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THE ISLAMIC CONCEPTION OF LIFE |
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The Islamic Conception of Life



The vitality of any society, people or civilization depends in a large part on its philosophy of life conceived and practised. In his natural state, man scarcely thinks of anything but his own individual interests, and then only later of his close relatives. However, there have been human groups in every epoch who have particularly distinguished themselves. When we study the features and characteristics of past civilizations (and we are now possibly at the dawn of another one) we find that even though one group may become distinguished as the torch-bearer for a civilization in a particular epoch, that does not necessarily mean that all other contemporary groups would be living in a state of savagery. There is instead the relative pre-eminence of one over the other, in the ladder of graded civilizations. For instance, when the Phoenicians appeared on the scene and developed a brilliant civilization, several other contemporary peoples were perhaps almost as civilized, although lacking the occasion and a suitable field of their activity. At the Arabo-Islamic epoch, the Greeks, Romans, Chinese, Indians and others, possessed all the characteristics of civilized peoples. Even so, they did not rise to the heights of the standard-bearers of the civilization of their epoch. In our own time, if the people of the USA and Russia form the vanguard with their nuclear might and other claims, the British, Chinese, French and the Germans follow close behind. Notwithstanding this progress of some, there are, at the same time, even in this second half of the 20th century, in certain parts of the globe, groups still in savagery if not actual cannibalism.

100. The question arises as to why the evolution of some is rapid, and others slow? In an epoch when the Greeks enjoyed a glorious civilization, why was it that Western Europe was barbarian? Why did barbarism prevail in Russia when the Arabs had risen to the height of splendour? The same question may be posed with respect to several countries in several epochs. Is it purely and simply a question of chance and circumstance? Or is it due to the fact that some individuals of lofty note and noble personality were born in one human group to the exclusion of other groups? There are other possible explanations which are more complex and depend upon a variety of co-existing causes which govern the accomplishments of some, and the frustration or even extinction of the other.

101. There is still another question. After a momentary state of splendour, why do people fall anew into relative obscurity, if not into a semi-barbarous state?

102. We propose to investigate these questions in relation to contemporary Islam, and discuss, if possible, its chances for survival.

103. If one were to believe Ibn Khaldun, the biological factor is the essential cause. At the end of a single generation, the race exhausts its vitality, and for purposes of rejuvenation there must be a change at least in the family of men at the helm of affairs. This racial theory, even though it may be considered a learned exaggeration, can affect ethnic civilizations and such religions which do not admit conversion. Islam luckily escapes this cycle of decadence, for its followers are found among all races, and it continues to achieve greater or smaller progress everywhere in the world. Moreover, it is unanimously recognized that Islam has almost completely eliminated, inside its community, racial prejudices - a feature which permits it to accept, without hesitation, men of any race to be its leaders and standard-bearers. The systematic emancipation of slaves, which was ordered by the Qur'an, presents another glorious example. As a matter of fact there have been several dynasties of Muslim rulers in history, drawn solely from slaves who had been freshly liberated.

104. The life and death of a civilization depends on equal measure on the quality of its basic teaching. If it invites its adherents to renounce the world, spirituality will certainly make great progress, yet the other constituent parts of man, his body, his intellectual faculties, etc., will not be allowed to perform their natural duties and will die even before their season of bloom. If, on the other hand, a civilization lays emphasis only on the material aspects of life, man will make great progress in those aspects at the expense of others. Such a civilization may even become a sort of boomerang which causes its own death. For materialism often engenders egoism and lack of respect for the rights of others, and this creates enemies who await their chance for reprisal. The result is mutual killing. The story of the two brigands is well known. They had captured some booty. One of them went to the town to buy provisions, and the other went to collect wood to prepare the meal. However, each one decided secretly in his heart to get rid of the other and to monopolize the illicit gain. So the one who had gone shopping poisoned the provisions, while his comrade awaited him in ambush and killed him upon his return from the town. Only when he tasted the food, he then joined his companion in the other world.

105. There may be another defect inherent in a civilization when its teachings do not contain an innate capacity for development and adaptation to circumstances. However nice its teachings may be for one epoch or one environment, it may not prove so for another. So to be captivated by such a teaching will evidently be fatal to those who come later. An ordinary example would

illustrate this point. At a time when there was no electric lighting and when the cultural centres had no stable revenues, it was certainly an act of piety to light a candle in some place of religious interest frequented during the night. Nothing may be said against a belief that an act of piety on the part of a repentant constitutes an expiation and an effacement of the crime committed against God or against man which otherwise was hard to repair. But wouldn't the continuation of lighting a candle in a place which is already brilliantly lit with electric lamps be anything more than a wastage? Let us study Islam in the light of these circumstances.

