muslim. It does not show what that individual did that was Islamic.

What this does is that it allows historians and scientists to be relatively free to discuss, examine and judge that person's acts of commission and omission. When a strong epithet of Islamic is added to a concept or a person, it immediately exalts the entity to a 'sacred' status and makes it difficult if not impossible to examine it/him/her critically, using or applying the conventions of historical analysis/critical discourse analysis.

Interestingly enough, now this epithet (Islamic) is being used with so many personalities or concepts that practically anything done by a Muslim 'hero' or a ruler becomes sanctified and he/she becomes infallible. This appears quite contrary to the historical epochs that we call formative.

Even the common man or woman would question the caliph(s) about the truthfulness or otherwise of their actions. We see a different practice there. In earlier times, they used more natural, non-judgmental, non-religious and neutral terms to denote and describe the important personalities of their age or what they did.

Many notable writers have argued that by having a tendency to refer to acts by Muslims as Islamic justifies what they did and sanctions the act in religious terms, which creates many historical and intellectual problems.

Also, it is argued that this approach has tended to develop myths about history and historical personalities. Often, this tendency leads to an approach of 'everything being perfect'. What then happens is that a set of myths are developed around a set of propositions or personalities that shroud and conceal the truth.

Particularly, history as a science of study of the past becomes a casualty because the study of history in such approaches then becomes more or less theology, or even may turn out to be devotional literature, having no characteristics of history.

This tends to lead to a loss of status for history, leading to loss of trust in the writer. History, among other things, is all about examining, critically analysing and studying the events or personalities of the past in a scientific way.

It is, therefore, no surprise that many of the scholarly students of history at advanced levels of their training tend to prefer more ‘serious’ historical literature mostly written in the academically advanced countries rather than in developing countries.

Exceptions apart, many history books written in Muslim countries, including Pakistan, methodologically, structurally, and content-wise leave much to be desired.

Some history books are even sprinkled with curses and abuses for personalities whom the writers did not like or approve of. Such is the sad story of some of the writers of our history in many Muslim societies.

One reason why this tendency seems to have developed is that history is approached as a tool to justify sectarian or ideological positions and defame others. The purpose is not finding the truth in history but using history to justify theological positions based on their assumptions and interpretations of history, which might be called ‘theologised’ or ‘ideologised’ histories.

Many other nations also tend to do this in the name of nation-building, which may be called nationalised histories. As opposed to this phenomenon, one can find versions of history written by many Muslim writers who have tried to investigate history from a more objective position trying to draw so-called scientific conclusions.

One such marvellous example is that of Ibn Khaldun. Today, Ibn Khaldun is seen as a shining example of this trend where he tries to study history not as theology, but as a science, an objective study of history without attaching any epithet.

In sum, writers should use the terms ‘Islamic’ or ‘Muslim’ discerningly which can prevent standardisation of everything Muslims do or don’t do in a particular society at a particular time and in a particular context.

The writer teaches Histories and Cultures of Muslim Societies at a private university in Pakistan.

The wisdom of Adam

By Ahmad Raza

ADAM is the archetypal man on earth. He is considered to be the first prophet and deputy (khalifatullah) of the Almighty on earth. The mention of Adam in the Quran is episodic.

The first part is concerned with the balanced organisation of his biological structure by God. The

material used for this purpose is referred to as mud, clay or dust (teen in Arabic).

According to the Quranic discourse, God applied His own hands to construct the face of Adam.

Once the biological structure was proportionally put in place by God, He then breathed His soul into the tangible physical structure. This brought Adam to life.

The second episode is concerned with the proclamation of Adam's superiority over the creatures of light and fire (malaika and jinn). These creatures were asked to prostrate (offer sajda) to Adam as a token of recognising his superior knowledge.

The malaika (angels) objected to the Almighty's choice for Adam's deputyship on earth but were satisfied when Adam displayed his superior knowledge to them on God's command. So they all prostrated before Adam in the Divine assembly except one, a jinn described as Shaitan and Iblees in the Quran. He refused to prostrate.

God asked him why he did not prostrate, to which Iblees replied that he was superior to Adam as God had created Adam from mud and himself from fire. Hence Iblees was asked to leave the Divine assembly. But Iblees was cunning. He begged God for an immortal life to mislead and misguide the children of Adam, except those who protect themselves from his devilish allure. Hence Iblees was granted limited immortality to misguide Adam and his progeny.

The third episode took place in the life of Adam after his proclamation of deputyship in the Divine assembly. This was the intrusion of Iblees in heaven, into the blissful life of Adam and Eve, who had been living there in a state of internal peace and harmony. They were closer to the angelic existence and were both still unaware of the biological and sexual desire present in their bodily system. They were also informed not to go close to the 'forbidden tree' and save themselves from Divine displeasure.

But Iblees was cunning enough to approach them. He allured them with his sweet rhetoric, telling them they were restrained from tasting the fruit of the forbidden tree so that they may not be able to attain angelic existence or an immortal life. They were tempted by Satan's narrative and tasted the fruit of the forbidden tree.

Hitherto hidden biological and sexual desires overcame them. They simply disobeyed and lost their pure state of existence in heaven. Iblees was very happy at this great achievement and thought he was successful in failing the Divine choice of Adam as deputy. This episode, however, laid a permanent foundation of a dialectical struggle between the children of Adam and the offspring of Satan on earth.

Adam needs to rediscover his lost purity on earth. Meanwhile, Satan and his progeny continue with their evil ways to stop him from attaining lost immortality. Adam and Eve were sent to earth to restructure their lost purity and immortality by invoking the names of God, the Merciful and Forgiving.

Iblees was, however, unaware of Adam's superior knowledge and his ingrained ability to seek forgiveness (tawba) for his misdeeds. The act of seeking forgiveness from God purifies the transgressor.

The essential difference between a satanic and human act lies in the fact that man revisits his mistakes and sins and repents. God loves those who repent and forgives them because of His innate and infinite mercy. In this way Adam and his children on earth became symbols of hope and good.

Those who do not revisit and repent their misdeeds are following the path of Satan. They are the symbols of darkness, despair, tyranny and evil. All evil and disorder on earth is perpetrated by these evil, satanic forces.

The touchstone to differentiate the children of Adam and the followers of Satan is very simple. The children of Adam seek forgiveness and amend their mistakes. They seek purity of thought and action. They are those, as mentioned in the hadith, who do not harm other human beings by their hand and tongue. On the other hand, the tribe of Satan thrives on plunder, killing, hatred, disorder and death. They indulge in orgies of destruction every day. They plan day and night to ruin the peace of cities. God and the Prophet (PBUH) have shown their displeasure towards those who perpetrate evil in the peaceful cities.

The satanic forces would invite you day and night to lead an immoral life. They would create fear in you to submit to evil and immoral commands.

In fact one aspect of our civilisation is an abundance of fear. We are driven by fear to blind obedience. For example some of our teachers lash out at us if we question them while our politicians tell us to obey them or else. Hence fear is a weapon.

The writer is a social scientist based at the University of Management and Technology, Lahore.

The Culture of Consumerism

By Amin Valliani

OUR lives today are totally different from the lives of our elders a few decades ago. Their

lives were mostly connected to and dependent on nature.

Senior citizens often recall their past days of simplicity when society was not driven by materialism and selfishness. They were unaware of problems of today`s life like loadshedding, gas shortage, CNG crisis etc. They were free to move about at night without having to fear street crime and mafias. In short, they were more content with their lives.

With the dawn of modernisation and urbanisation the old living patterns have been broken. Modernisation has many positive elements, but it has some negative aspects also. These have spread across many societies with adverse and serious consequences on the social, health and economic aspects of life.

Among the negative aspects of modernisation is consumerism, which means buying beyond one`s needs. People buy things not keeping in view their genuine needs but on impulse, just to satiate their desires. Many well-off people flaunt their riches by indulging in consumerism. They frequently change their home furniture, appliances, jewellery and cars without taking into consideration the necessity of doing so.

They hang out in eateries and consume sumptuous meals on a regular basis. Food is a basic human necessity but devouring lavish food on a regular basis is an extravagance. Weddings can last for days with much fanfare. Slick TV commercials also bewitch many people by promoting a luxurious, ostentatious style of living.

As a corollary, people indulge in the rat race of accumulating more money, even through illegal means. Some also allow themselves to get caught in the vicious cycle of borrowing money on high rates of interest. All this makes life more perplexing.

No doubt money is a must for living a quality life, but it should not become an overarching force.

An opulent lifestyle based on extensive consumerism bodes ill for any society. Therefore, serious efforts are required to simplify lifestyles. Islam does not favour excessive materialism or extravagance. In this respect the Holy Quran describes various attributes for believers such as: `And those who, when they spend, are neither extravagant nor niggardly, but hold a medium (way) between those (extremes) (25:67).

People are endowed with intellect therefore they are masters of their lives. They are free to lead life as they wish but Islam gives some value-laden directions to have contentment and happiness. Islam does not like those who amass wealth and indulge in ostentation. For example the Quran says `...But the mercy of your Lord is better than the (wealth) which they amass (43:32)`.

In the national context, it is on record that Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah, in his speech at Ziarat in 1948, lamented the spending habits of the subcontinent`s Muslims.

He said: `We Musalmans in general and young men in particular do not know the value of money. A paisa saved today is two paisa tomorrow, four paisa after that and so on and so forth. Because of our addiction to living beyond means and borrowing money, we lost our sovereignty over this subcontinent.

Consumerism also risks human health. It generates continuous mental agony and destroys peace of mind. It compels people to remain engaged in an unceasing struggle to make money. This artificial lifestyle leads towards a conflicting situation within families resulting in the loss of happiness, love and affinity.

Health and peace of mind should take precedence over the things money can buy. One must remember that hard-earned money can change people`s lives in a positive manner but illgotten money plays havoc with society. Unbridled pelf destroys the social fabric of society and damages the moral integrity of people. It makes people self-centred and callous to others` needs, thereby increasing the gulf between the haves and havenots.

We live in a world consumed with consumption but people are beginning to realise that pleasure through shopping is a losing proposition. There is more to life than the latest expensive gadgets, fancy clothes and luxury cars. Buying on impulse should be avoided.

It is a matter of reflection for everyone to see what constitutes our genuine needs and how to have a good grip on finances. Sometimes, people are affected by others`lavish ways of living, which they try to imitate.

We are living in an era of economic crisis. This requires us to be more cautious on an individual level to control the cost of living.

A glamorous lifestyle may be a recipe for bankruptcy. The present world population has crossed seven billion people and is growing. Hence, one of the major problems the world is likely to face is the management of resources and controlling the over-consumption of resources.

