

*“Call to the path of thy Lord with wisdom and goodly exhortation,
and argue with people in the best manner.” (Holy Quran, 16:125)*

The Light **AND** **ISLAMIC REVIEW**

**Exponent of Islam and the Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement
for over ninety years**

January – March 2012

In the spirit of the above-cited verse, this periodical attempts to dispel misunderstandings about the religion of Islam and endeavors to facilitate inter-faith dialogue based on reason and rationality.

Vol. 89

CONTENTS

No. 1

***Islam and the Environment* 3**

Lecture at Sheldonian Theatre in Oxford

By His Royal Highness, Prince Charles of Wales

***Muslim Savants on the Existential Significance of
Suffering in the Believer’s Spiritual Life* 10**

By Prof. Henry Francis B. Espiritu

***Lessons on the Quran* 16**

Sura Al-Baqarah, Section 3 (Part 1)

By Fazeel S. Khan, Esq.

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احمدیہ انجمن اشاعت اسلام لاہور

◆ Ahmadiyya Anjuman Isha‘at Islam Lahore Inc., U.S.A. ◆

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The Light was founded in 1921 as the organ of the AHMADIYYA ANJUMAN ISHA'AT ISLAM (Ahmadiyya Association for the Propagation of Islam) of Lahore, Pakistan. *The Islamic Review* was published in England from 1913 for over 50 years, and in the U.S.A. from 1980 to 1991. The present periodical represents the beliefs of the worldwide branches of the Ahmadiyya Anjuman Isha'at Islam, Lahore.

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The main objective of the A.A.I.I.L. is to present the true, original message of Islam to the whole world — Islam as it is found in the Holy Quran and the life of the Holy Prophet Muhammad, obscured today by grave misconceptions and wrong popular notions.

Islam seeks to attract the *hearts and minds* of people towards the truth, by means of reasoning and the natural beauty of its principles.

Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (d. 1908), our Founder, arose to remind the world that Islam is:

International: It recognizes prophets being raised among all nations and requires Muslims to believe in them all. Truth and goodness can be found in all religions. God treats all human beings equally, regardless of race, nationality or religion.

Peaceful: Allows use of force only in unavoidable self-defence. Teaches Muslims to live peacefully under any rule which accords them freedom of religion.

Tolerant: Gives full freedom to everyone to hold and practise any creed or religion. Requires us to tolerate differences of belief and opinion.

Rational: In all matters, it urges use of human reason and knowledge. Blind following is condemned and independence of thought is granted.

Inspiring: Worship is not a ritual, but provides living contact with a Living God, Who answers prayers and speaks to His righteous servants even today as in the past.

Non-sectarian: Every person professing Islam by the words *La ilaha ill-Allah, Muhammad-ur rasul-ullah* (There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah) is a Muslim. A Muslim cannot be expelled from Islam by anyone.

Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad taught that **no** prophet, old or new, is to arise after the Holy Prophet Muhammad. However, *Mujaddids* will be raised by God to revive and rekindle the light of Islam.

About ourselves

Ahmadiyya Anjuman Isha'at Islam Lahore has branches in many countries including:

| | |
|-----------|--------------|
| U.S.A. | Australia |
| U.K. | Canada |
| Holland | Fiji |
| Indonesia | Germany |
| Suriname | India |
| Trinidad | South Africa |
| Guyana | Philippines |

Achievements:

The Anjuman has produced extensive literature on Islam, originally in English and Urdu, including translations of the Holy Quran with commentaries. These books are being translated into other languages, including French, German, Spanish, Dutch, Russian, Chinese, and Arabic. The Anjuman has run several Muslim missions around the world, including the first ever in Western Europe.

History:

1889: *Hazrat* Mirza Ghulam Ahmad founds the Ahmadiyya Movement.

1901: Movement given name *Ahmadiyya* after Holy Prophet Muhammad's other famous name *Ahmad*.

1905: *Hazrat* Mirza appoints central body (Anjuman) to manage the Movement.

1908: Death of *Hazrat* Mirza. Succeeded by Maulana Nur-ud-Din as Head.

1914: Death of Maulana Nur-ud-Din. Ahmadiyya Anjuman Isha'at Islam founded at Lahore as continuation of the original Anjuman. Maulana Muhammad Ali elected as Head.

1951: Death of Maulana Muhammad Ali after fifty years of glorious service to the cause of Islam. Maulana Sadr-ud-Din (d. 1981) becomes Head.

1981-1996: Dr Saeed Ahmad Khan, an eminent medical doctor and religious scholar, led the Movement, at a time of intense persecution.

1996-2002: Prof. Dr Asghar Hameed, a distinguished retired University Professor of Mathematics, and learned Islamic scholar, served as Head.

2002: Prof. Dr Abdul Karim Saeed Pasha elected Head.

Islam and the Environment

By His Royal Highness, Prince Charles of Wales

[This article is a transcript of an hour long lecture by Prince Charles at Sheldonian Theatre in Oxford on June 9, 2010 on the occasion of the Oxford Centre's twenty-fifth anniversary. In this lecture, His Royal Highness explains that man's destruction of the world is contrary to the scriptures of all religions, particularly that of Islam. He goes on to urge the world to follow Islamic "spiritual principles" in order to protect the environment. This speech is available on the Prince of Wales website [http://www.princeofwales.gov.uk/speechesandarticles/a_speech_by_hrh_the_prince_of_wales_titled_islam_and_the_env_252516346.html] and its video recording may be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TB0G7QUf9s>.]

Vice Chancellor, Your Royal Highnesses, Director, Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is a very great pleasure for me to be here today to help you celebrate the Oxford Centre's twenty-fifth anniversary. Whereas bits of your Patron are dropping off after the past quarter of a century, I find quite a few bits of the Centre still being added! However, I cannot tell you how encouraged I am that in addition to the Prince of Wales Fellowship, the number of fellowships you now offer continues to grow and also that this Summer you will welcome the fifth group of young people on your Young Muslim Leadership programme which is run in association with my charities. This is a vital contribution to the process of boosting the self-esteem of young Muslims – about whom I care deeply.

It has been a great concern of mine to affirm and encourage those groups and faith communities that are in the minority in this country. Indeed, over the last twenty-five years, I have tried to find as many ways as possible to help integrate them into British society and to build good relationships between our faith communities. I happen to believe this is best achieved by emphasizing unity through diversity. Only in this way can we ensure fairness and build mutual respect in our country. And if we get it right here then perhaps we might be able to offer an example in the wider world.

I am slightly alarmed that it is now seventeen years since I came here to the Sheldonian to deliver a lecture for the Centre that tried to do just this. I called it "Islam and the West" and, from what I can tell, it clearly struck a chord, and not just here in the U.K. I am still reminded of what I said, particularly when I travel in the Islamic world – in fact, because it was printed, believe it or not, it is the only speech I have ever made which continues to produce a small return!

I wanted to give that lecture to address the dangers of the ignorance and misunderstanding that I felt were growing between the Islamic world and the West in the aftermath of the Cold War. Since then, the situation has both improved and worsened, depending on where you look. Certainly the sorts of advances made by the Oxford Centre have helped to build confidence and understanding, but we all know only too well how some of the things I warned of in that lecture have since come to pass, both here and elsewhere in the world. So it is tremendously important that we continue to work to heal the differences and overcome the misconceptions that still exist. I remain confident that this is possible because there are many values we all share that have the powerful capacity to bind us, rather than what happens when those values are forgotten – or purposefully ignored.

Healing division is also my theme today, but this time it is not the divisions between cultures I want to explore. It is the division that poses a much more fundamental threat to the health and well-being of us all. It is the widening division we are seeing in so many ways between humanity and Nature.

Many of Nature's vital, life-support systems are now struggling to cope under the strain of global industrialization. How they will manage if millions more people are to achieve Western levels of consumption is highly disturbing to contemplate. The problems are only going to get much worse. And they are very real. Whatever you might have read in the newspapers, particularly about climate change in the run up to the Copenhagen conference last year, we face many related and very serious problems that are a matter of accurate, scientific record.

The actual facts are that over the last half century, for instance, we have destroyed at least thirty per cent of the world's tropical rainforests and if we continue to chop them down at the present rate, by 2050 we will end up with a very disturbing situation. In fact, in the three years since I started my Rainforest Project to try and help find an innovative solution to tropical deforestation, over 30 million hectares have been lost, and with them this planet has lost about 80,000 species. When you consider that a given area of equatorial trees evaporates eight times as much rainwater as an equivalent patch of ocean, you quickly start to see how their disappearance will affect the productivity of the Earth. They produce billions of tonnes of water every day and without that rainfall the world's food security will become very unstable.

But there are other facts too. In the last fifty years our industrialized approach to farming has degraded a third of the Earth's top soil. That is a fact. We have also fished the oceans so extensively that if we continue at the same

rate for much longer we are likely to see the collapse of global fisheries in forty years from now. Another fact. Then there are the colossal amounts of waste that pollute the Earth – the many dead zones where nothing can live in many major river estuaries and various parts of the oceans, or those immense rafts of plastic that now float about in the Pacific. Would you believe that one of them, off the coast of California, is made up of 100 million tonnes of plastic and it has doubled in size in just the last decade. It is now at least six times the size of the United Kingdom. And we call ourselves civilized!