Islamic Ideology

106. It is well known that the motto of Islam is summed up in the expression of the Qur'an (2/101), "*well-being in this world and well-being in the Hereafter.*" Islam certainly will not satisfy the extremists of either school - the ultra-spiritualists (i.e. those who want to renounce all worldly things and mortify themselves as a duty) and the ultra-materialists (i.e. those who do not believe in the rights of others). Yet Islam can be practised by an overwhelming majority of mankind, who follow an intermediate path and seek to develop the body and the soul simultaneously, thus creating a harmonious equilibrium in man as a whole. Islam has insisted on the importance of both these components of man, and of their inseparability, so that one should not be sacrificed for the benefit of the other. If Islam prescribes spiritual duties and practices, these will also contain material advantages. Similarly, if it authorizes an act of temporal utility, it will also show how this act can be a source of spiritual satisfaction. The following examples will illustrate this.

107. One will agree that the aim of spiritual practice is to get closer to the Necessary Being (*dhat wajib al-wujud*), our Creator and Lord, and to obtain His pleasure. Therefore, man tries to "dye himself with the colour of God," as the Qur'an (2/138) enjoins, in order to see with His eyes, to speak with His tongue, to desire with His will -- as a Hadith says. In short, a believer tries to behave entirely according to His will, and seeks to even imitate Him according to one's humble human capacities. A believer must fast at the moment prescribed by the Qur'an, because that is an order of God. To obey an order of the Lord is in itself piety, but in addition to that, the fast will weaken the body and that, in turn, will fortify the soul by diminishing material desires. One feels a spiritual uplift, thinks of God and of everything He does for us, and enjoys other spiritual benefits. But the fast does material good as well. The acidity which secrete from the glands when one is hungry and thirsty kill many a microbe in the stomach. Also one develops the capacity to bear privation at moments of a crisis and still remain able to carry on one's normal duties undisturbed. If one fasts for material ends, it will have no spiritual value. But if one fasts for gaining the good

will of God, the material advantages are never lost. Without entering into a detailed discussion, it may be observed that all other spiritual acts or practices of Islam also have the same double effect - spiritual and temporal. It is the same in worship, whether individual or congregational. It is the same with the abnegation of the self at the moment of the pilgrimage to the House of God; in charity to the poor; and in other religious and spiritual practices apart from the obligatory minimum. If one does something solely for the sake of God, it has a double merit - spiritual advantage without any loss of material benefits. On the other hand, if one does the same thing for material aims, one may obtain the desired object, but the spiritual advantage would be completely lost. Let us recall the celebrated saying of the Prophet Muhammad: "Verily actions are entirely according to motives and intentions."

108. Speaking of a strict temporal act, such as a tax or a war, one pays taxes to the government. It should not be astonishing that Islam considers this act as one of the five basic elements of the Faith, which is as important as belief, worship, fasting and pilgrimage! The significance is deep: One unites the spiritual and the temporal in a single whole and one pays the tax not as a corvée [labour exacted in lieu of paying taxes] or even as a social duty, but solely for the sake of God. When this duty of paying the taxes becomes fixed in the mind as something sacred, a duty unto God from Whom nothing can be concealed and Who is, moreover, capable of resuscitating us and demanding our account, one can easily understand with what care and scruples a believer will pay his dues in the performance of this obligation. Similarly, war is forbidden in Islam except in the way of God, and it is not difficult to understand that this type of soldier is more apt to be humane and will not seek any earthly gain in the course of risking his life. By spiritualising the temporal duties, Islam has had no other motive but to strengthen the spiritual side of man who, in this manner, far from seeking the material advantage of a material thing, aspires to obtain only the pleasure of God thereby. The great mystic al-Ghazzali was not exaggerating when he said: "If somebody worships or fasts for ostentation, that is *shirk* (polytheism) and a worship of one's self, not of God Almighty. On the other hand, if one even cohabits with one's own wife, not for the sake of carnal pleasure, but for the performance of the duty imposed by God, then that is an act of piety and devotion and merits the pleasure of and reward from God."