Feeding the growing population would be a marathon task for future governments. Therefore, wasting food makes no sense economically, environmentally and ethically. Similarly, the aging population is also growing. People live longer but their working life is not increasing. They want financial security during their retirement years.

Ideally everyone should try to save as much as they can. This would benefit people in their retirement days.

• *The writer is an educationist.* **Sects and sectarianism**

By Jan-e-Alam Khaki

SECTS and sectarianism have been an enigma for almost all world religions, and the cause of much strife. Almost all religions comprise sects and sub-sects, which appear to be a historical phenomenon, quite common across history.

More often than not, sects and sectarianism have posed a great challenge to world faiths, leading often to intellectual debates but also to physical entanglement.

So if this is a historical fact, is there a way to approach this problem more constructively? Or do we have to continue to fight for another millennium over these issues?

Historically, sects have been seen as anathema to a faith/community, and therefore as a negative development. In the postmodern world, however, there is an alternative approach that focuses on multiple narratives rather than focusing on one standardised view of a set of interpretations taken from a certain period of time.

In the postmodern world, alternative or multiple interpretations of basic beliefs, tenets of faith, values, rituals, cultures and histories are seen as the richness of faith, not as a weakness. People having different interpretations are not hated but appreciated, encouraged to coexist and even celebrated.

If we were to take the word 'sect' to mean deviation or heterodoxy, it would lead us to a totally different attitude. For a long time in history, this attitude has often prevailed. This is one more reason why sectarian fighting has been taking place among different groups.

As a consequence of this attitude, one sect claims the 'ultimate truth' or having God only on its side or only their party going to paradise and the rest destined for hell. Members of one's own sect are commonly seen as 'brothers' in faith and the 'others' as enemies.

Such attitudes then regard the interpretations held by others as 'deviant' or 'heterodox' (deviating from the 'true' faith). This attitude may be called sectarianism or communalism. The key features of this attitude may include exclusivity and a 'win-lose' attitude.

The other attitude, in which other sects are seen as having an ‘alternative’ belief or opinion (unless they are extremists or militants, hell-bent on destruction), leads to a positive approach towards the ‘other’.

One of the words used to refer to sects in Muslim societies has been firqa, which literally means a branch. This is a powerful metaphor, connoting a branch of a giant tree.

A gigantic tree is expected to have numerous branches as it grows further. Similarly, a rich faith or tradition is always potent with numerous interpretations. Any tradition having only one interpretation for centuries will be a very poor tradition. Unity in this context is not necessarily a good quality of the tree; in fact it can be a debatable one.

This metaphor works beautifully when seen in the context of great world religions which have tended to be split, acquiring multiple interpretations, each one rich in its own way. Many Muslim thinkers and mystics have grappled with this question of unity and diversity in Muslim societies with immense wisdom. Rumi has addressed this issue in multiple ways. In the Mathnavi he uses the metaphor of an elephant and blind men to help us appreciate how human experiences can be subjective and therefore the need to respect others’ experiences and their interpretations.

The world of scholarship, fortunately, is moving towards understanding sectarian divisions, (not sectarianism), in a positive vein. Many scholars are building bridges among communities and across communities, and even across civilisations by initiating meaningful dialogue through analysing histories and traditions in a way that promotes better understanding among members of the same faith or across faiths. Dr Farhad Daftary, a renowned contemporary Muslim scholar, rightly regards the ummah as “communities of interpretations”. He argues that these communities are entertaining differing interpretations of the same faith due to many factors including historical, political, economic and cultural.

For one reason or another, a community has been holding an interpretation of its own background, but within the same faith. So, instead of seeing this diversity as a blessing, for reasons political, economic, racial and parochial, the diversity of interpretations has been regarded as something bad. We know what consequences this attitude has had.

Yet the notion of pluralism is, happily, gaining momentum and brings with it greater promise of avoiding clashes among sects or religions by ending ignorance.

For centuries, communal wars among communities have taken a huge toll on human life and it would be a pity if we were to continue to fight over interpretations of the same or other faiths. Communities, rather, should come together to solve their problems by pooling their resources to

help raise the standard of life of their people.

There is indeed hope as we see today many people working across communities and borders without letting their sectarian interpretations become an obstacle.

In sum, sects have been an integral part of Muslim societies for over 14 long centuries. We cannot just wish them away. What we need to do is to look at them with a positive attitude which may lead us to be inclusive and respectful of the multiple interpretations of the Muslim faith.

What needs to be discouraged, however, is sectarianism, which often leads us to exclusiveness, arrogance and violence against those who happen to have a different interpretation of faith.

The writer teaches Histories and Cultures of Muslim Societies at a private university in Pakistan.

Value of human dignity

By Muhammad Ali Musofer

HUMAN dignity has been one of the central themes in Islamic teachings. Islam has given a distinct position to humanity by viewing humans as the noblest of creatures and man as the vicegerent of God on earth.

According to the Holy Quran, human beings have been inspired by the divine spirit, therefore their status is unique among the creatures (38:72). In another verse human dignity is affirmed very explicitly: “We have honoured the sons of Adam ... and conferred on them special favours above a great part of Our Creation” (17:70).

There are numerous examples in the Quran which highlight the high status of human beings and stress on upholding it. From the teachings of Islam it is revealed that the divine spark is present in every human; however, it needs an enabling society to ignite it.

Islam has identified different aspects of human life which are considered crucial for maintaining human dignity. To uplift humanity, multidimensional efforts are required in order to develop the multiple facets of human life such as the physical/economic, intellectual, social/ethical and spiritual aspects.

In the Quran and the teachings of the Holy Prophet (PBUH), helping the less privileged and the weak is constantly underlined. According to the eminent Muslim scholar Dr Fazlur Rahman, the Holy Prophet’s fundamental effort was to reduce the social and economic injustices prevalent in society in order to uphold human dignity.

The sense of deprivation affects human self-worth and drags it to the lowest level. It is evident that poverty limits human potential in many ways. For example, sometimes it compels a person to indulge in crime.

Islam has given high value to human life and health. It has put significant emphasis on caring for the sick and disabled and articulated it as a duty. Good health is termed a divine gift.

The sanctity of human life is highlighted by equating the saving of one life with the saving of all of humanity (5:32). Similarly, according to a hadith “God has sent down a treatment for every ailment”. Hence good health is very crucial for holistic human development.

The intellectual dimension of human beings is constantly highlighted in Islamic teachings. The Holy Quran has reinforced the concept of human beings using their intellect and reflecting on the mysterious creations of God. Education and seeking knowledge are viewed as important to develop the intellectual capacity of human beings.

Therefore, in Islam seeking knowledge is viewed as abundantly good and it is obligatory for every Muslim to seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave.

In the Islamic tradition, knowledge has been viewed as light, ignorance as darkness. When the human being is not developed through education then ignorance prevails. Consequently, the individual as well as society suffers.

Spiritual uplift is viewed as a very important area for human development. Human beings are a combination of the body and the soul. Hence we are linked to the Creator while we have an association with fellow beings and other creatures.

According to Islamic teachings for spiritual development, one has to strengthen both relationships. To strengthen the bonds with the Creator one needs worship, and to strengthen the relationship with fellow human beings one needs to fulfil his or her social responsibilities.

The ethical/social dimension is viewed as a very important aspect of human development. It is directly linked to other dimensions of life such as physical, intellectual and spiritual development. Hence, Islam stresses on fulfilling the social/ethical responsibilities for balanced, holistic development of the human being.

To realise the multiple dimensions of human beings, it requires a society that provides opportunity for people to nurture and actualise their gifted potential and use it for the benefit of society.

Developing an enabling society for the people is closely related to good governance and leadership. According to Islamic thought, governance and leadership mean not just to rule but to create an environment where the human potential can be actualised and used for the benefit of society. Therefore, the Holy Prophet envisioned and strived for a society that could help nurture human potential.

Today, many Muslim countries like Pakistan, unfortunately, face huge challenges in human development in terms of poverty, ignorance, corruption etc. For example, in Pakistan a large percentage of people are living below the poverty line. Proper healthcare facilities are not available for a large number of people. Due to different forms of violence, human lives are lost. This situation affects the lives of nearly all the people in the county.

Similarly, the literacy rate of Pakistan is said to be not more than 56 per cent; this means that nearly half of the population is illiterate. According to one report, more than 25 million children are not attending school and as for the students who go to public schools, most of them are not provided the opportunity to develop their potential.

Furthermore, corruption is another big problem in society. Also, spirituality is sometimes viewed only as performing some religious rituals and the moral/ethical aspect is not reflected in society.

In such a situation, the dignity of the human being, as envisioned by Islam, seems like a major challenge. Hence, serious reflection is required particularly on governance and leadership practices in order to develop a society that can help the people actualise their gifted potential in order to uphold the dignity of human life. **In search of wisdom**

By Ahmad Raza

OUR age needs to rediscover the lost cultural resonance with the revealed words of God, which were spoken to the human species by a series of chosen prophets.

It has become ever more pertinent to reconnect with this common heritage of prophetic wisdom from all religious traditions of the world. This is a curious soul's well-justified need based upon the past 300 years of man's misconstrued historical progress modelled after a materialistic heaven on earth.

One can visibly see the social devastation gradually unleashed by the forces of unabated materialism on human cultures, on nature and on the earth in general.

What were the common attributes of the great prophets of the past? Firstly, they all were deeply connected with God. They showed a method to all human beings for an inward connectivity with

God. They taught that an inner discovery of God can be witnessed if one knows how to invoke divine mercy.

The method these prophets taught was prayer and hymn. They taught men and women to call out to God at every instant of their lives, over and above the specific times of prayer and worship. The prophets taught everyone to look into the mechanisms of one's ego. The application of this simple reflective technique would reveal the beauty of God.

The Quran has testified to this inner psychological connectivity when it states that God is nearer to man than his jugular vein.

The second attribute common to all the prophets and wise men was their unanimous and unequivocal refutation of evil and a programme for a simple, moral life.

Just look at the life of Gautama Buddha. He laid the foundations of a simple life. He advised his disciples not to harm any living creature on earth, plants and insects included, take care of fellow human beings and spend a life of reflection, self-control and meditation.

Now look at the life of Prophet Moses. He challenged the tyrannical rule of the pharaoh over Bani Israel. He asked the pharaoh to stop his atrocities and injustices targeting the Children of Israel otherwise he would face dire consequences. Moses was successful in achieving liberation for his tribe, who were suffering under the slavery of an unjust Egyptian king.