These are all very real problems and they are facts – all of them, the obvious results of the comprehensive industrialization of life. But what is less obvious is the attitude and general outlook which perpetuate this dangerously destructive approach. It is an approach that acts contrary to the teachings of each and every one of the world's sacred traditions, including Islam.

What surprises me, I have to say, is that, quite apart from whether or not we value the sacred traditions as much as we should, the blunt economic facts make the predominant approach increasingly irrational. I imagine that few of you are familiar with the interim report of the United Nations study called *The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity Study* which came out in 2008. It painted a salutary picture of what we lose in straightforward financial terms by our destruction of natural systems and the absence of their services to the world. In the first place they calculated that we destroy around 50 billion dollars worth of a system that produces these services every year. By mapping the loss of those services over a forty year period, their estimate is that, in financial terms, the global economy incurs an annual loss of between 2 and 4.5 trillion dollars – every single year.

To put that figure into some sort of perspective, the recent crash in the world's banking system caused a one-off loss of just 2 trillion dollars. I wonder why the bigger annual loss does not attract the same kind of Media frenzy as the banking crisis did?

This should demonstrate the flaw in the sum that does not need an Oxbridge mathematician to understand – that Nature's finite resources, divided by our evermore rapacious desire for continuous economic growth, does not work out. We are clearly living beyond our means, already consuming the Earth's capital resources faster than she can replenish them.

Over the years, I have pointed out again and again that our environmental problems cannot be solved simply by applying yet more and more of our brilliant green technology – important though it is. It is no good just fixing the pump and not the well.

When I say this, everybody nods sagely, but I get the

impression that many are often unwilling to embrace what I am really referring to, perhaps because the missing element sits outside the parameters of the prevailing secular view. It is this “missing element” that I would like to examine today.

In short, when we hear talk of an “environmental crisis” or even of a “financial crisis,” I would suggest that this is actually describing the outward consequences of a deep, inner crisis of the soul. It is a crisis in our relationship with – and our perception of – Nature, and it is born of Western culture being dominated for at least two hundred years by a mechanistic and reductionist approach to our scientific understanding of the world around us.

So I would like you to consider very seriously today whether a big part of the solution to all of our worldwide “crises” does not lie simply in more and better technology, but in the recovery of the soul to the mainstream of our thinking. Our science and technology cannot do this. Only sacred traditions have the capacity to help this happen.

In general, we live within a culture that does not believe very much in the soul anymore – or if it does, won't admit to it publicly for fear of being thought old fashioned, out of step with “modern imperatives” or “anti-scientific.” The empirical view of the world, which measures it and tests it, has become the only view to believe. A purely mechanistic approach to problems has somehow assumed a position of great authority and this has encouraged the widespread secularisation of society that we see today. This is despite the fact that those men of science who founded institutions like the Royal Society were also men of deep faith. It is also despite the fact that a great many of our scientists today profess a faith in God. I am aware of one recent survey that suggests over seventy per cent of scientists do so.

I must say, I find this rather baffling. If this is so, why is it that their sense of the sacred has so little bearing on the way science is employed to exploit the natural world in so many damaging ways?

I suppose it must be to do with who pays the fiddler. Over the last two centuries, science has become ever more firmly yoked to the ambitions of commerce. Because there are such big economic benefits from such a union, society has been persuaded that there is nothing wrong here. And so, a great deal of empirical research is now driven by the imperative that its findings must be employed to maximum, financial effect, whatever the impact this may have on the Earth's long-term capacity to endure.

This imbalance, where mechanistic thinking is so predominant, goes back at least to Galileo's assertion that there is nothing in Nature but quantity and motion.

This is the view that continues to frame the general perception of the way the world works and how we fit within the scheme of things. As a result, Nature has been completely objectified – “She” has become an “it” – and we are persuaded to concentrate on the material aspect of reality that fits within Galileo’s scheme.

Understanding the world from a mechanical point of view and then employing that knowledge has, of course, always been part of the development of human civilization, but as our technology has become ever more sophisticated and our industrialized methods so much more powerful, so the level of destruction is now potentially all the more widespread and un-containable, especially if you add into this mix the emphasis we have on consumerism.

It was that great scientist, Goethe, who saw life as the masculine principle striving endlessly to reach the “eternal feminine” – what the Greeks called “Sophia,” or wisdom. It is a striving, he said, fired by the force of love. I am not sure that this is quite the way things happen today. Our striving in the industrialized world is certainly not fired by a love of wisdom. It is far more focussed on the desire for the greatest possible financial profit.

This ignores the spiritual teachings of traditions like Islam, which recognize that it is not our animal needs that are absolute; it is our spiritual essence, an essence made for the infinite. But with consumerism now such a key element in our economic model, our natural, spiritual desire for the infinite is constantly being reflected towards the finite. Our spiritual perspective has been flattened and made earthbound and we are persuaded to channel all of our natural, never-ending desire for what Islamic poets called “the Beloved” towards nothing but more and more material commodities. Unfortunately we forget that our spiritual desire can never be completely satisfied. It is rightly a never-ending desire. But when that desire is focussed only on the earthly, it becomes potentially disastrous. The hunger for yet more and more things creates an alarming vacuum and, as we are now realizing, this does great harm to the Earth and creates a never ending unhappiness for many, many people.

I hope you can just begin to see my point. The utter dominance of the mechanistic approach of science over everything else, including religion, has “de-souled” the dominant world view, and that includes our perception of Nature. As soul is elbowed out of the picture, our deeper link with the natural world is severed. Our sense of the spiritual relationship between humanity, the Earth and her great diversity of life has become dim. The entire emphasis is all on the mechanical process of increasing growth in the economy, of making every process more “efficient” and achieving as much conven-

ience as possible. None of which could be said to be an ambition of God. And so, unfashionable though it is to suggest it, I am keen to stress here the need to heal this divide within ourselves. How else can we heal the divide between East and West unless we reconcile the East and West within ourselves? Everything in Nature is a paradox and seems to carry within itself the paradox of opposites. Curiously, this maintains the essential balance. Only human beings seem to introduce imbalance. The task is surely to reconnect ourselves with the wisdom found in Nature which is stressed by each of the sacred traditions in their own way.

My understanding of Islam is that it warns that to deny the reality of our inner being leads to an inner darkness which can quickly extend outwards into the world of Nature. If we ignore the calling of the soul, then we destroy Nature. To understand this we have to remember that we are Nature, not inanimate objects like stones; we reflect the universal patterns of Nature. And in this way, we are not a part that can somehow disengage itself and take a purely objective view.

From what I know of the Qu’ran, again and again it describes the natural world as the handiwork of a unitary benevolent power. It very explicitly describes Nature as possessing an “intelligibility” and that there is no separation between Man and Nature, precisely because there is no separation between the natural world and God. It offers a completely integrated view of the Universe where religion and science, mind and matter are all part of one living, conscious whole. We are, therefore, finite beings contained by an infinitude, and each of us is a microcosm of the whole. This suggests to me that Nature is a knowing partner, never a mindless slave to humanity, and we are Her tenants; God’s guests for all too short a time.

If I may quote the Qu’ran, “Have you considered: if your water were to disappear into the Earth, who then could bring you gushing water?” This is the Divine hospitality that offers us our provisions and our dwelling places, our clothing, tools and transport. The Earth is robust and prolific, but also delicate, subtle, complex and diverse and so our mark must always be gentle – or the water will disappear, as it is doing in places like the Punjab in India. Industrialized farming methods there rely upon the use of high-yielding seeds and chemical fertilizers, both of which need a lot more energy and a lot more water as well. As a consequence the water table has dropped dramatically – I have been there, I have seen it – so far, by three feet a year. Punjabi farmers are now having to dig expensive bore holes over 200 feet deep to get at what remains of the water and, as a result, their debts become ever deeper and the salt rises to the surface contaminating the soil.

This is not a sustainable way of growing food and maintaining the well-being of communities. It does not respect Divine hospitality. The costs it incurs will have to be borne by those who will inherit what is fast becoming the ruined and frayed fabric of life. So for their sake, we have to acknowledge that the immediate, short-term financial benefits of our predominant, mechanistic approach are too expensive to continue to dominate our way of life.

This happens when traditional principles and practices are abandoned – and with them, all sense of reverence for the Earth which is an inseparable element in an integrated and spiritually grounded tradition like Islam – just as it was once firmly embedded in the philosophical heritage of Western thought. The Stoics of Ancient Greece, for instance, held that “right knowledge,” as they called it, is gained by living in agreement with Nature, where there is a correspondence or a sympathy between the truth of things, thought and action. They saw it as our duty to achieve an attunement between human nature and the greater scheme of the Cosmos.

This incidentally is also the teaching of Judaism. The Book of Genesis says that God placed Mankind in the garden “to tend it and take care of it,” to serve and conserve it for the sake of future generations. “Adamah” in Hebrew means “the one hewn from the Earth,” so Adam is a child of the Earth. In my own tradition of Christianity, the immanence of God is made explicit by the incarnation of Christ. But let us also not forget that throughout the Christian New Testament, Christ often refers to Himself as “the Son of Man” which, in Hebrew, is “Ben Adam.” He, too, is a “son of the Earth,” surely making the same explicit connection between human nature and the whole of Nature.