109. Perhaps the corollary of the same all-embracing conception of life is the fact that the Qur'an uses the double formula "believe and do good deeds," The mere profession of faith, without application or practice does not have much value because Islam insists just as much on the one as on the other. In the interests of society, doing good deeds without belief in God is certainly

preferable to the practice of evil deeds. But from the spiritual standpoint, a good deed without faith cannot bring salvation in the Hereafter.

110. But how can one distinguish good from the evil? In the first instance, it is the revealed law which can be the criterion alone, but in the latter case, it is one's [conscience](#) which can be one's arbiter. When a problem is posed, one can refer to the text of the Islamic law, if necessary. Yet a jurisconsult can only reply on the basis of facts which have been brought to his attention. If certain material facts should have been concealed from him, whether intentionally or otherwise, the consequent injustice cannot be blamed on the law. We may recall a charming little discourse of the Prophet, who said one day: "People! in the complaints which come to me, I decide only on the basis of facts brought to my knowledge. If, by lack of full disclosure, I decide in favour of someone who has no right, let him know that I accord him a part of the Hell-fire." An Islamic judicial maxim stresses the same point when it says: "Consult thy conscience even if the jurisconsults provide justification to thee" (contained in a Hadith reported by Ibn Hanbal and al-Darimi).

111. To never think of others and instead think exclusively of one's own self, is not only inhuman but beastly. However, to think of others after having satisfied one's own needs is normal and permitted. Yet the Qur'an praises those "*who prefer others above themselves though poverty become their lot*" (59:9). Evidently this is only a recommendation and not an obligatory duty which has been laid upon the average man -- if one does not observe it, one will neither be considered a criminal nor a sinner. We can cite the famous saying of the Prophet in the same vein of recommendation: "The best of men is the one who does good to others."

112. The Qur'anic direction may be considered as a characteristic train of Islam, to wit: "*and of the bounty of thy Lord (on thee) by thy discourse*" (93:11). A saying of the Prophet (cited by Tirmidhi) explains this in an impressive manner: "God likes to see the traces of His bounty on His creature." It had so happened that one of his companions came to see him dressed in miserable attire, even though he was a well-to-do person. When the Prophet asked him the reason, he replied that he preferred to have a wretched look, not for miserliness but for piety, as he preferred the needy to his own self. The Prophet did not approve of it, and put a limit to self-sacrifice and ordered (cf. Abu Dawud): "When God has given you means, the traces of His bounty should be visible on you." The Qur'an (28:77) further enjoins: "*...and neglect not thy portion of this world.*" Islam does not recommend that man should stop work and become a parasite. On the contrary, one must use all one's gifts and talents in order to profit from God's creations and acquire as

much as possible and what exceeds one's requirements may then go to aid those who lack the necessities. The Prophet has unequivocally said: "It is better that you leave behind you relatives who are well off rather than obliging them to beg alms of others." Notwithstanding the imposition of heavy daily practices, Islam does not demand mortification or voluntary misery. On the contrary, the Qur'an reproaches those who would develop such an attitude:

"Say: Who hath forbidden the adornment of God which He hath brought forth for His servants, and the delicious things of nourishment? Say: they are, in the life of this world, for those who believe, being exclusively for them on the Day of Resurrection. Thus do We detail Our commands for people who have knowledge." (Qur'an 7/32)

There are things permitted by the Divine law and to deny for one's self deliberately is not necessarily an act of piety, as would be the case of abstaining from things forbidden by the same law.

Belief in God

113. Man seems to have always sought to know his Creator for the sake of obeying Him. The best religious leaders of every epoch and civilization have established certain rules of conduct for this purpose. The primitive people worshipped the manifestations of power and beneficence of God, hoping thus to please Him. Some others believed in two separate gods, one of the good and the other of the evil. Yet they overlooked the logical consequences of such a distinction which implies a civil war between gods. Still others have enshrouded God with mysteries which mystify the person of God sometimes. And some others have felt the need of such symbols, formulas or gestures, which will hardly distinguish their theological conceptions from idolatry or Polytheism.

114. In this field, Islam has its particularity. It believes in the absolute Oneness of God, and prescribes a form of worship and prayer which will admit neither images nor symbols (considering both to be the remnants of primitivism and idolatry). In Islam, God is not only transcendent and non-material, beyond any physical perception (cf. Qur'an 6/103: "*Sight comprehends Him not*"), but He is also Immanent, Omnipresent and Omnipotent (cf. Qur'an 50/16, 56/85, 58/7). The relation between man and his Creator are direct and personal, and do not require any intermediary. Even the saintliest of the saints, such as prophets, are only guides and messengers and it is left to the individual to make a choice and be directly responsible to God.

