

Comparisons between Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam

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*What follows is an excerpt from Chapter 1 of **The Prophet and His Message**, by Dr. Khalifa Abdul Hakim. ¹ We gratefully acknowledge and thank The Institute of Islamic Culture for permission to reproduce this.*

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

LIKE many other species of animals man is by nature gregarious; for the necessities of even very primitive existence he has to enter into some sort of reciprocal relationship with other members of his species. It is not only action and reaction upon his natural environment but dealings with other human beings that raise his consciousness to levels not reached by other animals. The natural biological unit consists of the parents and the offspring and the preservation of this unit is guaranteed by instinct. At this stage, man still lives at the common animal level, and is not easily distinguishable from higher animals like the monkeys. Morality, as human beings at the higher stages of development understand it, emerges where the desires of the individual begin to clash with the desires of other individuals and run counter to the demands of corporate social existence and well-being. Where this conflict does not exist, there is yet no morality, even though the social organisation may be inviolably perfect as among the ants and the bees whose totalitarian organisation runs smoothly in the interest of the whole. Natural instruction, regimentation and unconscious compulsion leave no room for individual desires inconsonant with the welfare of the group. Morality emerges only with individuality and free-will. An action, however valuable biologically or socially, carried out under the compulsion of instinct or because of external group pressures, is not a moral action; whatever value it may possess is an amoral value.

The definition of man as a social animal does not fully describe his nature because at the foundation of human life, there is a contradiction. To describe him completely, man should be called an unsocial-social animal. With respect to the other members of his group he is on the offensive or the defensive, and the identification of interests is never complete. There is always the stress and strain between man's egoism and altruism. The eternal question of human relations is how

to restrain the egoism of the individual or, within, the life of the individual, how to restrain the imperviousness of any one instinct and prevent its domination over the other natural or rational urges of life, because any one instinct left to itself may run amuck, suppressing and crushing all other instincts. To put it briefly, the problem of human life is the harmonisation of the apparently disharmonious. Also at the natural biological level, life is a constant effort of adaptation to environment. Civilised man's environment is much more extensive than the physical forces around him. He has to adapt himself to the demands of his group. These demands may be customary, institutional, mythical or ideational. When the individual has not yet emerged as a thinking being, desirous of regulating his personal life according to his own ideas and sentiments, all life is regulated by custom. But custom is not yet morality in the true sense. At a higher stage, custom is elevated and codified into laws, and the demands of corporate existence are met by legality; rights and duties are established with threats and sanctions against violation. But legality too cannot be identified with morality. First, because it comprehends only a part of human relations and, second, because of the element of compulsion in it – it rests on a *must* and not on an *ought*. A man may punctiliously observe what the laws demand and may still be a person devoid of moral sentiment or consideration. The truth that mere legality is not identical with morality is further substantiated by the established fact that laws throughout a long period of human history were made by groups or classes mainly to fortify their own vested interests. Not only the laws, but the ethics that was supposed to be their basis was little more than group morality. When tribes are welded into nations, the spirit of laws and ethics remains very much the same, although in a rational or humanistic garb.

Bergson in his book *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* has rightly endorsed this conclusion and propounded the thesis that in human history, morality inculcated by groups and communities, classes, castes and nations has always been a tribal morality, and the

only exception is the morality of saints and prophets. He identifies his *elan vital*, the Evolutionary Creative Life Urge, with Love which is realised in the intuitive life and conduct of the great saints and prophets who transcended the narrowness of tribal morality. Human morality has developed both by gradual extension of justice, love and sympathy to cover not only all humanity, but all living beings, comprehending even the entire organic realm. The feeling of Love has sometimes overflowed even these boundaries in all great cultures and, in some saints and mystic poets, has embraced the whole of existence. Among Western poets, Wordsworth is an eminent example of this approach, and there is an abundance of it in the Sufi poets of Islam. Says Mir Dard, the mystic poet of Delhi,

Step softly on the stones in the hills.
Each one of them is a storehouse of hearts (souls),
Delicate like glassware.

Ghalib, another great poet of Delhi, inculcates similar sentiments about the universe in some of his verses:

The sun and the dust-atoms that dance in its rays are all hearts.
The Cosmos is a glass-house of souls.

Every atom is intoxicated with the wine of the wonders of life.

It is like the eye of a lover reflecting the enchanting beauty of the beloved's bewitching eyes.

The Qur'an has taught the Muslims that the Universe is essentially spiritual and alive, singing praises of the Creator in its own tongue and manner which ordinary mortals do not understand:

The seven heavens and the earth, and whosoever is in them, glorify Him; there is nothing that does not proclaim His praise, but you do not understand this glorification (Qur'an 17:44).