Even the apocryphal Gnostic texts are imbued with the same principle. The fragments of one of the oldest, ascribed to Mary Magdalene, instructs us that “Attachment to matter gives rise to passion against Nature. Thus, trouble arises in the whole body; this is why I tell you; be in harmony.” In all cases the message is clear. Our specific purpose is to “earth” Heaven. So, to separate ourselves within an inner darkness, leads to what the Irish poet, WB Yeats, warned of at the start of the Twentieth Century. “The falcon cannot hear the falconer,” he wrote, “things fall apart and the centre cannot hold.”

The traditional way of life within Islam is very clear about the “centre” that holds the relationship together. From what I know of its core teachings and commentaries, the important principle we must keep in mind is that there are limits to the abundance of Nature. These are not arbitrary limits, they are the limits imposed by God and, as such, if my understanding of the Qu’ran is correct, Muslims are commanded not to transgress them.

Such instruction is hard to square if all you do is found your understanding of the world on empirical terms alone. Four hundred years of relying on trying and testing the facts scientifically has established the view that spirituality and religious faith are outdated expressions of superstitious belief. After all, empiricism has proved how the world fits together and it is nothing to do with a “Supreme Being.” There is no empirical evidence for the existence of God so, therefore, Q.E.D., God does not exist. It is a very reasonable, rational argument, and I presume it can be applied to “thought” too. After all, no brain scanner has ever managed to photograph a thought, nor a piece of love, and it never will. So, Q.E.D., that must mean “thought” and “love” do not exist either!

Clearly there is a point beyond which empiricism cannot make complete sense of the world. It works by establishing facts through testing them by the scientific process. It is one kind of language and a very fine one, but it is a language not able to fathom experiences like faith or the meaning of things – it is not able to articulate matters of the soul. This is why it consistently elbows soul out of the picture.

But we do have other kinds of “language,” as Islam well knows, and they are much better at dealing with the realm of the soul and matters of meaning. Each is a different aspect of our language, in fact. Each deals with different aspects of the truth and if you put empiricism, philosophy and the spiritual perception of life together, just as the Islamic tradition at its best and richest has always done, then they tend to complement each other rather well.

Take the difference this made in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries, as an example, during the so-called “Golden Age of Islam.” It was a period which gave rise to a spectacular flowering of scientific advancement, but all of it was underpinned by an age-old philosophical understanding of reality and grounded in a profound spirituality, which included a deep reverence for the Natural world. Theirs was an integrated vision of the world, reflecting the timeless truth that all life is rooted in the unity of the Creator. This is the testimony of faith, is it not, embodied in the contemplative implication of the formless essence of the Qur’an’s haqîqa? It is the notion of Tawhîd, the oneness of all things within the embrace of the Divine unity.

Islamic writers express it so well. Ibn Khaldûn, for instance, who taught that “all creatures are subject to a regular and orderly system. Causes are linked to effects where each is connected with the other.” Or the great Shabistârî in Fourteenth Century Persia, who talked of the world being “a mirror from head to foot, in every atom a hundred blazing suns where a world dwells in

the heart of a millet seed.” Words that resonate, don’t you think, with William Blake’s famous lines, “to see a world in a grain of sand and a heaven in a wild flower.”

Other Western poets have captured this truth too. William Wordsworth, perhaps one of the greatest of all our Nature poets, describes “a sense sublime of something far more inter-fused... a motion and a spirit that impels all thinking things, all objects of thought and rolls through all things.” I quote the poets because they help us identify this “sense sublime” and inspire reverence for the created world.

Reverence is not science-based knowledge. It is an experience always mediated by love, sometimes induced by it; and love comes from relationship. If you take away reverence and reduce our spiritual relationship with life, then you open yourself up to the idea that we can be little more than a chance group of isolated, self-obsessed individuals, disconnected from life’s innate presence and un-anchored by any sense of duty to the rest of the world. We are free to act without responsibility. Thus we turn a blind eye to those islands of plastic in the sea, or to the treatment meted out to animals in factory farms. And it is why the so-called “precautionary principle” is so often thrown out of the window.

This is the principle that would make us think twice if, say, we were to climb into a vehicle that happens to have a ninety per cent chance of crashing. Instead, because the danger is not proven beyond doubt, we think it is safe to embark upon the journey. This is how we proceed in many significant fields – in matters like genetic modification or climate change. We go on denying that there may be side-effects, even if our intuition warns us to be cautious, or even if there is some related evidence. Recently, for instance, the news emerged that, for the fourth year in a row, more than a third of honey bee colonies in the United States failed to survive the Winter. More than three million colonies in the U.S. and billions of honeybees worldwide have died. Scientists say they are no nearer to knowing what is causing this catastrophic collapse, but there is plenty of evidence that modern pesticides have played their part. Given that bees, like nearly every other bug, are insects, I would have thought it was rather obvious. And yet we carry on with a narrow-minded, mechanistic approach to industrialized farming with all its focus on high yields at whatever price. So we lace the fields with pesticides that kill insects. It is quite bizarre how we continue to entrust our food security to the very substances that are destroying the harmonic cycle which produces our food. It really is a form of collective hubris and I often wonder if those who practise such well-exercised scepticism in these matters will ever see that “the Emperor is wearing no clothes?”

This, then, is why the wisdom and learning offered by a sacred tradition like Islam matters – and, if I may say so, why those who hold and strive to preserve their sacred traditions in different parts of the world have every reason to become more confident of their ground. The Islamic world is the custodian of one of the greatest treasures of accumulated wisdom and spiritual knowledge available to humanity. It is both Islam’s noble heritage and a priceless gift to the rest of the world. And yet, so often, that wisdom is now obscured by the dominant drive towards Western materialism – the feeling that to be truly “modern” you have to ape the West.

To counter that tendency I have done what I can with my School of Traditional Arts to nurture and support traditional and sacred craft skills – not least those of Islam – because they keep alive a perspective that we sorely need, even though short-term fashion deems them to be irrelevant. The geometry and patterning that are taught at the School are the basis of the many crafts that have been all but abandoned in many parts of the world, including the Islamic world. It is a tragedy of monumental proportions that they are being forgotten because they reflect the spiritual mathematics found everywhere in Nature. As Islam teaches very specifically, it is a patterning that reflects the very ground of our being. It is the Divine imagination, so to speak; the ineffable presence that is the sacred breath of life. As the Seventeenth Century mystic, Ibn ʿAshir, puts it, by the practice of these arts you “see the One who manifests in the form, not the form by itself.”

For many in the modern world this is hard to understand because the view of God has become so distorted. “God” is seen as being, somehow, outside “His” creation, rather than part of its unfolding – what the Welsh poet, Dylan Thomas, called “the force that through the green fuse drives the flower.” Being the principle that underlines the Cosmos, the Cosmos is the result of God knowing it and of it knowing the uncreated God. Notice the emphasis there on “un”-created. It is of profound importance. The basis of all existence is in this relationship.

I suspect the reason why this is such an unfashionable view is that the deep-seated experience of participation in the living, creative presence of God is offered to us in all traditions not by empiricism, but by revelation. This is a rare and precious gift and only given to those whose supreme humanity and capacity for great humility achieves a mastery over the ego. It comes at the moment when “the knower and the known” become one – the moment when the mind of Man comes into union with the mind of God.

This, of course, is not deemed possible from an empirical point of view, but revelation is a very differ-

ent kind of knowing from scientific, evidence-based knowledge, and I cannot stress the point strongly enough; by dismissing such a process and discarding what it offers to humankind, we throw away a very important lifeline for the future.

I must say, once you do blend the different languages – the empirical and the spiritual together as I am suggesting, and as I have been trying to say for so long – then you do begin to wonder why the sceptics think the desire to work in harmony with Nature is so unscientific. Why is it deemed so worthwhile to abandon our true relationship with the “beingness” of all things; to limit ourselves to the science of manipulation, rather than immerse ourselves in the wider science of understanding? They seem such spurious arguments, because, as Islam clearly understands, it is actually impossible to divorce human beings from Nature’s patterns and processes. The Qur’an is considered to be the “last Revelation” but it clearly acknowledges which book is the first. That book is the great book of creation, of Nature herself, which has been taken too much for granted in our modern world and needs to be restored to its original position.

So, with all this in mind, I would like to set you a challenge, if I may; a challenge that I hope will be conveyed beyond this audience today. It is the challenge to mobilize Islamic scholars, poets and artists, as well as those craftsmen, engineers and scientists who work with and within the Islamic tradition, to identify the general ideas, the teachings and the practical techniques within the tradition which encourage us to work with the grain of Nature rather than against it. I would urge you to consider whether we can learn anything from the Islamic culture’s profound understanding of the natural world to help us all in the fearsome challenges we face. Are there, for instance, any that could help preserve our precious marine eco-systems and fisheries? Are there any traditional methods of avoiding damage to all of Nature’s systems that revive the principle of sustainability within Islam?

To give you an idea of what I mean, let me offer a few examples drawn from the work done by my School of Traditional Arts, where project workers have shown that re-introducing traditional craft skills brings a coherence to peoples’ daily lives, perhaps because they fuse the spiritual with the practical.

Since I founded it, the School has helped restore these skills in places as far afield as Jordan and Nigeria. It also helps to build bridges within communities in this country which have suffered the worst fractures. In Burnley in Lancashire, for instance, project workers have been teaching children from many backgrounds an integrated view of the world using the patterns of

Islamic sacred geometry. This has not just inspired the imagination of the children taking part, but their teachers too. They tell me they have discovered a much more integrated approach to education, where maths and art are not alien to one another, but are seen as two sides of the same coin and directly rooted in Nature’s patterns and processes.