115. Thus it will be seen that Islam seeks to develop the personality of the individual. It admits that man has his weaknesses, as he is constituted simultaneously of capacities for both good and evil. Yet it does not admit that there is original sin in him, because that would be an injustice. If Adam had committed a sin, this should create no responsibility on his posterity, and so each individual human being remains responsible for his personal account only.

116. In his weakness, an individual may commit offences against God or against his fellow creatures. Each offence has, in principle, a proportionate liability (punishment). Yet Islam recognizes the possibility of pardon, the elements of which are repentance and reparation. As to offences against man, they should be amended, as far as possible, so that the victim may pardon either gratuitously, or at the restitution of the object taken away from him, or by having it replaced, or in any similar way. As regards offences against God, man may receive either a suitable punishment or a gracious pardon from the Lord. Islam does not admit that God needs to punish first some innocent person in order to accord His pardon to other repentant sinners, for this vicarious punishment would be unjust on the part of God.

Society

117. Even as Islam seeks to develop individuality in man, it seeks also social collectivity. This can be seen in all its prescriptions, be they religious or temporal. Thus, the service of worship is collective in principle (in case of need, if there is some exemption regarding the five daily prayers, there is none regarding the weekly or annual prayer services); pilgrimage is even a more manifest example, since the believers assemble in the same place, and come from all points of the globe; the collective aspect of fasting manifests itself in the fact that it takes place in the same month for the faithful all over the world; the requirement of having a caliph, the obligation of paying the zakat-tax intended for the needs of the collectivity, etc. -- all these things affirm the same objective. It goes without saying that in a collectivity, or society, there is a force which people do not possess individually.

118. For reasons best known to God, He has endowed different individuals with different talents. Two children with the same parents, two students in the same class do not always have the same qualities or capacities. All lands are not equally fertile; climates differ; two trees of the same species do not produce the same quantity or quality. Every being, every part of a being has its own idiosyncrasies. On the basis of this natural phenomenon, Islam affirms the original equality of all on the one hand, whereas on the other hand, the superiority of individuals one over the

other. We are all creatures of the same Lord, and material superiority does not count for obtaining the greater appreciation of God. **Piety alone is the criterion of the greatness of the individual.** After all, life in this world is but ephemeral, and there must be a difference between the behaviour of a man and of a beast.



Nationality

119. It is in this sense that Islam rejects the narrow basis of birth and common blood as the element of solidarity. The attachment to parentage or to the soil on which one is born, is no doubt natural; yet the very interest of the human race demands a certain tolerance towards other similar groups. The distribution of the natural wealth in different parts of the world in varying quantities renders the world as interdependent. Inevitably one is forced to "live and let live." Otherwise an incessant succession of vendettas would destroy all. Nationality on the basis of language, race, colour or birthplace is too primitive, and therein is a fatality - an impasse - something in which man has no choice. The Islamic notion is progressive and it is based solely on the choice of the individual, for it proposes the unity of all those who believe in the same ideology, without distinction of race, tongue, or place of abode. Since extermination or subjugation of others is excluded, the only valid possibility is assimilation. And what means can serve this assimilation better if not the belief in the same ideology? It may be repeated that Islamic ideology is a synthesis of the requirements both of body and soul. Moreover it inspires tolerance. Islam has proclaimed that God has always sent His messengers to different peoples in different epochs. Islam itself claims nothing more than the function of renewing and reviving the eternal message of God, so often repeated at the hands of prophets. It prohibits all compulsion in the matter of religious beliefs. Also, no matter how unbelievable it may sound, Islam is under the self-imposed religious dogmatic duty to give autonomy to non-Muslims who reside on the soil of the Islamic State. The Qur'an, the *Hadith* and the practice of all time demand that non-Muslims should have their own laws, administered by their own tribunals, with their own judges, and without any interference on the part of Muslim authorities, whether it be in social or religious matters.

