The Message of Islam Seaiast

**IS RELIGION A THING OF THE PAST?**

By Muhammad Asad

With an introduction by Khurshid Ahmad

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Introduction

"Islam is a thing of the past-something many centuries old. Society has now immensely progressed. It has stepped ahead of the feudal stage and humanity now breathes in the 20th century-a century of science and technology, of reason and enlightenment. The mysterious beliefs of the Dark Ages can no longer hold the air. Their spell has been broken. At best they are relics of the past. Their proper place is the shelf of the museum and not the hearts and minds of human beings. Islam is too old to be adopted in this age of science. It is futile to think of going back to it. It is now only a thing of the past"-such and other doubts are commonly expressed by our so-called "progressive", "liberal" and "enlightened" young men. These suspicions haunt the minds of a section of our intelligentsia and call for an answer. The answer is quite simple. We must not get lost in the rhythm of the rhetoric. Proper analysis will point to the truth or falsity of this much-quoted allegation.

The question touches the core of a very vital problem what is the criterion on which to judge the ade quacy or inadequacy, relevance or obsoleteness of a certain way of life. Are "time" and "space" the true criteria? Are we justified in rejecting everything presented in the past by calling them obsolete? Can we spurn any system only on the plea that the idea is a thousand or two thousand years old? If so, what about democracy which was first introduced in the realm of thought by the Greek thinkers more than 2,000 years ago? Logical analysis shows that it is the height of folly to think that such and such a thing is useless only because it is so many years old. Rather, the existence of such a thing provides food for thought. If it has steered its way successfully through the deep oceans of time and has stood the severest tests of the ages, it shows that it is worth something. Theories have come and theories have gone. Civilizations have risen and civilizations have perished. Cultures have bloomed and cultures have withered. But Islam alone has lived from time immemorial. It has endured all eventualities and overcome all obstacles. In this 'struggle for existence' it has survived. Is it not sufficient to show the worth of its mettle?

Scientific studies show that human nature is unchangeable. The whole edifice of Inductive study rests on the foundation of the uniformity of nature in space and time. If human nature is the same, the basic needs and requirements of man are the same, human weaknesses and frailties too are the same then the logical conclusion that follows is that the fundamental principles of social conduct should also remain the same. The question, therefore, is not whether a particular system of life is old or new but whether it is in conformity with human nature, whether it satisfies the basic needs and requirements of human beings, and whether it is capable of solving the problems confronting mankind or not ?

If we look at Islam from this angle of vision, we find that Islam is the only perfect and complete way of life. It has a comprehensive system of its own. It is based on human nature and is propounded by the Author of the Universe, the Creator of Man and Nature. "It is like a perfect work of architecture, all its parts being harmoniously conceived to complement and support each other; nothing lacking nothing superfluous."1 Everything in its teachings is at its proper place.

Moreover, in the long range of history, it is the only way of life which has been practiced in all its details and has showered its blessings upon mankind. No other system has ever been practiced in its full bloom, even for one thousandth part of a minute-be it Communism, Capitalism or Democracy! History's verdict is in favor of Islam.

Islam is not a jumble of unrelated thoughts. It is a well-knit system of life. It is not based on superstition, nor does it spring from skepticism. Reason is its life- force. It liberated man from the fetters of ignorance and enabled him to take mighty strides on the road to know- ledge and learning.

Islam, unlike Christianity, does not divide life into watertight compartments. It does not separate the spiritual and temporal activities of man; it welds the two together. It is not only concerned with man's relation- ship with God, but also with the mode of his social existence rather the reform and reconstruction of man's social life is Islam's main objective. Islam stands for the salvation and prosperity of the entire human race and the believers are enjoined even to risk their lives and to shed their blood for the betterment of humanity.

Islam, whenever put into practice, may it be in the days of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (God's blessings be upon him) or of 'Umar Farooq or of 'Umar Ibn Abdul 'Aziz has always blossomed forth a society which history is

I. Muhammad Asad, Islam at the Crossroads.

Proud of. In that society peace dwelled, happiness pre- vailed, learning increased and science flourished. Even the western writers, who often have a prejudice against Islam have to call that society a "golden" one.

Moreover, when we cast a glance over the contemporary world we find that Islam is the call of our times. The world awaits the light which may dissipate the fog and mist of corruption and frustration which have engulfed it. The so-called modern 'Isms have proved to be mere delusions. They have miserably failed. The 'young' modern civilization has wrecked itself by the foul- ness of its own deeds. It has failed to produce the expected. Dr. Alexis Carrel, a famous thinker, scientist and philosopher writes in his well-known book Man the Unknown:

"Modern civilization seems to be incapable of producing people endowed with imagination, intelligence and courage. In practically every country there is a decrease in the intellectual and moral caliber of those who carry the responsibility of public affairs. We find that despite the immense hopes which humanity has placed in modern civilization, such a civilization has failed in developing men of sufficient intelligence and audacity to guide it along the dangerous road on which it is stumbling."

And that:

"The environment which science and technology have succeeded in developing for man does not suit him, because it has been constructed at random, without regard for his true self."

Almost all the great modern philosophers of history are agreed that 'night has set over the Western world' and her satellites. They are unaspell9msnoviewing our times as a period that is going to in the end of the Western civilization. Oswald Spengler, Nikolia Danilevsky, Arnold J. Toynbee, P.A. Sorokin, Walter Schubert, N. Berdyaev, Alfred Kroeber, F.C.S. Northrop, Albert Schweitzer, Lewis Mumford, all explicitly describe our times as a period of one of the greatest transitions from one civilization or cultural super-system to a different one. The old system is gradually but surely dying, giving place to the new. No one believes in the survival value of the Modern Civilization which has spelled disaster on a universal scale. The following remarks of Lewis Mum- ford, who is the author of the great epics: Technics and Civilization and the Condition of Man, are very significant: "Today every human being is living through an apocalypse of violence.....Now, for the first time in human history there is no spot on earth where the innocent man may find refuge.... something else has been disclosed to our unwary eyes: the rottenness of our civilization itself. If our civilization should perish, this will come about because it was not good enough to survive."