In Afghanistan, I have only recently managed to see the work being done under the umbrella of what we have called “the Turquoise Mountain Foundation” – an initiative I launched some four years ago – which is running similar education programmes and craft training courses. It is also helping with the urban regeneration of the old historic quarter of the city by guiding people to start businesses using the craft skills they have learned.

For example, in the building of schools, people are being shown how to use mud-bricks which are a quarter of the price of the concrete blocks used by other agencies. They are also resistant to earthquakes, whereas concrete is not. And they cope much better with extremes of temperature – mud-brick buildings are cooler in the Summer and warmer in the Winter. What is more, they use local labour and local, natural materials. So these schools are a good example of how traditional wisdom blends with modern needs. After all, you can still use computers and other modern technology in a mud-brick building! And more comfortably, too, given it is more suited to local conditions.

When I finally did manage to reach Kabul earlier this year – after several years of trying – what I saw was truly remarkable. It proved to me that teaching and employing traditional crafts is an effective way of re-introducing the kinds of techniques that are benign to the natural environment. They are also capable of restoring a cultural balance in peoples’ minds. By encouraging a wider celebration of the traditional, ancient culture of Afghanistan, these skills help in a very practical way to counteract the oppressive effects of extremism in all its forms, both religious and secular. This is how traditional wisdom works. It is not a theory or a science written down. Its wisdom is discovered through practice and in action.

These are schemes that are close to my heart, but the Oxford Centre keeps me informed of many others. Working in Muslim countries, the World Wildlife Fund has found that trying to convey the importance of conservation is much easier if it is transmitted by religious leaders whose reference is Qur’anic teaching. In Zanzibar, they had little success trying to reduce spear-fishing and the use of dragnets, which were destroying the coral reefs. But when the guidance came from the Qur’an, there was a notable change in behaviour. Or in Indonesia and in Malaysia, where former poachers are

being deterred in the same way from destroying the last remaining tigers.

And it is not just such interventions that are important. It is mystifying, for instance, that the modern world completely ignores the time-honoured feats of engineering in the ancient world. The Qanats of Iran, for example, that still provide water for thousands of people in what would otherwise be desert conditions. These underground canals – unbelievably 170,000 miles of them – keep the water from the mountains moving down the tunnels using gravity alone. And the water in every village is then kept fresh by the way the storage towers keep the air flowing freely, moved by the wind.

In Spain, the irrigation systems constructed 1200 years ago also still work perfectly, as does the way in which the water is managed by the local population – a way of operating devised before the Muslim rule in Spain disintegrated. The same sorts of Islamic management schemes operate in other parts of the world too, like the “hima” zones in Saudi Arabia which set aside land for use as pasture. These are all examples of how prophetic teaching, in this case framed by the guidance of the Qu’ran, maintains a long term view of things and keeps the danger of a self-interested form of short-term economics at bay.

I am sure that if an organization like the Oxford Centre could help to establish a global forum on “Islam and the Environment” many more very practical, traditional approaches like these could become more widely applied. They may range from science and technology to agriculture, healthcare, architecture and education. Think what could be achieved if mothers and fathers, the teachers in madrassas and Imams, all sought to demonstrate to children how to translate Islamic teachings into practical action – how to blend traditional knowledge and awareness of Nature’s needs with the best of what we know now.

This is certainly something I feel we have to do in the one final issue I have to mention as I close. Perhaps a few facts and figures might demonstrate why.

When I was born in 1948, a city like Lagos in Nigeria had a population of just three hundred thousand. Today, just over sixty years later, it is home to twenty million. Thirty-five thousand people live in every square mile of the city, and its population increases by another six hundred thousand every year.

I choose Lagos as an example. I could have chosen Mumbai, Cairo or Mexico City; wherever you look, the world’s population is increasing fast. It goes up by the equivalent of the entire population of the United Kingdom every year. Which means that this poor planet of ours, which already struggles to sustain 6.8 billion

people, will somehow have to support over 9 billion people within fifty years. In the Arab world, sixty per cent of the population is now under the age of thirty. That will mean, in some way or other, 100 million new jobs will have to be created in that region alone over the next ten to fifteen years.

I am well aware that the very long term prediction is that population may go down. 150 years from now the trends suggest there may be as few as four billion people, maybe even just two billion, but there is no getting away from the fact that in the short term, in the next fifty years, we face monumental problems as the figures rocket. No mega-city can ever hope to catch up with the present expansion in their numbers to provide adequate healthcare, education, transport, food and shelter for so many. Nor can the Earth herself sustain us all, when the demands and pressures on her bounty worldwide are becoming so intense.

I know it is a complicated issue. The experts suggest that, in theory, the Earth could support 9 billion people, but not if a vast proportion is consuming the world’s resources at present Western levels. So the changes have to be essentially two-fold. It would certainly help if the acceleration slowed down, but it would also help if the world reduced its desire to consume.

I have been following carefully the findings of my British Asian Trust in India which has been helping to run a women’s education project in a drought-prone region of Maharashtra called Satara. They have noticed that a real difference can be made when women are able to become more involved in the running of the community. This is also the experience in Bangladesh. I have long been fascinated by Muhammad Yunus’s Grameen Bank of Bangladesh. It operates micro-credit schemes that offer loans to the poorest communities through a bank which is now ninety per cent owned by the rural poor. Interestingly, where the loans are managed by the women of the community, the birth rate has gone down. The impact of these sorts of schemes, of education and the provision of family planning services, has been widespread. Whereas in the 1980s, the average family in Bangladesh had six children, now the average figure is three. But with mega-cities growing as they are, I fear there is little chance these sorts of schemes can help the plight of many millions of people unless we all face up to the fact more honestly than we do that one of the biggest causes of high birth rates remains cultural.

It raises some very difficult moral questions, I know, but do we not each one of us carry the same responsibility towards the Earth? It is surely time to ask if we can come to a view that balances the traditional attitude to the sacred nature of life on the one hand with, on the other, those teachings within each of the sacred tradi-

tions that urge humankind to keep within the limits of Nature's benevolence and bounty.

Ladies and gentlemen, you have endured all this with patience and fortitude. You have also given a very good impression of listening to my own personal thoughts on the perspective opened up by Islamic teaching. I have wanted to convey them to you because it always moves me to be reminded that, from the perspective of traditional Islamic teaching, the destruction of the Earth is represented as the destruction of a prayerful being.

Whichever faith tradition we come from, the fact at the heart of the matter is the same. Our inheritance from our creator is at stake. It will be no good at the end of the day as we sit amidst the wreckage, trying to console ourselves that it was all done for the best possible reasons of development and the betterment of Mankind. The inconvenient truth is that we share this planet with the rest of creation for a very good reason – and that is, we cannot exist on our own without the intricately balanced web of life around us. Islam has always taught this and to ignore that lesson is to default on our contract with Creation.

The Modernist ideology that has dominated the Western outlook for a century implies that “tradition” is backward looking. What I have tried to explain today is that this is far from true. Tradition is the accumulation of the knowledge and wisdom that we should be offering to the next generation. It is, therefore, visionary – it looks forward.

Turning to the traditional teachings, like those found in Islam that define our relationship with the natural world, does not mean locking us into some sort of cultural and technological immobility. As the English writer G.K. Chesterton put it, “real development is not leaving things behind, as on a road, but drawing life from them as a root.” I would also remind you of the words of Oxford's very own C.S. Lewis, who pointed out that “sometimes you do have to turn the clock back if it is telling the wrong time” – that there is nothing “progressive” about being stubborn and refusing to acknowledge that we have taken the wrong road. If we realize that we are travelling in the wrong direction, the only sensible thing to do is to admit it and retrace our steps back to where we first went wrong. As Lewis put it, “going back can sometimes be the quickest way forward.” It is the most progressive thing we could do.

All of the mounting evidence is telling us that we are, indeed, on the wrong road, so you might think it would be wise to draw on the timeless guidance that comes from our intuitive sense of the origin of all things to which we are rooted. Nature's rhythms, her cycles and her processes, are our guides to this uncreated, originating voice.

They are our greatest teachers because they are expressions of Divine Unity. Which is why there is a profound truth in that seemingly simple, old saying of the nomads – that “the best of all Mosques is Nature herself.” ■

Muslim Savants on the Existential Significance of Suffering in the Believer's Spiritual Life

By Prof. Henry Francis B. Espiritu

[The author of this article, Prof. Henry Francis B. Espiritu, is Assistant Professor VII in Philosophy at the University of Philippines – Cebu College. While canvassing the views of eminent Muslim savants on the divine purpose for suffering, Professor Espiritu presents a laudable exposition on this age old topic. As very well presented herein, far from punishment from Above, circumstances creating suffering is a Divine opportunity for self-improvement and a necessary precondition to the blessings of spiritual advancement. Professor Espiritu eloquently relates: “Facing our suffering with courage, perseverance, fortitude, and faith is both a source of grace and a sure road to our sanctification and spiritual transformation.”]