Moses always asked his people to pray to God, eat permissible food and be kind to parents. The great prophet would ask his tribesmen to engage in prayers at home and invoke the glorious names of God day and night.

Now just reflect on the words "jugular vein" employed in the Quranic verse. These are symbolic in both meaning and context. The safety and continuity of human life depends upon the healthy functioning of the jugular vein. Similarly, the spiritual and psychological sustainability of a person totally depends upon inner reflection on God.

The inner peace and harmony which has disappeared from contemporary civilisation can be restored if mankind could find its lost jugular vein, which is nothing else but a reflective reunion with our inner essence.

The revealed words of the Quran with which it opens its discourse with human beings are Bismillah ir Rahman ir Raheem, (In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful). The Holy Book introduces human beings to a God who is merciful and kind and closer to his

soul than his jugular vein. These are the two defining attributes of God's 'personality' in the Quran. In Surah al-Anam, God says that He has "prescribed mercy for Himself". On the basis of the scholarly authority of Shaikh Abdul Qadir Gilani in his book Ghuniya-tu-Talibeen (the objective of seekers), a hadith has been narrated by him, in which the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) has reportedly said that this single verse of the Quran was brought to him by the archangel Gabriel who was accompanied by a procession of 75,000 angels brightly dressed in divine light.

Therefore, anyone hoping to seek God inwardly must invoke His infinite mercy and boundless generosity. All worldly mercies and generousities shown by human beings to each other are nothing but the smallest drop taken from the boundless ocean of divine mercy.

These inspired words of the Quran teach us a simple reflective psychological technique to uncover the centre of our soul. Once one gets access to the centre of one's soul, one becomes quiet and calm and is in harmony with one's inner world. All historical contradictions and psychological conflicts evaporate into thin air.

The symbol of the jugular vein tellingly uncovers our biological programming to us. It exposes the biological necessity to connect our egos spiritually with God. The symbol of the jugular vein tells us that God has not abandoned us. One can rely in one's moments of joy and crisis, in rejection, in loss and loneliness, only on God. That calling out to Him and Him alone, incessantly, repeatedly, purifies us.

Then why run after the optical illusion of an earthly heaven, populated with the idols of greed, vulgarity, falsehood, lust and inequality?

Prophetic wisdom is nothing else but a lost treasure of mankind. It has never left the human ego because of its unique biological programming of being closest to and nearest to God.

The smoke of greed, which has been rising from the chimneys of technological civilisation for the last 300 years, has just marred this inner mirror. The mirror is there, the light is there. We need to take a small first step and see the difference.

The writer is a social scientist based at the University of Management and Technology, Lahore.

Quarrelsome behaviour

Amin Valliani

WE see no time in human history devoid of wars and killing. Human history is full of such events. Every nation takes pride in its heroes who fought wars against its enemies. But the question is: why do humans fight and kill each other?

The above question invites us to think about the root causes. Humans live in societies. They are different from each other in many ways such as habits, thoughts, interests and perceptions etc. These differences propel people to struggle for self-assertion and can lead to confrontation, intolerance and violence. Parochial thinking and egoism also create bad blood among different sections of the population.

Some people remain unhappy with the existing conditions of their societies; they feel deprived, mistreated and marginalised, which leads to confrontation and rocks society as a whole. Such societies are more vulnerable to frequent clashes and conflicts.

The Holy Quran highlights this issue. It says "...But man is more quarrelsome than anything" (18:54). This means that every human being has a natural tendency to quarrel. Quarrels start when a person, in response to some grievances, entertains grudges against others and feels indignation, followed by vengeful thinking.

Thereafter, a stage is reached when interaction between individuals touches the point of irrationality. It is amply proved in history that the spirit of revenge has resulted in horrid enmity, driving people to take up arms.

Vengeful thinking damages society at large. Therefore, a civilised society tries to nip vengeful thinking in the bud. It provides many avenues where one can vent one's frustrations and seek redress and justice.

Islam abhors violent and quarrelsome behaviour in society. It urges Muslims to solve their disputes through reconciliation, mediation, negotiations and other 'soft' means of conflict resolution. It warns believers that the devil sows disagreement among them (17:53).

In this connection, we find numerous examples in the life of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) which promote compromise and mutual concession in order to build friendship and confidence.

One such example is the incident of when the repair and renovation of the Holy Kaaba was over; a serious quarrel arose as to who was entitled to put the Hijr-i-Aswad (black stone) back in its place. Leaders of many Makkan clans were in dispute, each claiming the honour and the right to set the stone back in its place. There was an impasse, which was solved with the Prophet's

humane and intellectual approach.

It was suggested that the first person to arrive at the Kaaba the next morning would have the right to put the stone back. As it occurred the Holy Prophet was the first to arrive at the Kaaba, but he wished to share the privilege. He spread a sheet of cloth, put the Hajar-i-Aswad in the middle and asked all the leaders to hold the sides together and thus carried the stone back to its place.

In several places the Quran refers to solving disputes amicably, calling upon the disputing parties to forgive, for to forgive is ennobling. It enjoins believers to "...do good as Allah has been good to you. ..." (28:77). It states that "Believers are brothers. So make reconciliation between your brothers and fear Allah, that you may receive mercy" (49:10). Islam commends those who forgive peoples' mistakes and do not hold grudges.

However, conflict is a necessary part of life. And resolving conflict is one of the most difficult areas of human endeavour, but not something impossible. Every conflict is resolvable through negotiations if conducted in a spirit of openness, firmness and willingness to accept the ground realities.

Parties need to abjure the use of force, intimidation, rigidity, intransigence and uncompromising attitudes in settling disputes, as these are the biggest obstructions while fluidity paves the way to settlement. These are some basic requirements of resolving conflicts, but each conflict has a unique history with unique characteristics.

Each party to the conflict has its own concerns and fears. The challenge is to find the right inducement to draw the parties off the battlefield and into the negotiating room. The success of negotiations is often attributed to the readiness of parties to exploit opportunities, confront hard choices and make fair and mutual concessions.

It is very unfortunate that the Muslim ummah, during the last many centuries, has seen numerous conflicts turn ugly causing disunity, mistrust, discontent and unhappiness in its ranks. These have prevented smooth development and caused us to remain backwards. Centuries-old issues lurch back to life every now and then causing tensions.

It is a fact that the world will never be free from disputes and differences. But the need of the hour is to promote pluralism — to coexist in spite of differences. There are divergent views even in a family, so the nation at large must consider it a strength rather than a weakness.

Modern man needs to embrace diversity and curb all the irritants that cause differences to turn

into animosity and bloodshed. Many disputes erupt due to hearsay and the Holy Book enjoins us to verify before taking any action (49:6). We should keep our faith in Allah's promise that He "will judge you on the Day of Resurrection about that wherein you used to differ" (22:69).

Equally, it is necessary to inculcate sound ethics in the younger generation so that disputes can be solved with broad-mindedness. Those who live by the sword often die by the sword. Violence breeds misery and ruin. Therefore, in the modern era, one must seek peaceful means of solving disputes.

The writer is an educationist. **The knowledge society**

By Muhammad Ali

THE capacity for learning is one of the distinct gifts bestowed upon human beings. It is because of this capacity that humans have contributed to civilisation through continuous reflection, exploration and discovery.

This curiosity for learning and construction of knowledge has today led human beings to the concept of a 'knowledge society'.

Historically, it is evident that the societies that valued knowledge and provided an encouraging environment to learners excelled in the construction and contribution of knowledge. Consequently, such a culture led those societies to progress in different aspects of life.

Islam has put significant emphasis on learning and seeking knowledge. For instance, in the Holy Quran seeking knowledge is considered *khairan kathir* (abundant good) and human beings are encouraged repeatedly to reflect on and understand the mysterious world.

Similarly, the Holy Prophet (PBUH) has termed seeking knowledge obligatory upon every Muslim man and woman and guided them to attain knowledge from the cradle to the grave. In short, there are abundant examples in the teachings of Islam that lay stress on learning and acquiring knowledge.

For Muslims, such teachings have been the major impetus for acquiring knowledge and for intellectual discourse. It was because of this motivation that in the formative period of Islam Muslim societies started to thrive due to the thirst for diverse knowledge.

In the 9th-10th centuries Muslim societies excelled in different fields of knowledge such as theology, philosophy, science, art and architecture etc. Those developments are viewed as a treasured contribution of Muslims towards human civilisation.

This conducive environment for learning helped Muslim societies in nurturing extremely dynamic individuals and establishing some highly vibrant centres of learning in cities such as Baghdad and Cairo.

In the early period of Islam Muslim societies were comparatively flexible in studying diverse perspectives. Society then was also considerably open to learning from other cultures. For example, at that period Greek philosophy and science were given substantial attention. The books of Greek scholars and intellectuals were translated into Arabic and conscious efforts were made to reconcile them with Islamic thought.

This tendency of attaining knowledge from diverse sources helped Muslims cultivate an atmosphere where knowledge was constructed and contributed to the larger society.

Today, many Muslim societies such as Pakistan are facing acute challenges in educating their citizens and contributing to knowledge. For example, in Pakistan the literacy rate is comparatively low if compared to neighbouring countries. According to a report around 25 million children are out of school, hence Pakistan will not be able to fulfil its commitment of providing primary education for all children by 2015.

Of the children who do go to school, most of them do not get the opportunity to actualise their potential and develop their competencies. As a result, poor performance can be observed in different spheres of life in the country.

Furthermore, universities are generally considered places from where knowledge is generated and contributed to society. However, it is discouraging to note that not a single university from the Muslim world comes in the top 100 universities of the world; very few are included in the leading 500. However, a few countries like Turkey and Malaysia are making conscious efforts to improve the quality of higher education.

Why does this situation prevail in the Muslim world? There can be many reasons for this disparity. First, it is evident that political will plays a vital role in enhancing the cause of education in any society. However, in many Muslim countries including Pakistan, education has never been the priority of successive governments. No political party or government has shown true commitment to the cause of education. Historically, various education policies have been developed but they have never been implemented properly.

Secondly, the collective mind/attitude also plays a very important role in learning and acquiring knowledge. In many Muslim societies memorisation and rote learning are considered effective methods of learning. Reflective and critical thinking have not been given due importance in the

process of education. Such an attitude towards learning does not help society develop inquisitive minds.

Furthermore, dividing knowledge into different categories, such as religious and non-religious or 'ours' and 'others', limits the learners' capacity for looking at diverse perspectives. At times religious knowledge is viewed as superior and other scientific knowledge is considered less important. Such an approach shapes an attitude of rigidness and an environment of stagnation.