Thus, too, says the great mystic poet Rumi, whose magnum opus, the Mathnawi, is considered to be a Persian version of the essential meaning of the Qur'an:

Earth and water, air and fire, are alive,
And are servants of the great Nourisher and Sustainer of Existence,
Although man in his ignorance considers them to be dead matter.

I have quoted a few of these verses in support of the thesis of Bergson that Cosmic Life and Love are best reflected in the sentiments, life and conduct of the great prophets and saints. Their morality, rooted in spirituality and Divinely made by contact with the Cosmic Creative Urge (which the Qur'an designates as *Rabb*), is broad and universal and transcends group morality which is commonly the morality of nations and classes and sects.

To whom does humanity owe the moral elevation and transcendence of individual or collective egoism? Not to those who were merely great lawgivers, because legality does not touch the deeper founts of the human soul and is, ultimately, an attempt to save individuals from the tyranny of one another's egoism. Not to the great philosophers who, by the instruments of logic and dialectic, tried, like Socrates and Plato, to convince humanity that morality is not subjective but objective not relative but absolute, rooted in the nature of rational reality. Philosophical ethics in the West begins with Socrates and Plato. There is much that is edifying and satisfying to the intellect in their arguments for the cosmic validity of 'the good' but, taken as a whole they do not make the chords of the human heart vibrate. Plato's *Republic*, in which Socrates is the chief exponent and promulgator of an idealistic scheme of ethics and politics, draws up only the pattern of a caste system in which a eugenically selected minority is privileged to be the custodian of wisdom and morality and the large majority of citizens and slaves are prohibited from thinking for themselves and guiding their own lives. *The Republic* denies the essential equality of human beings – equality before law and equality of opportunity to develop one's endowments and potentialities. It is fortunate for humanity that this "pattern in heaven" was not realised on this earth. Morality really is less of a theory and more of a way of life. Therefore, the example here is more effective than a precept. The life of the philosophical moralist, or of the writer of ethics, is seldom an example for others. It is only great personalities, their conduct and their life attitudes, from which edifying influences radiate and the lives of others receive fresh ideals and energies. It is men like Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad who are regenerative and creative moral influences.

It is not due to any historical accident that these great souls continue to receive homage from a large portion of humanity. The philosopher and the scientist, the rich and the poor, the peasant and the ordinary wage-earner continue even after millenniums to hold them as ideals, and measure their own conduct by the standards set by

them in precept and example.

Who can deny the historical fact that of all these great teachers the life of Muhammad is the richest in the multiplicity and variety of human experience? What we know about Buddha with any certainty is only this, that overwhelmed by the pain and misery of life, he wandered away from his princely realm, deserting his community, his wife and child, in search of light to solve the problem of cosmic pain. The light that he received showed him the unreality of all life. Life, according to him, could not be mended. The only remedy, therefore, is that it must be ended. Actions, good as well as bad, are the products of desire. Therefore, to end all actions and ultimately all life, all desires should be annihilated. The aim of life should be to negate itself to attain to a desireless state. Nirvana, to which no category of life or consciousness is applicable, for which reason it is indescribable. Such a metaphysics could lead only to a limited kind of negative morality – i.e. not to tell lies; not to injure any living being; not to be selfish; not to be harsh, but to feel mercy for the unhappiness of all life; not to mix with others on the ordinary social plane, but to prefer the life of the monk who lives on the charity of the wage-earner or the rich; and to engage in no occupation that constitute the sum total of human civilisation and culture. The beneficial influence of Buddha on some aspects of the life of those who revere and follow him lies in the fact that even some portions of negative morality form a necessary part of ethics, although they could be effectively useful only in their application to the practical affairs of life. One can very well value the philosophy and life attitude of 'non-attachment,' if it is a non-attachment of the kind preached by Krishna as related in the *Mahabhart*a, namely, that a person must remain detached from egotistical ambitions and desires while doing his duty – even while fighting a battle for a righteous cause. Duties emerge only in the complexities of human relations and predicaments. This *Karma Joga*, as presented by Krishna in the *Bhagavat Gita*, comes very close to the positive ethics of Islam.

The moral and spiritual influence of Jesus has been much wider and deeper. Being the last of the great Israelite prophets, he represents the spiritual inheritance of a long line. Christian dogmatics and theology have set him apart from the other great prophets and have lifted him from humanity into divinity. Not being satisfied with his divinised humanity, it made him "God-Man" instead of "Man of God". The concept of incarnation, against which every great prophet of Israel would have fought tooth and nail, stigmatising it as a most unforgivable

blasphemy, was imported from the Aryan religions where it still is a central doctrine. Besides, some Mediterranean dogmas and mysteries were grafted on the simple monotheistic creed of Jesus. Identifying him with God Almighty Himself did no service either to God or to man. To this deification of Jesus, the doctrine of Original Sin was tacked in order to convince humanity of its inherent depravity, for which the sole remedy was not a pious and virtuous life, but belief in the vicarious suffering and sacrifice of "God's only begotten son" expiating the inheritable sin of humanity's first progenitors. Every great prophet suffers for the sake of humanity and is truly a saviour, but Jesus was made the Son and Saviour. The simple and sweet religion of Jesus was thus beclouded by irrational mysteries, which sapped the very foundations of morality by depriving man of free-will, and making God a cruel, revengeful tyrant, visiting the sin of the first parents on innumerable generations – a God implacable without human sacrifice of a nature found in pagan creeds. According to this kind of dogmatism, moral effort loses its value and assurance of well-being, here and hereafter.