You will certainly be tried in your property and in your persons. And you will certainly hear from those who have been given the Book before you and from the idolaters much abuse. And if you are patient and keep your duty, surely this is an affair of great resolution.¹

Surely with difficulty is ease, with difficulty is surely ease. So when thou art free (from anxiety), work hard, And make thy Lord thy exclusive Goal.²

* * *

Preliminary Points of Consideration

If Divine Providence (*Qadr*) is just, why is there so much suffering in this world? Philosophers, theologians, and even common folks ask this perennial question. Ancient and contemporary sages pondered on this question and they too had some answers to this paradox of life — answers that fill volumes upon volumes of books and philosophical treatises. Likewise, I would, from time to time, reflect on this existential mystery and I gained some glimpses of truth on the nature of suffering and its value in our spiritual maturity. I am not however pretending to give a comprehensive answer to this

most ancient of questions. I am sharing this “cents-worth” of insights to those who may be right now searching to find existential sanity in the midst of overwhelming suffering and hurt that they experience in their lives. Perchance, my reflection can be a source of inspiration for them to go on living their lives with meaning despite pains and suffering. My reflections on suffering are however not entirely my own; they are mediated by my philosophical and spiritual readings of the transcendental and devotional writings of the sages and saints of mystical Islam (*tasawwuf* or Sufism). For me, the profound reflections of these Sufi savants hold rich treasures of insights on suffering, as well as keys that unlock the secret panacea that will eventually allow us to overcome pain and suffering: by making us understand and appreciate the redeeming value of suffering in our spiritual journey to God Who is our Ultimate Goal.

The Perspective of Buddhist Philosophy: Suffering as Caused by Worldly Desires and Materialistic Cravings

Taking a cursory look at our world, we find many unpleasant things and occurrences that are happening: death, injustice, hunger, human trafficking, natural and manmade calamities, cruelties, barbarities, wars, terrorism, chronic sickness, epidemics, etc. This phenomenal world is in pain and in constant suffering. Pain is not only limited to the outside world; in our internal world (*nafs*) we are also suffering because we can hurt our own selves just as well. Insults from people, broken relationships, misunderstandings with friends, bitter feelings towards another person, persecutions from enemies, sadness, loneliness, ennui, boredom, guilt feelings, and our own materialistic cravings—all these can hurt us deeply. Why then do we have to suffer? Gautama Buddha Shakyamuni, the sage of Buddhism also questioned this formidably depressing situation characterizing human existence. In fact, his Enlightenment was the culmination of his long search for an answer to the existential question of suffering. This is the first statement of Buddha’s “Four Noble Truths”: “Life is full of sufferings”. This truth is very relevant for our own reflection on suffering since if this is properly contemplated upon and fully realized; that is, once we see the full existential picture of this truth, we begin to transcend suffering. From the perspective of Buddhist philosophy, once we truly accept the difficulty of life and the existence of suffering as part of the nuances and complexities of living, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters. It means that suffering as part of our human situatedness, once admitted and accepted, can be the starting point of our own spiritual healing.³

What is the main cause of suffering? The Buddhist perspective simply answers: “Limitless desires”. The

Buddha said: “Suffering is brought about by our infinite cravings or desires”. Our unlimited cravings and desires pitted against the true nature of Reality are the causes of our own pains. For instance, we want to be rich and famous without being disturbed and without exertion. We want to be absolute knower without striving to learn. We want to be happy always free from any inconveniences and botherations. We want to be healthy and well always; but if we look at Reality we will be frustrated since not all our desires can be satisfied the way we want them. Since we crave and desire with no limitations—but the nature of Reality does not permit our unlimited desires—we grumble and sigh: “Oh what a cruel world!”

Sufism’s Existential View of Suffering as Part and Parcel of the Imperfect Condition Characterizing Human Existence

In contrast with the much rationalizing and overly cerebral attitude of Buddhism regarding suffering, Sufi Islamic mystics offer a more down-to-earth existentialist perspective regarding the purpose of suffering with respect to “our human condition of unsatisfactoriness”⁴. Hazrat Bayazid Bistami, a Persian Sufi spiritual master, states:

Accepting our human condition of unsatisfactoriness is the antidote to suffering, for somebody who knows that the oil in his lamp is limited, will not moan after its extinction. One who knows that the lamp which he has lit is not safe from the harsh winds will not scream when it is blown out.⁵

Sufism likewise accepts the inevitability of suffering as part of the general structure of Reality. Therefore, we are obliged to accept the existence of suffering for our own mental and spiritual sanity.

Hazrat Moulvi Wahiduddin Khan, a contemporary Indian saint and Muslim scholar said:

Suffering is not *per’se*, negative; it happens to everyone in this imperfect world—we suffer because this world is far from perfect. Suffering is a great equalizer; suffering is therefore a ‘given’ and a ‘constant’ in this ephemeral world... that is why I call suffering a neutral occurrence. It is how we make of it that makes suffering negative or positive. The enlightened person approaches pain as a stepping stone towards his perfection and spiritual growth... the pessimist sees it as a stumbling block... it is your decision that matters as to how you see it and respond to its challenges.⁶

In the above quote, Hazrat Moulvi Wahiduddin Khan noted on the inevitability of suffering as part-and-parcel of our own human situatedness, therefore we simply

need to accept this “existential fact” in our life as humans. However, Hazrat Moulvi Wahiduddin Khan also observed that it is our outlook and response to the problem of pain and suffering that paves the way to our own spiritual development and maturity; hence we must make use of the experiences of suffering and difficulties as opportune moments for our own spiritual enlightenment and transformation.

The Redeeming, Transforming, and Purifying Value of Suffering in the Perspective of Islamic Sufism

Spiritually speaking, suffering is beneficial if we know its redemptive purport, transformative aim, and its transcendental objective. Hazrat Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, a great Turkish saint said that pain and sufferings instruct us so that we will be able to see a “higher view of life”.⁷ Suffering enables us to contemplate that God alone suffices for us; and that we need to submit ourselves to the Providence of God, in perfect trust, contentment, gratitude, forbearance, and obedience.⁸ Furthermore, it is through the pain of confronting and resolving problems that we grow spiritually strong and psychologically mature in life—thus we learn to face life in its multi-dimensional challenges and tasks.⁹ As per Hazrat Said Nursi, truly wise people do not dread pain and suffering: they welcome them, learn from them, pour courage on them and find wisdom in them. Our experiences of suffering make us resolute, spiritually mature and holy; since the experience of pain and suffering prod us to place our reliance solely on the Benevolent God Who allows us to experience difficulties for the good of our souls.

It is only through sufferings and difficulties that one can attain mastery in life and living. Hazrate Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi, the famous 12th century Turkish mystic, keenly observed our human condition; thereafter, he articulated this very penetrating observation:

God turns you from one feeling to another and teaches you by means of opposites, so that you will have two wings to fly—and not just one.¹⁰

For Hazrate Maulana Rumi, life is characterized by the alternating movements of opposites: conflict and peace, peace and conflict, happiness and sufferings, sufferings and happiness, joy and pain, pain and joy... so on and so forth. God designs this alternating psycho-spiritual dynamics in the inward soul for the moral, mental, emotional, and spiritual development of humans.

The Holy *Qur-an* says:

Surely with difficulty is ease, with difficulty is surely ease. So when thou art free (from anxiety),

work hard, And make thy Lord thy exclusive Goal.¹¹

Similarly, the view of the idealist German philosopher Hegel absolutely agrees with the abovementioned *Qur-anic* pronouncement when he said;

Conflicts, disputes, confrontations, and struggles are the laws of progress. Human development evolves in the battlefield of the mind and in the riot of the world. One can therefore reach stability and tranquility only through conflicts, disputes, and struggles. Here, I am not speaking only of struggles in society but also from the point of view of the struggles in man’s inward psyche. Life’s development and transformation are always borne out of conflict... conflict purifies experience... Struggle and striving are the vehicles of the evolution of man’s spirit.¹²

In the same vein, Hazrat Said Nursi echoed Hegel’s perspective regarding the dialectic relationship between conflict and development. However, transcending Hegel’s view, Hazrat Nursi strongly articulated on the redemptive effect of conflict in our inner-life and in our spiritual growth towards deep communion with the Supreme Beloved. To quote Hazrat Said Nursi:

... by means of misfortune, illness and pain, and other motion-inducing contingencies, the cogs of the human machine are set in motion and revolution... It [i.e., suffering or conflict] induces in man to toil and labor for excellence. Thus by means of these contingencies, man becomes like a moving pen... he becomes a pen to write the decree of God in his very own life; due to this, he becomes an ode to the glory of God.¹³

For Hazrat Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, suffering is a venue by which we can reach the heights of spiritual excellence, and an effective vehicle whereby we can manifest the majesty of God in all our life’s struggles.