Looking at this situation, Muslim societies today require serious reflection on the challenges they face regarding learning and education. They need to re-examine their beliefs and reconcile them with the Islamic values concerning learning.

They must learn from the formative period of Islam how Muslims of that era were able to be open to different perspectives and to generate and contribute to the human civilisation's wealth of knowledge.

In short, no society can progress without education and seeking knowledge. Islam clearly stresses upon learning and, by making it obligatory, values the seeking of knowledge.

The writer is an educator.

muhammad.ali075@yahoo.com **Power of the pulpit**

By Qasim A Moini

THE power of the minbar (pulpit) in Muslim societies such as ours is considerable. For whatever flows from this source is heard with rapt attention and largely accepted as true by most believers. Hence the responsibility of the sahib-i-minbar (one who occupies the pulpit) is immense.

While local society may be composed of people with varying degrees of involvement in religious activities, it can safely be assumed that a large number of Muslims in Pakistan attend the mosque at least once a week, to offer Friday prayers. And with the khutbah (sermon) being an integral component of Friday prayers, the imam-i-jummah (who leads Friday prayers) or khateeb (who may also deliver sermons on other occasions) has a large, captive audience.

Considering this, the Friday sermon can be instrumental in changing society and inculcating ethical values amongst the believers. Even if worshippers act upon a percentage of what they hear in the sermon, visible changes can occur in society. But for that to happen preachers must plan their sermons in such a way that the khutbah identifies society's many ills and, more importantly, proposes ways inspired by Islamic tradition to find a way out of the moral darkness

that has enveloped us.

What is usually addressed in the Friday sermon? In most mosques the imam dilates on certain Quranic verses while punctuating the sermon with hadith, often citing examples from the early Islamic era. Yet while citing from these sacred sources is perfectly fine, perhaps not many preachers make an attempt to link tradition with solutions to address modern man's problems.

Perhaps we forget that the Holy Quran was not revealed for a certain time or for a certain people, but to address mankind's spiritual and existential issues across the limited boundaries of time and space. It is this disconnect between Islam's eternal message and the content of most Friday sermons that the learned men of religion need to address.

The sermon can be an essential tool for the character building of society. It is important to address theological and philosophical issues, but preachers should not forget the people's problems while addressing believers. Society is brimming with issues that need attention. Seemingly small problems, if regularly highlighted, can lead to big changes.

For example, despite Islam's focus on personal hygiene and an environment free of all sorts of pollution, our streets and neighbourhoods overflow with filth and garbage. If khateeb constantly exhorts their flocks to make an effort to keep their homes and neighbourhoods clean, people may go the extra mile to do so considering it a religious duty.

Similarly, despite Islam's insistence on education for all — men and women, rich and poor — we as a society do not value knowledge and revel in ignorance. If our scholars use Friday sermons to send clear messages to the faithful that educating themselves and their children is a religious requirement, perhaps it may change attitudes. To paraphrase a renowned hadith, knowledge has been equated with life and ignorance with death.

There are countless other questions that can be addressed through the pulpit within the Islamic framework which can be instrumental in changing society. These include respect for women, problems of the youth, treating others with empathy and respect, eliminating ethnic discord, how to raise responsible children etc. Islam provides a wide array of tools for character building. It is up to the men of religion and society as a whole to properly employ different tools in different situations.

Perhaps the root of the problem is selecting the right candidate for the right job. Unfortunately, while there are notable exceptions, many of those who occupy the pulpit across Pakistan may not be qualified to bear the heavy responsibility the minbar demands. After all, preaching has become a profession and unfortunately in many instances preachers lack the broader vision the

Quran and the Prophet's (PBUH) tradition seek to give man.

What, then, are the qualities one who occupies the minbar should possess? The base should be impeccable character fused with a firm knowledge of faith and the religious sciences. But it does not stop there. A truly progressive and socially conscious khateeb should be a capable public speaker, able to use the nuances and subtleties of language to effectively communicate the message.

A thorough knowledge of history should be an added bonus, for Muslims do not live in a bubble and should be aware of the changes the world has gone through both before and since the final revelation. Also, the khateeb must have a working knowledge of sociology in order to addresses society's myriad problems.

But perhaps the most important prerequisite for a khateeb must be hikmah (wisdom), as explained in verse 125 of Surah al-Nahl. Wisdom cannot be learnt in a university or a college, in a madressah or jamea. Academic training is important, but perhaps wisdom is received after studying the book of life, ultimately depending on the Almighty and following the Prophet's tradition.

It may be a tall order but if our society is to be reformed, responsible and socially aware khateeb must occupy our pulpits, from plush air-conditioned mosques to more modest set-ups in villages and katchi abadis. Mosque boards and trusts must primarily take up this responsibility.

Preaching must focus on societal reform and harmony. Those who preach hate and fan the flames of difference must not be let anywhere close to the minbar. Only by placing capable individuals on the pulpit can we hope to change society for the better and stem the further spread of the poison of sectarian and communal hatred.

women rights 3/15/2013

EVERY year March 8 is celebrated as International Women`s Day. ... Women deserve to be appreciated and encouraged because they have rendered numerous sacrifices and endured injustices and are still facing discrimination and ill-treatment ... in society. ...Women can play apivotalrole in the social and economic development of the country and it is the duty of the state to give proper attentionto progress of the female population.

...The celebration of the ..

day reminds us of the significance of females in our society and urges us to accept their due rights, give them proper share in the policymaking institutions and work for their development,

especially in underdeveloped areas.

Nobody can deny women their rights across the globe and in the present era women are in the position to raise a voice for their rights and against violations. ... The male population alone cannot overcome the existing problems and it is the need of the hour to take advantage of women's support and experiences in different fields and sectors.[we also need to] . .

focus on the issues of rural women. It is a fact that women in the rural [areas] can play a vital role in boosting the national economy. ...The government should also take notice of the injustices [meted out to women. It should] particularly [focus on] stopping child marriages, `marriages` with the Quran, acid-throwing incidents and harassment of women.

Caring for the earth

By Amin Valliani

THE earth and its environment are the most valuable assets for all creation. Be it the tiniest insect or a gargantuan creature, all are dependent on the earth's resources.

Among all earthly creations, the position of human beings is superb. Man has a special relation and connection with the earth. Being worthy of prostration by the angels, he is regarded as the crown of creation, a microcosm of the universe and a trustee of all that is created. He is God's vicegerent on earth and assigned the responsibility of taking care of other creations.

He has been gifted with divine guidance, a potential to develop his intellect and build a repository of knowledge. He can also develop his intuition to become a spiritual being. These developments enable him to foresee the portents of the future and act accordingly. Allah says that "It is He who created for you all that is on earth. ..."
(2:29). The resources of the earth — material and non-material — are all under man's trusteeship.

The higher position of humans leads to higher responsibility. This includes the responsibility of protecting the earth against all perils. The earth has all the ways and means needed for man's survival and development. Allah has created the earth for human habitation. Among the known celestial bodies, it has been inhabited by humans and other creatures from time immemorial. It is a place of worshipping Allah and prostrating before Him, seeking blessings and invoking His name day and night.

The Quran refers to the earth very often as a reflection of Allah's power of creation and invites us to look at the mountains, rivers, trees and flowers as evidence of Allah's grace for humanity. The earth provides divine signs and symbols, paving the way to develop one's self, society and the world at large. Islam guides humanity about how to fulfil the responsibilities related to the

earth and carry out development cautiously, thoughtfully and conscientiously.

The earth is an exciting place where man can develop a reflective self and a humane society to foretaste the promises of the life hereafter. The social interactions that take place on earth also impact on one's faith and spiritual life. It is a training ground where a believer learns how to lead a pious life. If he is able to live a pious life here, he would resultantly be capable of inheriting an abode in paradise.

We have inherited the earth from our ancestors and will leave it behind for future generations. It has the beauty and resources to sustain humanity for centuries to come. Therefore, every human act should strengthen its beauty and safeguard its resources.

Humans have been warned over time to be cautious as every act of man has an impact and leaves an imprint on the earth. The earth has been assigned the task of providing sustenance and shelter to all creatures. It is spacious enough to perform prayers. It has been symbolised as a sowing field to harvest in the hereafter. In short Allah says "...Therein you shall live and therein you shall die and from it you shall be brought out" (7:25).

History testifies that humanity has always been capitalising on the earth's resources. Many a time the quest for the earth's resources has become a bone of contention among different nations. Many have fought wars and killed each other over the competition for earthly resources. The earth provides evidence of tyrannies, atrocities and bloodshed of past nations as well as signs and symbols of man's past achievements in order for us to think and draw lessons.

The present era of modernisation and industrialisation has also brought new challenges for the earth. Myriad human activities have created a sense of fear among saner circles that rampant use of resources and unwarranted extinction of natural life would render the earth barren.

Many societies have witnessed the fast-disappearing natural beauty. Rapid expansion of population, increasing environmental degradation and uneven development have contributed to make a mess of the earth.

The environment is affected with the advancement of modern technology, cultivable land has been turned into industrial zones, mining, exploration, dams, deforestation and highways have changed the nature of the environment. Though laws exist in Pakistan requiring environmental impact assessments to regulate developmental projects and ensure sustainable development, these need to be rigorously implemented.

Also, the growing precariousness of resources demands self-assessment with a change of

mindset. Aggrandisement, avarice, excess spending and showing off are vices which the human nature is prone to. These vices have often led some to plunder and subsequently degenerate the earth.

We have been enjoined to be careful in the use of natural resources and to leave behind the world and its resources in a better shape than it was when we came into it.

Being the trustees, our ideal spending patterns should be in conformity with Islamic values that reflect simplicity, modesty and forethought. This does not imply, however, that one should refrain from utilising nature-gifted resources for meeting legitimate needs or providing necessary comforts.

Yet it does require some sort of sanity, sound and serious judgment and consideration when it comes to consumption. Islam's central emphasis is on walking the middle path, avoiding the epicurean as well as the miserly ways of life.

The writer is an educationist.

A harmonious marriage

By Asghar Ali Engineer

UNTIL yesterday, a woman was considered a man's property after marriage and gratification with her was considered his absolute right.

She could not deny her husband this right, whether she wanted to or not. In the early 1980s I was sent a query about this issue. I went through all available traditional Islamic literature and found nothing addressing this problem.

I also studied literature on women's movements in various countries and found that no such concept exists in Western laws too. But then I came across a judgment of a British court which addressed the question of a husband forcing himself on an unwilling wife.