This belief in Original Sin and vicarious sacrifice was made the indispensable condition of salvation. More pagan mysteries were incorporated in the religion of love propagated by Jesus. In the Greek mystery religions, a god incarnated in a lamb had to be eaten in a solemn sacrament so that his divinity might be imbibed by direct physical assimilation. Dogma and sacrament replaced moral effort.

If real Christianity were no more than a belief in *Incarnation, Original Sin, Vicarious Divine Suffering* and in the efficacy of pagan sacraments and mysteries, it would have perished and would have been relegated to the limbo of discarded pagan creeds and mythologies. But the real triumph of Jesus and his valuable contribution to the uplift of humanity are attributable not to these mysterious dogmas but to his preaching and Practising the love of God and Man, exposing the superficialities and hypocrisies of the rigid legalists and worshippers of the letter of law. For him, a pure heart full of love is the essence of all true religion. When religion has degenerated into spiritless external observances, a man like Jesus finds himself called upon to proclaim to the world that the Sabbath is made for man and not man for the Sabbath – the letter killeth and the spirit giveth life.

He found that Judaism which, from Abraham downwards, had produced great prophets, had degenerated into a

religion of ritual, ceremonies, external observances and legalism, from which the spirit had departed. He confined his teaching to this vital mission and left aside the whole political, economic and cultural life of the Jews, in the belief that if hearts were changed for the better and religious outlook was genuinely spiritualised, laws and customs and the various institutions of civilisation would get a new meaning. When universal love ruled the world it would be transformed into a Kingdom of Heaven. The Jews were expecting a Messiah who would make them politically dominant and powerful, but when they found this claimant of Messiahhood proclaiming that the Kingdom of Heaven was within one's own soul, they were disappointed and considered him to be a charlatan and an impostor, who was incapable of delivering the goods. They wanted to get rid of Caesar, but here was a man who said, "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's."

If he had stirred up a political revolution the Romans might have crucified him, but not the Jews who would have welcomed such a revolt with a sporting chance of success. He invited the Jews to a spiritual revolution, promising to them that if they first sought the Kingdom of Heaven in the inner recesses of their own souls everything else would certainly be added unto it.

This phenomenon has happened in the history of all great religions. Every religion has of necessity to have an institutional side. Some ritual of worship and some laws and regulations are necessary for the purposes of organisation. These things are the external shell to protect the kernel of morality and religion. But with the passage of time, the followers of a religion begin to identify religion with verbal assent to rigidly formulated dogmas and certain external observances and ceremonies. A person is considered to be religious if he gives this assent and observes some ritual, irrespective of the fact whether he is moved by love or justice in his dealings with his fellow men.

Such was the case of the professionally religious people whom Jesus called venomous and blood-sucking vipers. During the lifetime of Jesus, his cry proved to be a cry in the wilderness. Neither the elite nor the common people understood him. The crowds that began to gather wherever he went, believed him primarily to be a faith-healer, possessing powers of the kind that our present-day Christian Scientists claim to be potentially present in every human being. The few disciples who attached themselves to him were poor and ignorant

people. For the most part they were men of weak and superstitious faith, and of wavering and dubious loyalty, one of them betraying Jesus for a few coins. According to the Gospel, they could not keep themselves awake during the night when their Master felt the approach of death. It is said that these disciples got utterly dismayed, their hopes having been shattered by the Master's crucifixion which the Jews believed to be an ignominious end of the cursed. Their faith revived only when he was seen alive by some on the third day after his crucifixion.

Whatever may be the nature of his death and resurrection, the ministry of Jesus lasted for a very short time. He had neither time nor opportunity to grapple with the manifold moral and cultural problems of his nation. He preached the reality of the spirit and disappeared into the realm of the spirit. Humanity was left to itself to find out by a long process of trial and error the rights and duties of man in the various spheres of life.