The Experience of Suffering as Testing Ground of our Fidelity to God and as Venue for Learning the Value of Patience, Forbearance, Faithfulness, and Perseverance

Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad Sahib of Qadian (circa, A.D. 1836-1908)—the eminent Punjabi Islamic mystic-theologian, considered by the worldwide Ahmadiyya movement as the Regenerator (*mujaddid*) of Islam for the 14th Islamic century (*hijrah*)—provided beautiful and valuable insights on the existential and spiritual roles that the experience of pain and suffering play in the integral maturity of the human person. Although Hazrat Mirza Sahib never presented himself as a Sufi

Pir (spiritual master) in the traditional sense of the word (i.e., as understood by Muslims in a particular Muslim society); yet his numerous writings show him to be an expert spiritual guide for his adherents; furthermore, Hazrat Mirza Sahib had a very lucid grasp of the classical teachings of *tasawwuf*, which he believed to be part and parcel of the practice of the Islamic faith.¹⁴ Hazrat Mirza Sahib believed that all humans have to face various kinds of sufferings all throughout their lives as part of the overall makeup of Reality: such that it is to the benefit of humans that they should make-peace with all their trials in life by accepting the inevitability of difficulties and sufferings. Furthermore, Hazrat Mirza Sahib added this very important spiritual truth: it is through patience (*sabr*), firmness of intention (*istiqamah*) and contentment (*ridha*) that the human person will be able to endure and overcome trials and pains that will conduce to his own spiritual improvement.¹⁵

The Holy *Qur'an* in *Surah Baqarah* explicitly declares:

And We shall certainly try you with something of fear and hunger and loss of property, and lives, and fruits. And give good news to the patient, who when a misfortune befalls them, say: 'Surely we are Allah's and to Him we shall return'. Those are they on whom are blessings and mercy from their Lord; and those are the followers of the right course.¹⁶

For Hazrat Mirza Sahib, this specific passage of the Holy *Qur'an* clearly articulates the value of patience, constancy, steadfastness, faith in God's unwavering goodness, and contentment. Believers need to be patient with every misfortune because God delivers both blessings and trials on everyone—with no exemption. If we are often graced in receiving blessings coming from God, it would be both improper and impudent to whine and complain to God when difficulties, from time to time, come to our lives.¹⁷ The sincerity of our faith is marked by our total reliance and compliance with whatever situations God gave us, whether good or bad, whether happy or sad; since God knows the reasons for sending a particular trial to us. Sufferings therefore bring-out the best in our souls by manifesting the spiritual virtues of perseverance, contentment, firm determination, and sincere faith in the ultimate goodness of God and in the justness of His dealings in our individual lives.

The Experience of Suffering as Vehicle for Achieving Knowledge of God and for Attaining the Station of Divine Proximity (Qurbah)

Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad Sahib elucidates on the role that suffering plays in unveiling the depths of God's

Divine character of mercy (*rahma*) and love (*wadud*). According to Hazrat Mirza Sahib, by being tried with various difficulties in life, the believer attains to the true knowledge of God and ultimately reaches the station of nearness to God as the reward for the believer's rectitude and faithfulness amidst trials. To reach the goal of divine nearness (*qurbah*) our soul must develop steadfastness of resolve and fortitude of spirit by not shying away from all our hardships and difficulties to be able to reach the station of nearness to our Almighty God.

According to Hazrat Mirza Sahib, if a believer dreads suffering in his life and hates afflictions to such an extent that he will aspire solely for mundane blessings, pure enjoyment, and physical ease; then such a person will miss the divine blessings encountered through trials and difficulties, which exceeds all other worldly blessings. These are the blessings which are given by the Almighty God only to those who never shrink back from sufferings and trials: comfort coming from God Himself, supreme serenity in the midst of chaos, enablement and strength to face trials, knowledge of God's mercy and nearness or privileged access to the Divine Throne. To quote from Hazrat Mirza Sahib:

... in afflictions and trials, the Merciful causes a light to descend upon the hearts of His faithful servants, strengthened with which they meet all trials with calmness and dignity and, on account of the sweetness of their faith, kiss the chains they are bound with for walking in the right path.¹⁸

The Holy *Qur'an* clearly states that our fortitude (*istiqamah*) in the midst of sufferings is the surest way to win Allah's good pleasure.¹⁹ Our fortitude is perfected by our sincerity, contentment, and unshakeable belief in God despite the bleakness of our situations and the seeming abandonment of God in our painful circumstances. The combination of the virtues of forbearance and steadfastness merit Almighty Allah's favor, allow the believer to gain knowledge of Allah's secret and enable the believer to attain nearness to Him. A lover's love to his beloved is indeed proven and found true in periods of troubles and difficulties much more than during periods of ease and comfort. In the words of Hazrat Mirza Sahib:

The true lover does not recede but takes a forward step when he sees ills and adversities and looking upon his own life as a very insignificant thing, willingly submits himself to the will of heaven and is prepared to meet the worst. Of such people, the Lord says: "And of men is he who sells himself to seek the pleasure of Allah (*Qur'an* 2:207)". In short this is the essence of constancy that leads to the Divine Being.²⁰

The Believer's Experience of Suffering: Learning Process Towards Sensitivity of the Heart, Training of the Spirit, and Openness to Receive God's Grace into the Soul

Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi analogized on the educative and transformative significance of suffering in the human spirit when he said;

They throw barley on the earth; then came out branches. Next, they crushed it in the mill; then it became delicious bread after being baked and placed in the burning furnace. Next, the bread is chewed and digested and it became mind, spirit, body, and emotion. And when the mind is bewildered with love for the Beloved, what a wonderful transformation this simple barley went through! This barley-grain has indeed taken a marvelous journey!²¹

In the same vein, Hazrat Baba Guru Nanak, a saint of medieval India, revered by Muslims and Hindus alike, echoed Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi's view on the transformative role that suffering play in our inner spirit by this statement:

When God instructs His slaves with profound things and mysterious secrets of life, He drowns them into the sea of suffering. Like a swimming tutor who throws his new student into the water and makes him struggle to learn swimming, God does the same to perfect His slaves' patience and faithfulness.²²

Hazrat Baba Guru Nanak's analogy is indeed very instructing and very true; for if one simply reads hundreds of books on swimming, he will not learn how to swim. The student has to wade into the deep water and risk the danger of drowning, and from there learn swimming. The spiritual significance of the abovementioned analogy of Baba Guru Nanak—on the necessity of the student's risking fear of the waters to swim, thereby learning the art of swimming—is clearly elaborated by Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad Sahib's insight when he said that the believer's knowledge of the unfathomable depths of the abiding presence of God can only be known with certainty through the crucible of suffering, trials, and difficulties.

Hazrat Mirza Sahib believed that all kinds of theoretical knowledge can only be perfected through practice or experience. The ultimate certainty of any theoretical knowledge can only be realized when such a knowledge is translated in practice in real life. Similarly, sorrows and difficulties which God placed on us, as the allotted portion of our human existence, are vehicles for perfecting our knowledge through practical experience; so that by facing our difficulties with courage (*shuja'at*) and

steadfastness (*istiqamah*) we will learn to make our hearts spiritually sensitive to the sufferings and pains of others and train our souls to be open and available to God's enabling grace (*ni'mah*) that succor us in times of troubles and woes. In the words of Hazrat Mirza Sahib:

A person who undergoes sufferings has an occasion to apply the treasure of knowledge accumulated in his heart to the actual circumstances of life, and by their right application he becomes, as it were, a perfect embodiment of Divine guidance... Our morals are not finally developed unless they are proved by sufferings and trials which stand to them in the relation of [actual] practice to [theoretical] knowledge.²³

Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad then quoted another passage from the Holy Qur'an to prove his abovementioned point:

It is to this that the Lord calls our attention to this verse: "You will certainly be tried in your property and in your persons. And you will certainly hear from those who have been given the Book before you and from the idolaters, much abuse. And if you are patient and keep your duty, surely this is an affair of great resolution" (*Surah Ahli Imran*:186). This verse shows conclusively that knowledge is not perfect and fruitful without practical application.²⁴

In this above statement, Hazrat Mirza Sahib declares this profound spiritual principle: virtues that conduce to our spiritual maturity—virtues such as constancy, patience and fortitude of spirit, our abiding faith and confidence in God—can best be tested, exhibited, and proven-out in the fiery furnace of trials and difficulties. Through our volitional surrender to Divine Providence in the midst of sufferings, we will be molded to be persons whom Almighty Allah finds pleasure and satisfaction.

Therefore, if we long to attain true happiness of living, we have to undergo all difficult and painful experiences in life. Great men, saints, savants, martyrs, and heroes suffered from oppressions, tortures, poverty, persecutions, and misunderstandings; they courageously persevered in going on with life—despite much difficulties—by God's grace, beneficence, and mercy; that is why they become heroes and saints. By responding with perfect submission, coupled with courage and trust to whatever challenges the Almighty God give us, we become co-workers with Him in furthering His Will in our lives and in the lives of others. Facing our suffering with courage, perseverance, fortitude, and faith is both a source of grace and a sure road to our sanctification and spiritual transformation. This, I believe, is how the Sufi

mystics and savants of Islam understood and realized the transcendental, sanctifying, and liberating value of suffering in our lives as human persons. May we therefore possess a mature realization that living entails both joy and suffering; hence, we should not escape suffering for sheer enjoyment, instead we should use our pain and suffering as vehicles for our emotional, intellectual, and spiritual growth; for it is in learning and realizing the redemptive and transformative values of suffering where we can comprehend the secret of life's significance, meaning, and joy.