This set me thinking and compelled me to study the Quran from this angle. As we all know most of the Quranic verses were revealed over a period of 23 years and were in response to some or the other problem which arose in the Prophet's (PBUH) life. It seems that no such problem arose as women in those days also considered it their duty to surrender quietly to their husbands' demands. For the same reason hadith literature was also silent on this question.

But mere silence does not mean approval. The Quran is also silent about punishment for drinking. Does it mean drinking is allowed? Not at all. The punishment for drinking was prescribed through analogical reasoning. Also, the Prophet was strongly in favour of ijtihad

based on Quranic values and the values of Sunnah. It is also important to note that it would amount to injuring the basic spirit of the Quran to assign fixed meanings to its verses.

If the Quran is a book of eternal guidance, especially in new situations arising from time to time, one must have the freedom to rethink the meanings of its verses in novel situations.

Also, what is more important to note is that the Quran was not meant for guidance of one or two generations of Arabs but was meant to guide entire humanity for all times to come. Although it is true that the Quran addresses some specific problems of immediate relevance to the Arabs of the time, the Holy Book is much more than that. It gives certain eternal moral and ethical values and a transcendent vision going much beyond the time it was revealed in. Only persons of great vision could capture this spirit of the Quran.

Again it was for this reason that its verses — ever dynamic and pregnant with meaning — were interpreted in different ways. Also, if we confine the Quran to Arab culture, customs and traditions, it will lose much of its relevance for the coming ages.

What the Quran prescribed by way of women's rights was revolutionary enough. It gave to women what no woman could have imagined at the time. Yet there were severe constraints at that time and extremely low consciousness among women themselves in that era.

Now times are changing fast and women's consciousness is not what it was when the ulema of the time were formulating Sharia laws. The whole approach to the divine text has to change in keeping with the transcendent vision of our own times. This requires not only the study of the Quran in great depth but more than that focus on its real vision. In the past the ulema, in keeping with the spirit of their own times, considered woman, above anything else, a reproductive agent and also a means for the gratification of men's desires. Sadly even verses on polygamy and possession of slave girls were interpreted in this light and even contemporary ulema talk of polygamy as necessary because women go through menstrual cycles and pregnancy. Nothing could be more absurd than this.

Even a cursory study of the Quran makes it clear that a woman is as much a spiritual entity with dignity of her own as a man. The Holy Book repeatedly advises men to treat women in all matters, including marriage, divorce and even weaning of children, with utmost sensitivity, compassion and mercy. The Prophet gave women the greatest respect both in the roles of mother and wife.

It was for this reason that when women asked the Prophet about their status, Verse 33:35 was revealed, which gave women the most exalted spiritual status. How can they then be treated as

mere objects of sexual desire as most of our ulema reduce them to?

Desire is not the end but a means of perpetuating the human species and women have a more exalted status in this respect as they fulfil the reproductive function. But for them the human species would be extinct. Men thus cannot treat women as an object of sexual desire but a most noble means of perpetuating the human race.

Thus any attempt to force women to merely fulfil men's lust would be un-Quranic in spirit and against her dignity. Love and tenderness are most fundamental where relations between man and wife are concerned. It is these feelings according to the Quran which create a strong marital bond. If there is no love and tenderness, such a marriage cannot be successful.

The writer is an Islamic scholar who also heads the Centre for Study of Society & Secularism, Mumbai. **Culture, ethics & architecture**
By Muhammad Ali

BUILDING and construction have been significant activities in human civilisation. The journey from caves to building gigantic cities reflects the enormous interest and capacity of human beings in these areas.

Studying the built environment has become one of the important disciplines of human knowledge. The built environment encompasses the entire man-made environment such as buildings, roads, parks, rural and urban planning/development, social/religious spaces etc.

Because of the strong connection between the built environment and quality of life, this area has received extensive attention in many societies and therefore it is studied in connection with other disciplines such as health, development, education and ethics. However, in developing countries like Pakistan this notion has not yet received considerable attention.

Today, many Muslim societies like Pakistan are facing enormous challenges in terms of the built environment. At times construction-related activities are driven largely by economic forces with less consideration for their impact on common people and the environment. It is also observed that sometimes, buildings are constructed while copying from other contexts without considering the local context/culture. This process has posed critical challenges.

For example in many cities, like Karachi, open spaces such as parks and gardens are gradually being replaced with huge buildings. Increasingly, social areas are vanishing. The mushrooming of underdeveloped slums creates enormous challenges to fulfilling the basic needs of the dwellers.

Most buildings are constructed poorly without considering human safety and security. As a result the quality of life is impacted in terms of physical and mental health, social life, education and economic development. Living in a globalised world there is no harm in learning from other societies about architecture and construction but context, needs, cultures, values etc should be kept in mind. The quality of architecture is not limited to technical knowledge. Rather, it also requires cultural and ethical knowledge. Although the ethical and cultural dimension can be learnt from different sources, the rich heritage of Muslims in art and architecture can be one of the most powerful sources.

Historically, Muslim societies have contributed significantly to art and architecture. They have played a vital role in building or extending exemplary cities such as Abbasid Baghdad, Fatimid Cairo, Safavid Isfahan, Ottoman Istanbul and Mughal Lahore. These cities have significance for different reasons such as their design, structure, construction and facilities. They have been hubs of economic and cultural activities for centuries and survive even today.

While building these cities conscious decisions were made in terms of planning and construction, particularly keeping in mind the public interest, strategic position and economic prospects. For example, when Al-Mansur, the second Abbasid caliph, came to power, he envisioned a modern city for his capital (modern-day Baghdad).

According to the famous Muslim historian Al-Tabari, the caliph took a deep interest in the planning and construction of the city. Along with inducting experts from different parts of the world, he himself visited the location and spent months there to supervise the planning and construction process.

Baghdad has been considered impressive for its design, construction, infrastructure, facilities for common people etc. This city has been the centre for different civilisations and cultures for centuries. Similarly, other cities built by Muslims have also been appreciated for their planning and architectural design.

Today, along with technical knowledge the cultural and ethical dimensions of Muslim architecture need to be explored to gain an insight and respond to the challenges in the contemporary Muslim world. Various characteristics of Muslim architecture have been highlighted in literature, which are still relevant to deal with the challenges of architecture.

Adaptability is viewed as one of the important aspects of Muslim architecture. Muslims have learnt from other traditions but they have adapted them wisely by modifying and adding according to their cultural and contextual needs.

Durability is considered another important aspect of the architecture. Many buildings/constructions have survived for centuries and are still in good condition.

Muslim architecture is also seen as user-friendly. For instance space, ventilation and light were particularly taken into account while designing the interior and exterior of buildings.

Furthermore, aesthetics played a predominant role in Muslim architecture. Geometrical shapes were extensively used in the design as symbols. Calligraphy has traditionally been the most prominent feature. Colours were selected carefully with an eye to the kind of building they were to be used for. Water and greenery were considered one of the important aspects of architecture to symbolise religious/ cultural ideals such as purity and jannah.

A conscious effort to engage with diverse kinds of Islamic architecture will not only be helpful to learn from, but also to support efforts to preserve heritage. Such engagement will also provide common people with an opportunity to enhance their quality of life through the process of integration into their heritage.

In short, the built environment is very much connected to human life. The rich Muslim heritage in architecture can be a valuable source for Muslims to learn from in order to respond to the ethical/cultural issues of architecture. In this regard, conscious efforts are needed at multiple levels such as the policy level, through education, media etc, to educate the people about the importance of the built environment in enhancing the quality of life.

The writer is an educator. **Importance of Discipline**
By Amin Valliani

February 15, 2013

AT many places in the Holy Quran there is reference to the universe and its different phenomena. It invites us to reflect on the working of all celestial bodies and learn lessons in order to be successful in life.

All celestial bodies are governed by discipline an organised and coordinated system with an invisible linkage.

We see the daily rising and setting of the sun, the moon appears and shines according to phases,

the seasons change on a yearly basis and the days and nights occur according to their length fixed in every season.

Similarly on the earth we see green trees, colourful flowers, sweet and delicious fruits, towering mountains, gushing water channels, animals, birds, bees and insects and the oceans. All these are bound together by natural laws which allow them to exist with an integrated coherence.

Within the human body there are several systems, such as the respiratory, circulatory, digestive, nervous and reproductive systems working according to set patterns.

By studying all of this one can learn and discover the secrets of nature. Allah promises that `We will show them Our signs in the universe and in their own selves until it becomes manifest to them that this is the truth. ...` (41:53).

Natural laws are inherent in the working of the entire universe. They are balanced, well-integrated and divinely enforced ever since the universe was created.

Islam, being a natural religion, has emphasised learning from nature. It has prescribed community practices like the daily prayers, fasting, Haj and other acts of worship synchronising with the movement of celestial bodies. Thus we learn many lessons but the most important lesson one can learn is discipline. It can be regarded as a major theme, a core value and a great secret of success in any area of human endeavour.

Every human desires success in life, but success depends on strictly following the path of discipline. To be disciplined means to follow the teachings of a guide, whether that guide is a person, an ethic, a community, a historical tradition or a set of ideas and to organise one's behaviour and attitude according to those teachings, as per the Encyclopaedia of Religion.

The Holy Prophet (PBUH) spent years in order to change the unruly Arab culture into a civilised society. Islam encourages Muslims to display responsible behaviour in life. It disallows drinking alcohol, gambling and other vices which take people towards indiscipline and laxity. The Holy Quran portrays a vivid picture of the Day of Judgment characterised by an extreme sense of discipline. It says `On the day when it comes no person shall speak except by His (Allah`s)leave. ...` (11:105).

A human in this world is like a student in a school. He has to learn lessons of regularity, punctuality, mindfulness and attentiveness to what his teachers say. Discipline makes our lives easy and enables us to realise our goals. Overall, society becomes caring and law-abiding.

As far as our nation`s history is concerned, Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah dreamt that Pakistan would be an egalitarian, progressive and peaceful society. He gave certain ideals like unity, faith and discipline. If the country had been run according to these ideals the nation would have progressed and would not be in the mess it is in now.

Discipline is one of the most important requirements if a nation is to progress. It leads man to the path of success, be it in any field or institution. Without adhering to a strict sense of discipline, achieving success becomes very difficult.

Discipline differentiates humans from beasts. For example a stray animal leads an irregular and undisciplined life. It sleeps wherever it finds a place, scavenges through garbage for scraps of food etc. Animals do not have a sense of right and wrong, nor a guide or directions to regulate their life. But humans are subject to discipline and their success lies in adherence to it.