The discontent, frustration and unrest of the modern man are very clearly reflected in the works of T.S. Eliot, the great modern poet. In the Waste land he says:

"All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance, all our ignorance brings us nearer to death, But nearness to death, not nearer to God,

Where is the life we have lost in living?

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

The cycle of heaven in twenty centuries

Brings us farther from God and nearer to dust.

The civilization which the West had reared on the foundations of Godlessness and anti-religion has, it has now been revealed, only feet of clay. Its once mighty edifice is now crumbling down. But, what about the future? A study of the history of civilizations and of the con- temporary philosophies of history reveals that ethical renaissance and religious revival alone have arrested the decay of a civilization. Dying cultures have survived only through a religious transformation. Ethical movements alone have saved tottering cultures. This is the verdict of all great philosophers of history.

Sorokin sums up the modern philosophical thought as follows: 2

"Spengler contends that the last civilization phase of a high culture is marked by an emergence and growth of the 'second religiosity', which serves as a passage to the emergence of a new high culture and its new 'spring-phase'. Toynbee states that in the last phase of civilization there emerges the 'universal church' and a new religion which ushers in a new civilization dominated by the new religion in its period of child- hood or growth. My study of the succession of the super-system during some thirty-five centuries of the Creto-Minoan, the Creto-Myeenancean, the Greco- Roma, the Western European and the Hindu cultures has shown likewise that in all observed cases, after the decline of the Sensate Super-system a new ideational (religious) super-system becomes dominant."

Spengler's "second religiosity", Toynbee's "universal church" ushering in a new religious phase of a civilization, Berdyaev's new "Medieval" culture succeeding the

2 P.A. Sorokin, Social philosophies in an Age of Revolution.

Declined "Humanistic secular", Schubert’s "New Messianic prototype"-all these concepts are similar. Kroeber also states that often ".... after science and philosophy had seen their active course, religion once more becomes important."

Thus, at least on this point all the important social theories seem to be in essential agreement: a new Ideational Religious super-system supplants the declining Sensate or "disintegrating" phase of a dying civilization. Sorokin further says: "Notwithstanding the differences in the details and interpretation, almost all the writers considered agree on the revival or ethical movements in the last phase of the declining super-system of civilization."

This is a fundamental historical truth. When, in the light of this principle, we view the contemporary world we come to the conclusion that religion alone can give the world a new civilization. Nearly all the philosophers of history prophesy that the coming civilization will be Religiously Ideational (Danilevsky, Spengler, Toynbee, Schubert, Berdyaev and Sorokin) or 'Integral as a harmonious synthesis of the Aesthetic-Theoretic' (Northrop) or the "Voluntaristi cally Ethical and Rational" (Schweit- zer), or Purely Religious and Theistic (Fulton J. Sheen). In short, the coming civilization is going to be basically different from that which has been dominant over the world during the last six centuries. It is also interesting to know that:

"All the writers agree that with the end of the dominant old and the emergence of the dominant new culture, a shift is taking place from the geographical center, and from the nation or nations that were the old super-system locale to a new nation or nations.

Since Western Europe is the century of the dying cultural super-system the new civilization must emerge elsewhere."3

These social philosophies are a pointer to the future. If the clouds of destruction are to dissipate, if the sorrows of man are to be lightened, if the curse of war is to be lifted off man's brows, if civilization is to survive, the light of religion must dawn and it must be realized that fear of God and reverence for moral values are the only weapons which can arrest the downward march of humanity and that Divine Revelation alone can offer the bridle that can control man's passions and the light that can guide his steps.

And wherefrom can we have that light except from the Holy Qur'an and Sunnah of the Prophet (peace be upon him). Islam is a complete code of life, a moral order, a social system, a polity and a cultural force. In its scheme of life everything is in prefect equilibrium. Its efficacy as a culture producing factor is beyond any shadow of doubt. The pages of history bear testimony to the fact that it gave a new face to civilization and a golden era to history. Its principles are as modern as the tomorrow morn. They are Capable of heralding a new era in the life of humanity, as they did in the past.

The current of history is moving towards this system of life-a system which humanity is ceaselessly searching for. The Materialistic civilization has chained man down to unnatural ways of life and has sapped his soul. Islam can give man a new lease of life. It stands for Truth and Justice. Its message penetrates the heart and moves the soul. It can liberate man from the iron shackles of false gods. It can bring revolution in the hearts and souls of human beings-ushering in an era of peace and prosperity. Those who say that it is a thing of the past only betray their abysmal ignorance of Islam as well as of the requirements of the modern age!

The objection stated above needs be given the lie it deserves. It is welcome that the rebuttal is being offered by one who is imbued with the best traditions of both the East and the West. It comes from the pen of none other than the brilliant Muslim thinker and writer of our times, Muhammad Asad (Leopold Weiss). Originally this article appeared in his monthly critique of Muslim Thought, Arafat (October, 1946) and won wide appreciation. In view of the importance of the topical requested Brother Asad to permit us to publish it in the form of a separate brochure? We are grateful to him for giving us ungrudgingly the permission to publish it and to edit it to suit the present needs. I hope this essay will go a long way in dispelling the suspicions which have been created in the minds of our young men by allegations like the one discussed here.

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