May our All-Compassionate God grant us abiding determination to face all kinds of sufferings and pains in life. May He give us endurance, steadiness, courage, and resolve to surmount all kinds of calamities, afflictions, and ordeals by His mercy, assistance, and grace. Amen, a thousand times Amen! ■

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- 2 *Al Qur-an: Surah Inshirah:5-8.*
- 3 See M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth.* London: Arrow Publishers, 1990; pp. 13-14.
- 4 *Sirr-e-Dil [Secrets of the Heart].* Dacca, Bangladesh: Naksobondi Tarikat Sahit Kutabkhana, 1977; p. 141.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 142.
- 6 Cited in *The Grace of Contentment and Surrender*, by Sayyid Abubakr Qadri. Peshawar, Pakistan: Qadri Book Depot, 1965; p. 41.
- 7 Cf., *Risale-i-Nur: The Flashes Collection.* Istanbul: Sozler Publications, 2004; p. 27.
- 8 *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- 10 *Mathnawi Selections*, Islamabad, Pakistan: Ruhani Suhbah Press, 1985; p. 76.
- 11 *Holy Qur-an, Al-Inshirah:5-8.*
- 12 Helmut Wilhelm Kuhn, *The Spirituality of Hegel.* Winchester: Anglican Resources, Ltd., 1985; p. 127.
- 13 *Risale-i-Nur: The Flashes, op. cit.*, p. 28.
- 14 In my own opinion, Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad Sahib did not consider himself a Sufi spiritual teacher because his divine office as a *mujaddid* (regenerator of Islam) is higher than the status of a Sufi master (*Pir*). A Sufi *Pir* or saint (*waliullah*) belongs to a specific mystical order or *tariqah*—however Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad Sahib belongs to the entire Muslim *Ummah* by virtue of his office as renewer of Islam in the 14th century *Hijrah*. His not being a Sufi master (*Pir*) must not imply that Hazrat Mirza Sahib did not appreciate the value of *tasawwuf* (genuine Islamic Sufism) in Muslim spiri-

tual life. In many of his writings, Hazrat Mirza Sahib referred to true *tasawwuf*, as Islamic-Sufism—the Sufism which is unequivocal in following the precepts of the Holy *Qur'an* and the *Sunnah* (Traditions) of the Holy Prophet and the Sufism which shuns away from all the innovations of so-called Sufis who mix Hindu-Yogic, Buddhist, Gnostic, and Magian practices to the pristine mysticism of Islam as found in the Holy *Qur'an* and *Sunnah* (Cf., Dr. Basharat Ahmad, "Position of Sufi-ism [*Tasawwuf*] in Islam in *Essays in Islamic Sufi-ism*, Mohammad Ahmad [ed.]. Columbus, Ohio: Ahmadiyya Anjuman Isha'at Islam Lahore, nd; pp. 5-7). For Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad Sahib, genuine Islamic Sufism is just the genuine Islam as taught in the *Qur'an* and the *Sunnah*; and as practiced with true sincerity (*ikhlas*), divine love (*muhabbah-ilahi*), and heartfelt spirituality (*ruhaniyyah*). Hazrat Mirza Sahib exemplified supra-excellent degrees of *ikhlas*, *muhabbah-ilahi*, and *ruhaniyyah* all throughout his life in service to Islam—as such I consider Hazrat Mirza Sahib to be an authentic Sufi saint (*waliullah*) of the highest caliber although Hazrat Mirza Sahib did not specifically and strongly claim to himself the status of a Sufi *waliullah* as compared to his unambiguous claim of being the *mujaddid* of the Islamic *Ummah* (See, Dr. Basharat Ahmad, *Ibid.*, pp. 7-10).

- 15 Hazrat Mirza Sahib's exposition of the Muslim faith, *Teachings of Islam*, that endeavors to explain Islam as a complete philosophy of life contained valuable reflections on the significance of suffering in the spiritual development of the soul. There are three (3) basic points that Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad gave in his reflection on the spirituality of the experience of suffering and difficulties: a) life's difficulties provide ample venue for the soul to learn patience, forbearance and fortitude; b) patient acceptance to sufferings and pains win for the soul God's pleasure and divine nearness; and c) life's difficulties provide practical experiences of God's sovereignty in our life, for us to appreciate God's mercy, grace, and enablement (See Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad Sahib of Qadian. *Teachings of Islam* [Maulana Muhammad Ali, translator]. Columbus, Ohio: Ahmadiyya Anjuman Isha'at Islam Lahore, 1998 [reprint edition]; pp. 74-78, 174-177, and 210-213; respectively).
- 16 *Surah Baqarah:155-157.*
- 17 Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad Sahib of Qadian. *Teachings of Islam, op. cit.*; p. 90-91.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 176.
- 19 See Holy *Qur-an, Surah Ha Mim:31-32.*
- 20 Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, *Teachings of Islam, op.cit.*, pp. 176-177.
- 21 *Mathnawi Selections*, Islamabad, Pakistan: Ruhani Suhbah Press, 1985; p. 81.
- 22 *Guru Nanak Sahib Ustat* [In Appreciation of Guru Nanak Sahib]. Jabalpur, India: Sikhi Parchar Publishing, 1981; p.75.
- 23 Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, *Teachings of Islam, op. cit.*, pp. 211-212.
- 24 *Ibid.*, pp. 212-213.

Lessons on the Quran:

Sura Al-Baqarah, Section 3 (Part 1)

By Fazeel S. Khan, Esq.

[Lahore Ahmadiyya members in various cities in the USA gather each week for a Quran study group via skype. The study group commenced with lessons from Sura Fatihah and continued with a subsequent section of the Quran every week. Members take turns presenting on a particular section, and discussion from all participants follow. This article is based on a lesson presented to the study group by the Editor. It deals with the first part of Section 3 of Sura Al-Baqarah. The lesson on the second part will be published in a forthcoming issue.]

This section of the Holy Quran contains lessons on the concept of Unity of God. As such, Maulana Muhammad Ali titles the section “Divine Unity”. This concept of unity of God is illustrated in this section through examples of the work of God in nature.

Chapter 2, Verse 21

“O men, serve your Lord Who created you and those before you, so that you may guard against evil,”

In this verse, we find a *commandment* for the first time in the Holy Quran. And the commandment is to “serve your Lord”. Interestingly, when we compare this commandment to the first of the well-known ten commandments of the bible, we see some similarities and some interesting differences. The first of the ten commandments states:

“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before Me.”

This commandment also focuses on the “unity of God”; this is clear from the words: “You shall have no other gods before Me.” Despite the patent congruity between both commandments in terms of establishing the principle of “divine unity”, there are differences between the two commandments. These differences are seen when the implications of the context in which the commandments appear are studied.

For instance, Verse 21 commences by addressing “O men”, or “all mankind”. Right from the outset, the reader is informed that this One, True God is not only the god of a particular group of people, but rather of all peoples, regardless of race, nationality, culture or faith tradition. And by drawing attention to this God creating “those before you”, it is shown that His Lordship not only expands to all physical/geographic regions, but also crosses all barriers of time too. In contrast, the first of the

ten commandments limits the scope of the commandment to the Israelites by addressing those who were brought out of Egypt and saved from bondage. In essence, it limits this God to being the “God of Israel” or the “God of the Israelites”. This contrast between the first commandment in the Quran and the first of the ten commandments is reflective of what Islam purports to be the difference between it and previous faiths. In 5:3 we read:

“... This day have I perfected for you your religion and completed My favour to you and chosen for you Islam as a religion ...”

As the final religion, being “completed” and “perfected”, Islam considers itself as a universal religion, one that is for all peoples and all times in the future. Previous faiths were based on guidance for specific groups of people and for particular time periods. Thus, what many are unaware of is that Islam accepts the earlier teachings (and commandments) and does not regard them as falsities. Rather, Islam accepts their source being the same One, True God but clarifies that their application was limited to specific groups and specific periods of time. It is in this context that the reference to Israelites in the first commandment of the bible is understood in Islam.

Another difference between the two commandments is that the first of the ten commandments seems to focus on the *belief* in One God. The commandment in chapter 2, verse 21 of the Quran, though, appears to be based on *action* (that is, to “serve your Lord”). As we know from our lessons on Sura Fatihah, to “serve” (*ibadat*) entails the action of pursuing the attainment of divine morals and establishing their impress on our souls through humble submission to God. Hence, the first of the commandments in the Quran not only stands for guidance on divine unity but also offers insight into the relationship between man and this One, True God.

It is also noteworthy, that in chapter 2, verse 21, we are provided with the *reason* for which the commandment is based, as it states “so that you may guard against evil”. This also appears to be a significant difference between the two commandments. A plain reading of the first commandment of the bible seems to suggest that because God helped the Israelites in certain ways (i.e. bringing them out of Egypt and out of bondage), that they owe it to Him to believe in Him. Verse 21 of Sura Al-Baqarah presents a major shift in the way we understand God and our relationship to Him. We are told that it is not because God needs anything from us, or that because we are indebted to God that we must obey Him, but rather by *humbly serving* Him it is for our own benefit and progress (much like a proper regimen of eating and drinking guards against malnutrition and other physical ailments). By *humbly serving* Allah – that is, by living our lives in a way so as to try to acquire the divine attributes and display them in our daily lives – we

are able to divert evil (which is what corrupts our souls and stagnates spiritual progress).

Chapter 2, Verse 22

“Who made the earth a resting place for you and the heaven a structure, and sends down rain from the clouds then brings forth with it fruits for your sustenance; so do not set up rivals to Allah while you know.”