A society without a strong sense of discipline in all areas of life has, time and again in human history, proved to be well on the way to decay. Unfortunately over the last many years many state organisations in Pakistan, as well as the public at large, have ignored the Islamic message of discipline.

For example we often read reports pointing out financial indiscipline in matters of public funds. Government officers running the public services have become lax. Major cities like Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad present the worse scenario of indiscipline. Markets are plagued by rampant encroachments, traffic on the roads is hugger-mugger, people travel on the roofs of buses without realising the inherent dangers. Lack of discipline makes our main roads jam-packed causing irritation and friction on thoroughfares. Illegal parking and crumbling roads make urban life a nightmare. These are just a few examples.

This state of indiscipline is tied to the overall state of affairs prevailing in Pakistan.

Changing mindsets and the culture of indiscipline is much harder than changing the law. It needs proper planning with clear indications about where society needs to be headed. The media and the education system have to play a crucial role in this regard. As a suggestion, television channels can try and convince people to change their thinking, attitude and style of working. They can telecast short plays highlighting core values and Islamic messages based on discipline, regularity, punctuality and empathy for others. This may persuade people to lead more disciplined lives.

- The writer is an educationist.

Leadership criteria

By Muhammad Burdbar Khan

IT is often stated that the real reason behind the world's perennial financial, economic and political crises is the lack of ethical leadership.

If one ponders over the state of affairs in Pakistan as well, it becomes clear that it is also the singular lack of leadership that is driving the country into the abyss.

Leadership can be commonly defined as directly or indirectly influencing others, by means of formal authority or personal attributes, to act in accordance with one's intent or a shared purpose.

There is an emphasis on the role of 'transformational' leadership in academic circles these days. It has been preferred as a better mode of leadership than 'transactional' leadership, which is characterised by a swapping, trading or bargaining motive in an exchange process between a leader and the led.

Transactional leadership lacks lasting engagement between the two sides as both 'use' one another as we commonly see in material exchanges. On the contrary, transformational leadership involves the mutual 'raising' of both sides to higher levels of motivation and morality.

It is acknowledged that authentic transformational leadership must rest on a moral foundation of legitimate values. The difference between authentic and pseudo-transformational leadership lies in the presence or absence of such a moral foundation of the leader.

In addition, leaders in different spheres of life may impart ethical values to followers who seek guidance from authorities they respect and trust. However, if the values spread are unethical, these authorities are pseudo-transformational, as we commonly see in Pakistan. Ironically, although still eyed with suspicion, spirituality at the workplace has gained currency in the West and there is even talk of spiritual leadership in Western academic circles.

Spirituality based leadership, academically, does not differ much from leadership, but rather proposes that leadership must be based on self-realisation, personal character, and foster integrity and character throughout the organisation. Besides virtuous behaviour, spirituality looks for transcendence in human life. Consciousness and affirmation of the higher self is considered essential in spiritual leadership behaviour for engendering care for others.

The moral development of the leader, thus, embraces the individual, familial and spiritual dynamics of the personality. Small wonder, then, that transformational leadership incorporates terms such as ethics, character, transcendence etc. Such leaders receive power without seeking it.

We can find accounts of these leadership styles in spiritual and religious traditions. We find authentic transformational leadership to be more consistent than transactional leadership with Islamic traditions. In Islam, the general philosophy of life centres on Tawhid — the oneness of the Creator.

From this unity of the Creator follows the unity of creation, and unity of purpose in the life of a human being. In the Islamic concept of the universe, man has been appointed as a vicegerent (khalifah) on this earth by God and everything has been given to him in trust (amanah).

As part of society, he has to perform his duties while being conscious of that trust. In fact, there are verses of the Quran pointing to the same concept: “Behold, thy Lord said to the angels: “I will create a vicegerent on earth. ...” (2:30).

Leadership in Islam is considered a trust. A leader is entrusted with leading a group of people or managing an organisation. The leader is responsible as well as accountable. There are two levels of trust: responsibility and accountability. Trust goes with responsibility and accountability as is depicted in the following verse: “O David! We did indeed make thee a vicegerent on earth: so judge thou between men in truth (and justice): Nor follow thou the lusts (of thy heart), for they will mislead thee from the path of Allah: for those who wander astray from the path of Allah, is a penalty grievous, for that they forget the Day of Account” (38:26).

Islam acknowledges that leadership is exercised at different levels. A well-known prophetic tradition outlines the concept of multi-level leadership: “Each of you is a guardian and is responsible for his subjects. The ruler, who has authority over people, is a guardian and is responsible for them. ... So, all of you are guardians and are responsible for your charges” (Muslim, 2000, 663).

Thus, leadership has to be exercised at the level of the family, community, organisation and country. A leader is accountable to God primarily, but he/she is accountable to the people/follower as well. The Prophet (PBUH) has been quoted to have said: “If a person dies having cheated the people he/she was entrusted with, he/she will not smell the scent of paradise” (Muslim, 2000).

In fact, one should not seek a leadership role in Islam for the sake of power but only when one has the expertise to help others in a crisis situation. Interestingly, it is quite contrary to what we

see these days when all and sundry make a beeline for the corridors of power for any potential benefit.

Many prophetic traditions emphasise that appointments to leadership positions should be mainly based on qualifications and the ability to do the job. A Quranic verse states: "...Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. ..." (49:13).

The preceding discussion informs us that the world in general and Pakistan in particular urgently needs transformational leadership bordering on spiritual leadership which must rest on moral foundations.

More importantly, only those must be considered for positions of leadership who are competent and qualified for the job and who are not only conscious of their immense responsibilities but also mindful of ultimate accountability to the higher (divine) self.

*The writer is member of the adjunct faculty at Stirling Management School, University of Stirling, Scotland. **Is Sharia immutable?***

By Asghar Ali Engineer

IT is believed by millions of Muslims across the world that Sharia laws are immutable and represent divine will. This is based on serious misunderstanding. Sharia is not and cannot be immutable.

Recently I was invited to the Jaipur Literary Festival to be part of a panel discussion on the book Heaven on Earth by Sadakat Kadri of London, which is on the application of Sharia laws across the Muslim world. He has travelled to different Muslim countries and talked to various ulema and muftis about Sharia as applied to their respective countries.

All of them were defenders of conservative Sharia formulations and refused to admit any change. They maintained that Sharia being divine cannot be changed. It is from this rigidity of our ulema that the misunderstanding among common Muslims arises that Sharia is divine and hence immutable.

In fact our ulema forget that ijthihad was not only permitted but encouraged by the Prophet of Islam (PBUH) and the hadith pertaining to Ma'adh bin Jabal is well-known.

When the Prophet appointed him to the governorship of Yemen and he came to take leave of the Prophet, Ma'adh was asked how he would govern. Ma'adh said, according to the Quran. The Prophet thereupon asked what he would do if he did not find the solution to the problem in the

Quran, to which Ma'adh said he would govern according to the Sunnah. But when the Prophet asked if he could not find it in the Sunnah also, Ma'adh said "ana ajtahidu" (I will exert myself to find the solution). The Prophet thereupon patted his back and told him he was right.

All ulema accept this hadith and yet, while theoretically admitting the permissibility of ijtihad, refuse to engage in it or allow it saying there is no one capable of doing it.

In fact, what is unalterable are the principles and values underlying Sharia ie usul al-fiqh. But laws based on these usul must undergo change in keeping with changes in the social and cultural context. In fact cultural context plays a very important role in the formulation of Sharia. The Arab adaat (customs and traditions) form an important part of Sharia formulations.

The late Abdurrahman Wahid, who headed Indonesia's religious organisation Nahdlatul Ulama and also served as president of that country, told me once that there was great debate among the ulema of Indonesia over whether Indonesian customs and traditions can become part of Sharia as applicable in that country; those who advocated Indonesian adaat ultimately won.

Let us remember that what was called the Muslim ummah (community) during the Prophet's time was limited to Arabia only. But when Islam spread to different areas the ummah was no more confined to the Arabs alone; it also encompassed the Iranians, Uzbeks, Turks, Chinese, Indians and others. Thus there were various linguistic and cultural groups within the fold of Islam.

Sharia was influenced by these factors. Thus the ummah was no longer a homogenous group but comprised of various cultural communities with their own age-old customs and traditions.

However, the values, maqasid (intentions) and masalih (welfare) of human beings did not change. Maqasid al-sharia and masalih al-sharia do not change, but in order to keep these values, maqasid and masalih intact, the rules framed by the ulema must change. When Imam Shafi'i moved from Hejaz to Egypt, which was a confluence of Arab and Coptic cultures, he realised this and changed his position on several issues.

However, what I am saying does not apply to ibadaat ie matters pertaining to worship, the world hereafter etc but only to matters pertaining to mu'amalat ie interpersonal relations like marriage, divorce, inheritance and many other similar socio-economic matters.

The most important, of course, among these is matters pertaining to marriage, divorce etc. In Jaipur I spoke mainly on women's position in Sharia and women's position in the Quran.

The fact that the venue was packed with people shows the interest women's position in general and that of Muslim women in particular generates. I commented that the book referred to earlier deals with only the status quo and application of Sharia laws of patriarchal and feudalised Islamic societies. It very much misses what I call the transcendental Quranic vision. The Quran gives absolutely equal rights to man and woman without any discrimination.

However, the Quran was revealed in a highly patriarchal society which later also became feudalised when the caliphate turned into a feudal empire. Thus patriarchy and feudalism completely distorted the fundamental Quranic vision of gender equality and women's individuality and dignity.

Unless we understand these sociological and cultural aspects and relate them to the theological one, we will miss the very revolutionary role which Islam wanted to play in totally transforming women's status.

However, it is highly regrettable that Muslim societies could not produce ulema with the capacity to relate sociology with theology. Even in modern and post-modern societies our ulema totally lack a transcendental vision of Islam. They have become prisoners of the past and have frozen Islam in a feudal, patriarchal state.

We need theologians with vision to fulfil the Quran's mission of going beyond the present which is full of injustice. Our society is replete with gender injustices and the Quran's central value is justice — justice in all areas of life. Gender justice is as emphatically emphasised as justice in social and economic matters.

In order to emphasise gender justice it is high time that we produce female theologians with profound knowledge of the Arabic language. Even the most conservative ulema cannot oppose the concept of female theologians.

The writer is an Islamic scholar who also heads the Centre for Study of Society & Secularism, Mumbai.

The ethical ideal

Qasim A Moini

IT can be argued that the biggest dilemma confronting the Muslim world currently is a moral and ethical one. The root cause of all the major ills that plague Muslims — ignorance, poverty, intolerance, etc — is the fact that many of us have failed to apply the practical ethics taught by Islam in our everyday lives.