Economic Outlook

120. The social importance of economic questions is self-evident. The Qur'an does not exaggerate when it declares (4:5) that material goods constitute the very means of the subsistence of humanity. If everyone were to think of no-one but himself, society will be in grave danger, because there are always very few rich and very many poor. In the struggle for existence,

the vast majority of the starving will in the long run exterminate the small minority of the rich. One can bear many privations, but not basic sustenance. The Islamic conception on this subject is well known. It envisages the constant redistribution and dispersal of national wealth. Thus, the poor are exempt from taxation, whereas the rich are taxed to provide for the needy. Again, there are laws which require the obligatory distribution of the heritage; those which forbid the accumulation of wealth in the hands of the few by banning interest on loans and prohibiting bequests to the detriment of near relatives, and so on; and those which prescribe rules for the expenditure of the State revenue, and which aim at a beneficial redistribution of this income among the beneficiaries among which the poor top the list. If this principle is kept in view, it tolerates differences in the means and method according to regions, epochs and circumstances, provided the goal is achieved. The competition of free enterprise may be tolerated as long as it does not degenerate into a cut-throat exploitation and ruin of those who are economically weak. The planning of the whole may equally be tolerated if that appears necessary, due to circumstances of economic and demographic evolution. In any case, wastage of goods and as well as of energy is to be avoided, and such means adopted which are better adapted to the needs of the moment.

[Free Will and Predestination](#)

121. This leads us to the philosophic question of the free-will. This eternal dilemma can never be resolved by logic alone. For, if man enjoys free-will with respect to all his acts, the omnipotence of God suffers thereby. Similarly, if God predestines, why should man be held responsible for his acts? The Prophet Muhammad had emphatically recommended that his adherents not to engage in discussions on this topic "which has led astray those peoples who preceded you" (as Ibn Hanbal, Tirmidhi and others report), and he has separated the two questions, viz., the omnipotence of God and the responsibility of man. In fact there is no logic in love, and the Muslim loves his Creator, i.e., he cannot admit that God should have defective attributes, for God is not only wise and powerful, but also just and merciful in the highest degree. Islam separates celestial affairs, which are the attributes of God, from human temporal matters, and insists on the faithful to act. And since the Divine will rests concealed from man, it is man's duty never to despair after a preliminary failure, but to try again and again until the object is either realized or becomes impossible to attain. In this latter case, the Islamic concept of predestination comes to console man: that such and such was the will of God, and success or failure in this world has no importance in connection with eternal salvation. In this matter, God judges according to intention and effort and not according to whether it is successful or not.

122. According to the Qur'an (53/36-42 among other passages), such is the truth always revealed by God to His successive messengers:

"Or hath he not news of what is in the leaves (Books) of Moses and of Abraham who paid his debt: That no laden one shall bear another's load, and that man hath only that for which he maketh effort, and that his effort will be seen, and afterwards he will be repaid for it with the fullest payment; and that thy Lord. He is the goal....?"

We are rewarded only because we have accepted also to be punished for acts which are predestined. This seems to be the Divine Deposit [i.e. to place for safekeeping] with which we have been entrusted, when the Qur'an (33/72) reports: *"We did indeed offer the Trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains; but they refused to undertake it, being afraid thereof: but Man undertook it; -- he was indeed unjust and ignorant."* God said: *"I shall predestine your acts, and want to reward or punish you according to whether they are good or evil.* Other created beings said: How? Thou wilt create, and we have to be responsible for the same? They got afraid. Man believed in the limitless mercy of the Lord, and said: Yes Lord, I accept to take this responsibility and the Deposit of Thine. This pleased the Lord so much that He ordered even the angels to prostrate before Man. To sum up, since Islam separates completely the two questions, it is not difficult for it to admit simultaneously the requirement of man (effort, sense of responsibility) and the rights of God with all His attributes, including the power to predetermine.

123. Predetermination in Islam has another significance which is no less important. Namely, it is God alone Who ascribes to a human act the quality of good or evil. It is God Who is the source of all law. It is the Divine prescriptions which are to be observed in all our behaviour. He communicates to us through His chosen messengers. (Muhammad was the last of these also the one whose teachings have been the better preserved.) We do not possess originals of the ancient messages which have suffered damage in the unhappy fratricidal wars of human society. The Qur'an is not only the exception to the rule, but also constitutes the latest Divine message. It is commonplace that a law which is later in date, will abrogate former dispensations from the same legislator.

124. In conclusion, let us refer to another trait of Islamic life: It is the duty of a Muslim not only to follow the Divine law in his daily behaviour in his life (in matters temporal as well as spiritual) as an individual as well as a part of the collectivity. Also he is to contribute according to his capacities and possibilities to the propagation of this ideology, which is based on Divine revelation and intended for the well-being of all.

125. It will be seen that such a consolidated creed covers man's entire life, materially and spiritually, and that one lives in this world in the preparation for the Hereafter.