In this verse, the theme of the universality of mankind is reinforced. Just as God is One, all mankind is but one nation. This verse directs attention to all of mankind by making reference to the entire earth (which is a resting place for *all* people), and the heaven (which is a common covering or roof for *all* people as if belonging to the same house). This verse also provides us with an explanation of the first attribute of God, which is that of “Rabb” (Lord). So, after commanding that we *humbly serve* the Lord (*Rabb*), we are offered an illustration of Who or What this *Rabb* is. Again, as we know from our lessons on Surah Fatihah, *Rabb* conveys the idea of “fostering or nourishing unto perfection”. This verse illustrates this concept by providing the example of God not only creating the earth and the heavens, but also sending down rain from the clouds so that the earth may be fostered and nourished in such a way so as to produce fruits for our physical sustenance. Now, rain is repeatedly used in the Quran as symbolizing “revelation”. And, just as the rain brings the dry earth to life, so too does divine revelation resurrect the souls of man by giving him spiritual sustenance. In essence, the point that can be drawn from this is that those who want to follow the command to humbly serve the Lord are not left alone in the dark as to how this is to be done; rather, God is a loving, nurturing and fostering force that provides His creation with what is needed in order to do so.

Chapter 2, Verses 23 and 24

After providing this illustration of God’s attribute of *Rabbubiyat* in the form of an analogy between rain and revelation, the next two verses go on to assert a challenge in support of this divine revelation to those who oppose it. It states:

“And if you are in doubt as to that which We have revealed to Our servant, then produce a chapter like it and call on your helpers besides Allah if you are truthful.” (V.23)

“But if you do (it) not – and you can never do (it) – then be on your guard against the fire whose fuel is men and stones, it is prepared for the disbelievers.” (V.24)

The Holy Quran is certainly a unique revelation, different from other scriptures in many ways. Its style, diction, poetic manner in which it is recited, the fact that it

is written in the first person (as opposed to a narrative form), etc., are all distinguishing characteristics. But these features are not necessarily the basis of the challenge. The challenge to produce something like the Quran seems to be based on the knowledge, wisdom, and light of guidance that it contains. In line with the analogy in the previous verse, the challenge is to produce something that brings to life a fallen humanity, as rain brings life to barren land. The revelation of the Quran brought about spiritual life to a spiritually dead Arab society at the time of the Holy Prophet and the challenge is for anyone to produce another script that can produce the same transformation. As Maulana Muhammad Ali explains in his commentary on this verse:

“That the transformation wrought by it [i.e. Quran] is unparalleled in the history of the world is admitted on all hands, for if the Holy Prophet was the “most successful of all prophets and religious personalities” [as referenced in the Encyclopedia Britannica], this success was due to no other cause than the Quran.”

...

“Besides, every word of the Quran gives expression to Divine majesty and glory in a manner which is not approached by any other sacred book.”

Chapter 2, Verse 25

The statement by Maulana Muhammad Ali about every word of the Quran giving expression to Divine majesty and glory got me thinking about the word “Garden” used in the verse 25, which states:

“And give good news to those who believe and do good deeds, that for them are Gardens in which rivers flow. Whenever they are given a portion of the fruit thereof, they will say: This is what was given to us before; and they are given the like of it. And for them therein are pure companions and therein they will abide.”

I started thinking about why the word “garden” (*jan-nat*) is repeatedly used in the Quran to describe the state of “heaven” or “paradise”. After meditating on this, I came to realize that the word “garden” is actually a perfect symbol or analogy for describing *how* to humbly submit to God (as commanded in Verse 21).

The definition of the word “garden” is:

“A plot of ground where herbs, fruits, flowers, or vegetables are cultivated; a rich well cultivated region.”

So, in order to produce a garden, one must first “cultivate”. And the word “cultivation” is defined as:

“To foster the growth of; to improve by labor, care or study”

Keeping with the analogies between the physical and spiritual, if the “garden” requires cultivation of the *seed* in the earth, so too must the attainment of the spiritual state of “heaven” required the cultivation of the “soul”. And this is exactly what is explained in 91:9-10; referring to the condition of the soul, it states:

“He is indeed successful who causes it to grow, and he indeed fails who buries it.”

The analogy of the “garden” provides a description of what is required in order to be successful in this process of cultivating one’s soul. As we all know, for vegetation to grow, it normally requires three things:

1. Rain (or some source of water);
2. Sunlight; and
3. Proper environment.

These three ingredients seem to be physical representations of three spiritual essentials for attaining spiritual life (i.e. the state of heaven).

As we already noted, **rain** is repeatedly used as a metaphor for “revelation” in the Holy Quran. So, just as the seed requires rain, so too does the soul require the guidance contained in divine revelation. After rain, the growth from the earth requires **sunlight**. And so too is the soul in need of the “light” of the Holy Prophet Muhammad in order to put into practice the lessons provided in the Quran. In 33:45-46, we read:

“O Prophet, surely We have sent thee as a witness and a bearer of good news and a warner, and as an inviter to Allah by His permission, and as a light-giving sun.”

The Quran itself equates the Holy Prophet Muhammad with the light of the sun. And these two ingredients are related together in 5:15 as well:

“Indeed there has come to you from Allah a Light and a clear Book”

The “Light” in this verse refers to the Holy Prophet and the “clear Book” is the Quran. Similarly, the Holy Prophet Muhammad in his final sermon also reiterated the need for these two essentials; he said:

“I leave behind me two things, the Quran and my example (the Sunna), and if you follow these you will never go astray.”

Now, for one to develop the innate divine attributes within all of us, we need to experience the trials and tribulations that life has to offer, just like the seed must be planted and cultivated in the **proper environment** in order for it grow. Just as an appropriate environment is required for growth of vegetation into a garden, so too are the trials of everyday life required to develop the soul so that it may attain the spiritual state of heaven. As the Quran explains:

“Every soul must taste of death. And We test you by evil and good by way of trial. And to Us you are returned.” (21:35)

Quite fascinatingly, this analogy of the garden seems to also shed light on the *stages* of spiritual development. As was brought up last week, it seems that we tend to go through stages of faith (progressing at times, and then feeling stagnant at other times). Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din Sahib explains in his book *The Ideal Prophet* that there are intermediary or transitory stages in one’s spiritual development, and that between each stage of advancement, there occurs a period of “*inactivity*” known as “*barzakh*”, just like the period between when we die and are brought back to life in the hereafter. He writes:

“The end of each greater stage is characterized by a sudden cessation of progress popularly called death – the decomposition of the ingredients which the progressive entity then absorbed in order to pursue its course of progress, in every stage. This cessation of progress continues for periods of different duration in different cases. This period we Muslims call barzakh.”

Now, in the analogy of the “garden”, we see that at an appointed term or *season*, the garden too will experience a sort of death. A period of inactivity takes place, growth and life becomes stunted. However, after a period of cessation, we see the signs of the continuation of the previous period’s development. So, the sense of leveling out of faith at times appears to be a natural phenomenon, and a part of the process by which Almighty Allah nourishes and fosters our souls.

Later in the verse, mention is made of “pure companions” (or *hurs*). We all know that the “pure companions” do not refer to virgins or anything of the like, as, unfortunately, many Muslims incorrectly believe. Rather it refers to spiritual blessings. And because heaven is a state or condition in which one can experience more and more spiritual advancement, being in the company of the “pure companions” seems to indicate that one will benefit from being in the company of “pure” people in the hereafter as well. Just as we see *mujadids* (divinely appointment reformers) and other saintly people helping facilitate spiritual development in others through their companionship (by way of their lessons, deep insight, and personal example) in this world, so too does this lesson explain that such persons will continue to serve as a source from which people may derive spiritual benefit in the hereafter.

I’ll end here and continue with the remaining verses in the next session. May Almighty Allah help us in our own journeys toward humble service to Him by cultivating our souls. Ameen. ■

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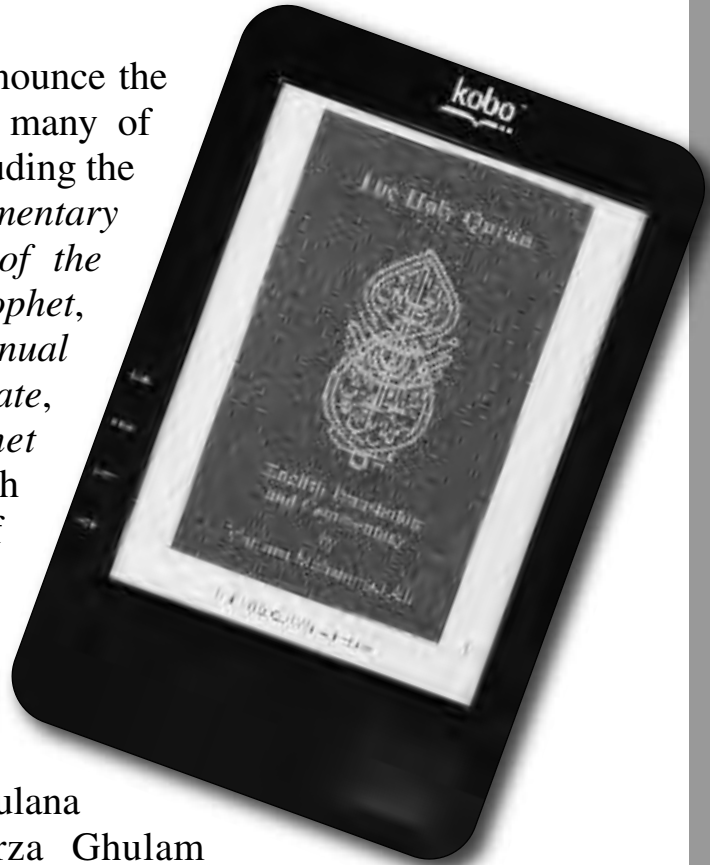
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