The Quran and Sunnah contain very clear guidelines regarding the construction of an ethical

personality. The Almighty desires that each individual reach the exalted station of ashraf al-makhluqat, the pinnacle of creation. Yet most Muslims are content — out of either lack of direction or lack of effort — to be counted amongst the asfala safileen, or the lowest of the low. The disastrous results of such a course of action are clear for all to see.

But what is strange is that in a country like Pakistan, which is so full of religiosity and claims to be an ‘Islamic’ society, there is a huge moral and ethical vacuum. This either means that the majority of us are hypocrites, or we have not endeavoured far enough into the bottomless oceans of knowledge to seek out the pearls of truth — and act upon it. One would like to believe the latter is the case.

Considering that Rabiul Awwal, and particularly this day, is linked to the blessed birth of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) — that greatest of teachers and possessor of the most sublime morals — it would be in order to reacquaint ourselves with the examples of moral excellence found in the life of the Messenger. This is important for two reasons.

Firstly, in order to improve our own ethical situation we need to go beyond just professing love for the Prophet and try to apply his example to our own lives. Secondly, in the wake of crude attempts by some to malign his impeccable character, Muslims need to practically demonstrate to other communities what it means to be a follower of the Messenger. In other words, burning down our own cities to ‘protect’ his honour is light years away from the example he has set; building a compassionate, knowledgeable, egalitarian and indeed ethical society is in line with what the Prophet taught.

To get a proper idea about the personality of the Prophet, we must consult the traditional primary sources of Islam: the Quran and the authentic hadith. This is important for as Iranian scholar Prof Syed Hossein Nasr argues in his book *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, “In order to understand the significance of the Prophet it is not sufficient to study from the outside historical texts pertaining to his life. One must view him also from within the Islamic point of view. ...”

However, it is also important to consider what those outside of Islam say about the Prophet, especially regarding his moral excellence. While there is much spurious material available in historical texts meant to malign the Prophet’s character — due partly to Orientalist biases against Islam and partly due to the early controversies regarding the recording of hadith within the Islamic realm — there are some truly remarkable and frank admissions from non-Muslim thinkers regarding the Messenger’s ethical excellence.

For example English historian Edward Gibbon says in *History of the Saracen Empire*, which he co-authored: “The greatest success of Muhammad’s (PBUH) life was effected by sheer moral

force without the stroke of a sword.” On the other hand Mahatma Gandhi is quoted to have said: “I became more ... convinced that it was not the sword that won a place for Islam. ... It was the rigid simplicity, the utter self-effacement of the Prophet, the scrupulous regard for his pledges, his intense devotion to his friends and followers, his intrepidity, his fearlessness, his absolute trust in God and in his own mission.”

Aside from the words of such luminaries of history, most Muslims have — from childhood — heard traditions in which the moral excellence and outstanding character of the Prophet have been highlighted. Traditions which speak of his magnanimity towards adversaries, his tenderness towards the weak, the poor and the downtrodden of society, his love of knowledge, his dislike of arrogance and ostentation, his simplicity etc. Yet if we study our own society most of these values are completely absent, despite our claims of love for the Prophet.

Instead, what we find here and in most Muslim states is a vicious society steeped in ignorance, malice and exploitation. Justice — the foundation upon which an Islamic society is built — is completely absent. And those who talk of imposing Sharia present a frightening, mutilated version of Islam, one which is at complete odds with the Prophet’s Islam.

This disconnect between what we preach and what we practise must be urgently addressed in order to reform society. The pulpit must be at the forefront of this struggle: instead of focusing on relatively minor issues and fanning differences, society’s shortcomings (and their solutions) must be highlighted in mosques. This is admittedly a tall order, but until the pulpit — perhaps the most powerful of religious platforms — is used to construct a better society, change will not be forthcoming.

Going back to what Prof Nasr has written, in the Holy Quran the Almighty announces that He and the angels confer blessings upon the Prophet, going on to order those who believe to do the same (‘Surah Ahzab’). Such is the stature of the Noble Messenger that without conferring blessings upon him and his progeny the daily prayers are incomplete. These are clear signs for those who believe that there is no better an example to emulate in order to achieve excellence in this world and the next.

The writer is a member of staff. **The ethical framework**

By Ahmad Raza

SURAH Luqman provides an outline of the Islamic ethical framework. Verses 12 to 19 clearly spell out the indicators of a well-organised ethical framework for everyone.

God says in Verse 12 that, “And certainly We gave wisdom to Luqman [and said] be thankful to

God. Those who are grateful are grateful [for their own soul]. And whoever denies, then God is free of need and praiseworthy”.

The innate ethical sense programmed in a human being commands him or her to be thankful to God. This act of thanksgiving makes a person humble and generous to fellow human beings. Those who show compassion and warmth to the creatures of God are the true manifestations of ethical sensibility.

The act of thanksgiving purges our egos from feelings of evil and whisperings of all sorts, hate, jealousy, revenge and oppression. This ego-cleansing activity has been termed by the Sufis as takhliya. Some spiritual teachers have made it mandatory upon their students to engage in takhliya every night and prepare a balance sheet and diagnose and rectify in case some evil feelings towards a fellow creature have crept into one’s thoughts and feelings.

The visible psychological effect of this purging gradually makes an ego recipient to the pain and suffering of fellow creatures.

The real value of thanksgiving is thus revealed in one’s own ego transforming and becoming humble. The permanent psychological advantage thus lies in humility and not pride and prejudice. It connects a person with God.

Then Luqman engages in a conversation with his son from verse 13 onwards. He advises him, “...Do not indulge in an act of association (shirk) with God. Shirk is the greatest injustice”. The next verse urges man to be kind to his parents: “...His mother carried him bearing weakness after weakness.... Be thankful to Me and to your parents; to Me is the [final] destination”.

Parental care is thus incumbent upon a person under all circumstances, except in case one’s parents force one to engage in an act of association (shirk) with God. The right of parental care is inalienable because God says that one should keep worldly relations with one’s parents in a decent manner even if they force one to indulge in shirk, but one must not engage in it at any cost.

The intactness of familial organisation is irreversibly connected to parental care. The sociological implication of ethical sensibility can be seen here very explicitly that bears upon the social foundations of human societies. The act of being thankful to God and one’s parents not only cleanses one’s ego but keeps the social system healthy, clean and dependable.

Verse 16 takes up the problem of evil very squarely. Luqman advising his son says, “Oh son! If the [evil] is equivalent to a mustard seed and remains hidden inside a rock or in the heavens or in

the earth, God shall bring it forth. Verily God is subtle and aware”.

Those who think that they can get away with doing evil or hide it from divine accountability are mistaken. God has made examples of evil individuals and evil civilisations that transgressed and committed tyranny against others. The best practice Luqman advises his son is to stay away from evil.

Verses 17 to 19 describe the behavioural attributes of a person which have far-reaching moral, cultural and social consequences for a harmonious and healthy society. Luqman advises, “Oh my son! Establish prayer, and command good and forbid evil and be patient over what befalls you...” The next verse advises “And do not turn thy face away from people and do not walk in insolence on the land. Verily, God does not like the arrogant and the boastful”. Verse 19 says that “And be moderate in your pace and lower your voice. Verily the braying of the donkey is the most disagreeable of sounds”.

The practice of prayer connects one with God. This spiritual connection has a logical corollary: that one practises well and avoids evil in life. This also leads one to be patient and bear the pains, discomfort and losses in one’s life.

This patience is then reflected in interpersonal life and psychomotor activities of a person. One walks in harmony and talks with temperance. The attributes outlined by Luqman help create an ethical personality that is likeable. The ethical individual thus created would form the basis of a trust-efficient, interdependent and harmonious social fabric. The ethical and self-aware individuals then turn out to be the building blocks of a socially aware and critical collective.

This ethical model is absent from our collective life. Our public discourse and our textbooks promote pedagogy of loud speech, arrogance, complaining, discrimination and impatience etc. Our personality building discourse in classrooms as well as personality testing methods are based on alien ethical concepts.

For example, aggressive, competitive and self-confident are considered to be the core values of a successful manager. So management books are replete with examples of ‘aggressive managers’ who achieved success in their life by subscribing to utilitarian ethics, and which only focus around the notion of self-interest. One must pause here and ask what kind of ‘success’ one is looking for.

Similarly, TV talk shows, which promote loud speech and violent aggression, are highly rated and liked. Thus, our crisis is ethical and not of a political or economic nature.

The writer is a social scientist based at the University of Management and Technology, Lahore.

Role of the family

ISLAM recognises the importance of the family. It is a natural and fundamental unit of society. If all families of a given society are conscious of their roles and responsibilities in creating and developing healthy, righteous members, then society and subsequently the nation will benefit.

We all belong to a family and our nurturing, growth, mindset and character revolve around our family traditions. According to medical science, every child is a carrier of genetic factors of its family. Similarly, it is also evident from social history that many children prefer the vocations of their parents.

If a child is born in a politician's or sportsman's family, then it is probable he may become a politician or a sportsman in future to continue the family tradition. Also, if a family is educated with a strong inclination towards a particular religion, then the child is likely to pursue the same tradition. Thus the child is a reflection of the parents and carries forth family traditions.

Parents are always concerned about their children. Even prophets have expressed deep concern for their offspring. The Holy Quran refers to Hazrat Ibrahim, who wished that his children may be steadfast on the straight path and be regular in their prayers. He prayed, "My Lord! Make me one who performs prayer and also from my offspring..." (14:40). When Allah granted him leadership (imamah), he asked for the same position for his offspring (2:124).

Families in modern times face numerous challenges. Modernisation and urbanisation have totally changed the traditional patterns of family life. People are more conscious and in a hurry to earn more money to improve the quality of material life. No doubt in the present age when the cost of living is high it has become necessary for everyone to contribute towards the family income. But one must not forget the traditional values which are considered essential for family harmony.

In an ideal family setting, children get enough attention, quality time, love, guidance and patronage from their elders to build their future lives and similarly, grandparents enjoy respect, good healthcare and financial protection. Nowadays, many parents are busy in their jobs for long hours and children as well as grandparents are often neglected. They feel alienated and some youngsters can develop behavioural problems.

Islam does not prohibit the legal ways of earning money, but it does underline a sense of responsibility towards family, society and the ummah at large. The Holy Quran directs believers to "...Ward off from yourselves and your families a fire (Hell) whose fuel is men and stone..."

(66:6).

Every family wishes for its children to achieve the best in their careers. But certain eternal values whose roots are to be found in all civilisations must be adhered to. For example, the first and foremost requirement of every child is to have his mother's milk at the start of life.

Nowadays, many mothers, due to a number of reasons, avoid breastfeeding their children, which results not only in physical weakness of the child but also intellectual and spiritual frailty. The Quran says that mothers should suckle their children for two whole years (2:233).

The second requirement is to provide the right environment that makes a child curious, imaginative and ethical. The home should be made a centre of Islamic values where future leadership is nurtured. The parents, as well as other senior members of the family, must avoid abusive language, violence and other unethical practices in the home environment. They should keep their home environment free from unhealthy activities like smoking, drugs and other abuses.

At a tender age, many children do not listen to their parents, but they do try to copy them. If the parents are sincere towards their religion, practising it daily and have a positive attitude towards their neighbours, kith and kin and humanity their children will also acquire the same traits later in life. If parents solve problems by creating understanding through mutual discussion, the children will develop the same method.

Another important aspect relates to schooling. It is incumbent upon parents to make sure their children get quality education.

Schools are supportive in the overall nurturing of a child, but the main responsibility lies on parents. Children spend a few hours in school, but the majority of their time is spent at home. In the Quran, our worldly life is likened to a sport (6:32); all sports require the spirit of sportsmanship. Likewise, our life is demanding, littered with challenges. Its competitive nature requires consistent and persistent efforts. It is a jihad in Islamic parlance.

In other words, one needs exercise to stay healthy, reading and reflection to stay fit intellectually, positive attitude in social interactions to command respect, savings and prudent living to meet economic exigencies and above all the regular practice of religion to strengthen the faith.

A cursory look at the present society indicates the alarmingly low level of the ethical standards of our new generation. The burgeoning gap between parents and children has blighted the social fabric and day-to-day incidents of violence and lawlessness require urgent steps to improve the

situation.

The government has a great responsibility in this regard. For example, it needs to revise the curriculum and make relevant changes. The media, educationists and social scientists also need to contribute by suggesting essential changes to improve the child-parent relationship and strengthen the bonds of family life.

The writer is an educationist.

Vaccinators targeted

RECENTLY we read with great pain that extremists in Pakistan killed several women who were active in administering anti-polio drops to children.

Many feel that one of the reasons behind the attacks was that the extremists think an international conspiracy is afoot to reduce the population of Muslims in the world, and the anti-polio drops make a person impotent.

Some Muslims and mosque imams in India too thought likewise and in their Friday sermons asked Muslims not to allow social workers to administer anti-polio drops to their children.

But in India it was just an appeal. No one was physically harmed, much less killed. In Pakistan the extremists believe in a culture of violence. For them the only solution to their orders being defied is to shoot people dead. For example, Malala Yousufzai was shot — but thankfully survived — because she did not obey the Taliban’s call to stop advocating education for girls.

Those who kill others in the name of Islam can hardly be called Muslim, let alone pious Muslims. In order to be a pious Muslim one has to be just. The Quran says that “...Do justice, it is closest to piety....” (5:8)

How can one claim to observe the norms of justice by killing others? Justice is something most difficult to do. Even for murder we require at least two pious and honest witnesses and to prove rape or fornication we need four such witnesses. One has to make sure, according to Sharia, that before accepting their testimony, the witnesses are honest and pious. Testimony cannot be accepted from just anyone.

To kill someone without justification is a great sin. The Quran says that “...Whoever kills a person unless it be for manslaughter or for mischief in the land, it is as though he has killed [the] whole humanity. And whoever saves a life, it is as if he has saved the whole humanity....” (5:32). This is a very important statement of the Holy Book.

Life is sacred. It is not so cheap that anyone can kill any other person just like that. If life could be taken by anyone at any time, entire humanity would be wiped out in the course of time.

Perhaps the extremists need to ask themselves which rule of Sharia has prescribed that administering anti-polio drops should be punished with death? Besides, this cure did not exist in the early days of the faith. The orthodox elements greatly resist any change in Sharia law even with proper justification, but do not hesitate to change Sharia or invent new laws through false reasoning when it suits their interests. This is what killing women administering anti-polio drops amounts to. It is pure innovation with false justification.

These very extremists would not mind producing and selling drugs through smuggling to buy weapons and destroy thousands of young lives. All intoxicants are strictly prohibited in Islam, particularly liquor and drugs, and yet the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan are known to be producing and smuggling drugs to buy weapons.

I have attended an anti-drugs conference in Afghanistan and know how thousands of people are suffering because the Taliban want weapons. Even a number of women are addicted to drugs in Afghanistan. So much for the version of Islam propagated by the Taliban.

Also, whoever said that anti-polio doses make men impotent? Have they done any research on that? Or do they believe only in hearsay? To believe in something without confirming its truth is highly condemned by the Quran. The Holy Book calls it zann (suspicion, guess). The Quran condemns zann. In some cases it says it is a sin, in other cases it is described as personal desire and nothing to do with the truth. The Holy Book advises believers to avoid zann as much as possible.

If the extremists have proof the anti-polio drops are harmful, let them produce it. Or do they want these young children to be afflicted with polio and remain disabled for life? Life is a beautiful gift from Allah. Do they want this beautiful gift to become an affliction for these young ones? That too on the basis of mere suspicion or guesswork?

Also, this campaign has been launched by the UN to eliminate this curse from earth and make our lives healthier and happier. It is far from aimed at reducing the number of Muslims. Polio doses are being administered throughout the world. The whole of humanity is benefiting from the campaign, particularly in Africa and Asia where most of the world's poor live. Perhaps it is a conspiracy of the Taliban to paralyse the coming generation of Muslims so they live at their mercy and through their charity.

There is so much emphasis in the Quran and hadith on knowledge (ilm). Instead of encouraging

science and learning Muslim extremists are being ignorant and superstitious. They want to keep Muslims in the darkness of ignorance through the sheer power of the gun.

Muslims are in fact duty-bound to eliminate ignorance and usher in an era of enlightenment. But the Taliban do not want modern education, especially for women, do not want modern medicines and do not want freedom for anyone. Instead they are spreading the gun culture. Is this Islam?

We have to produce young Muslims to counter this menace of extremism as it is no less a curse than polio.

The writer is an Islamic scholar who also heads the Centre for Study of Society & Secularism, Mumbai.

Plurality of Expression

By Muhammad Ali

December 28, 2012

RELIGION is viewed as divine inspiration and as guidance for the salvation of human beings. When the divine message, which reveals itself through allegorical and symbolic language, is understood and practised by people in different contexts with different focuses, the understanding appears in the form of multiple interpretations.

Hence, in the presence of multiple expressions, if a particular interpretation is considered `the` interpretation instead of `an` interpretation and when attempts are made to impose it through force, it causes conflict and polarisation in society.

According to William Chittick, an eminent scholar in Islamic learning, Islam appeals to different dimensions of human needs such as the mind (intellectual), the heart (spiritual) and the body (rule and law).

Historically, Islam has been understood differently by different groups of people. For example, the theologians and philosophers put emphasis on the intellectual aspect (mind), the Sufis focused on the spiritual dimension (heart) and the jurists paid attention to the legal aspect of Islam.

In the formative period of Islam, there were major developments in different areas of human knowledge in the Muslim world such as theology, philosophy, jurisprudence, Sufism, art, architecture and science. Those developments are considered a valuable contribution of Muslims

to human civilisation.

It shows that in the early period of Islam, Muslim societies were considerably flexible and open to studying religion through different perspectives.

The diverse exegeses of the Holy Quran during that period reflect people`s interest in understanding Islamic teachings with the help of prevailing knowledge and science.

Society then was also comparatively open to learning from other traditions. For instance, during that period Greek philosophy and science was given considerable attention. The books of Greek philosophers were translated into Arabic and conscious efforts were made to relate them to Islamic thought.

Hence this trend of seeking knowledge from different sources helped Muslims to develop an environment where different views could be tolerated and accepted.

Today, we live in a globalised and multicultural society. This society demands a paradigm of thinking which leads to appreciation of multiple perspectives. In this context, we can learn from the formative period in order to develop a culture of tolerance and acceptance of the plurality of views.

There is a need to re-examine our way of thinking and argument, which is mostly influenced by Hellenistic logic. This logic basically encourages debate and rejection instead of understanding and appreciation. Maltese thinker Dr Edward de Bono has called this way of argument `rock logic` based on the paradigm `I am right, you are wrong`, which leads to conflict and polarisation. Today, we require a `water logic` that encourages understanding of different perspectives through dialogue.

Today we need the culture of dialogue rather than debate.

Dialogue leads to understanding of different perspectives with a win-win approach. Debate can lead to rejection with a winlose mindset. From the debate approach it is difficult to develop the culture of harmony and coexistence in a diverse society like Pakistan.

In understanding religion we need to adopt the paradigm of a humble student rather than a proud scholar. When religion is approached with humility, it helps one realise that human attempts to understand the divine message cannot be the final or absolute understanding; rather, a continuous effort is required. On the other hand when religion is approached with scholastic vanity, one tends to reject other perspectives. In such a rigid environment learning stops and stagnation

prevails.

In this regard, Maulana Rumi`s allegory about the elephant is very powerful in understanding attitudes towards the truth.

According to Rumi, once an elephant was brought to a place where people had not seen such an animal before. The elephant was put in a dark room and six people were asked to touch the creature and describe it.

The first man touched the elephant`s leg and reported that the unknown phenomenon was similar to a tree trunk. The second man touched the elephant`s stomach and said that the elephant was like a wall. The third man touched the elephant`s ear and asserted that the phenomenon was precisely like a fan.

The fourth man touched the elephant`s tail and described the beast as a piece of rope. The fifth man felt the elephant`s tusks and declared the phenomenon to be a spear. The sixth person touched the elephant`s snout and announced the phenomenon was a snake.

The six men started arguing to prove their observation to be correct. However, when the elephant was brought out from the dark room all of them were surprised. They had touched only one part of the elephant but assumed they had absolute knowledge about the creature. Similarly, we understand one aspect of faith and view it as the absolute understanding.

Developing a culture of dialogue and acceptance of the plurality of expression is not an easy job. In this regard education, media and other social institutions can play a vital role to inculcate the culture of acceptance and appreciation of plural interpretations.

In short, our society today is facing critical challenges in the form of violence and polarisation. There is a dire need to understand that we cannot eliminate the differences which have been part of our history. Rather, we need to learn to live with the differences by accepting and celebrating them. In this regard we need to develop new lenses to look at the plurality of expression.

- The writer is an educator.