Muhammad has been called by the writer in *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* as the most successful of all the prophets. From among the numerous prophets, Carlyle chose Muhammad as the best representative of his class because, as he says, he stood up heroically against terrible odds, and ultimately overcame all obstacles and brutal opposition. He left the world after having fulfilled his mission. Over against him the shortlived and abjectly terminated mission of Jesus apparently lacked all sign of success. But one would not call Jesus, on that score an unsuccessful man who created just a ripple in the stream of his nation's life and disappeared like many another preacher. The high and broad principles of spiritualised morality that he inculcated are a leaven that would perpetually inform, purify and exalt human hearts and ameliorate human life in all its various spheres. Had he been vouchsafed the opportunity to apply these principles to some of the vital institutions of civilisation, he could have shown humanity a better way of remoulding them to the approximation of the Kingdom of Heaven for whose advent he had worked and prayed. But destiny had left the accomplishment of this practical task to another great prophet who would demonstrate in every sphere of life how the synthesis of law and love can improve all institutions and human relations. Was not Jesus uttering a prophecy about Muhammad when he said in very clear words:

Nevertheless I tell you the truth; it is expedient for

you that I go away. For if I go not, the Comforter will not come unto you. But if I depart, I will send him unto you (John 16:7).

I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. But when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth. For he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak; and he will show you things to come (John 16 : 12-13).

Jesus's inculcation of love, mercy and peace is identical with the teaching of the Qur'an and the Prophet of Islam, but the difference lies in its practical application to the actual problems of human existence. Real and living love is not passive and negative sentimentality. Love must be creative and positive – it is a light that should lead towards a better life. Religions have suffered from two extremes. They either become mere dogmatism, legalism and ritualism; or, emphasising the spirit only, they begin to recommend flight from the practical realities of life and tend thereby to become life-negating and ascetic. The religion of Jesus suffered from this latter calamity. As Jesus was not a married man, his followers, who took him for a model, began to consider marriage as a concession to the lower, unregenerate animal nature of man. Jesus had said nothing against marriage, but St Paul lowered it in the eyes of the Christians by saying that it was "better to marry than to burn."

In the early centuries after Jesus, members of the Church did marry, and some even had concubines, but it was considered to be a compromise with the flesh whose avoidance would surely raise a man spiritually. Jesus was not an ascetic but, because he had no opportunity to deal with the practical affairs of life, his followers gave an ascetic bent to his creed. This asceticism continued to develop among the religious enthusiasts and saints in Christian society sometimes to very irrational and perverse extremes. The world and the flesh were identified with the devil and were considered as essentially antagonistic to the spirit.

The history of Hinduism and Buddhism repeated almost identical traits. Hindu philosophy and religion had declared the world of time and space and matter to be unreal illusion. The question of the purpose of life did not arise because only what is real could have a purpose. Life is a product of cosmic illusion which should be dispelled by knowledge of its unreality, so that the cycles of births and deaths could be ended. Every birth

is a kind of punishment for the sins committed in an earlier life; but even virtuous life is of no avail because the universal and impersonal law of Karma must produce the results of all good and bad actions, so that the process of rebirth shall not cease, and one would not be rid of life which necessarily entails ignorance and pain. Buddhism repudiated the Hindu caste system and considered the fermenting of the flesh for purposes of spiritual purification as useless and harmful. But with respect to the unreality of all life and the necessity of getting rid of it by true knowledge, its metaphysics was almost the same as that of Vedanta. Although Christian metaphysics was not identical with Hindu and Buddhist philosophy, yet in actual practice Christian asceticism and monasticism did not differ from the ascetic attitude of the Hindu and the Buddhist. Life negating asceticism is a *reductio ad absurdum* of that view of life which dichotomises existence into spirit and flesh, or God and the world alienated from Him. If the world and the flesh are the enemies of the spirit, then, to save one's soul, one should have no truck with them.

This view of life was dominant in the greater part of the then civilised world and all great religions which may be called spiritual had adopted this view. Spirituality was everywhere identified with negation of life and repudiation of the world. Nietzsche, whom one would not like to quote about spiritual matters, uttered, however, a great truth when he said that religions could be classified as those that affirm and those that deny the reality of life and the world. His criticism of Christianity as a life-negating force, although exaggerated and partial, is levelled against the dogmatic and ascetic tendencies that developed so early in the religion of Jesus. No objective and clear-sighted scholar of the history of religion would deny the fact that, during the sixth century of the Christian era, that is to say, at the time of the advent of Islam, religion almost everywhere had become identified with the negation of life and the world.

Many Western Christian writers go on repeating the ill-founded opinion that there was nothing original in Islam. If the Qur'an was only repeating over again what the Jewish and Christian Scriptures had taught or what the Zoroastrians and the Brahmins and the Buddhists already knew and believed, why was the whole world of established religion so bitterly antagonistic to it? The impression of lack of originality, if not based on sheer ignorance and prejudice, arises occasionally from the fact that the Qur'an itself – although in a very different sense from the one it is made to serve – claimed no

originality. The Book does not address the followers of other great religions, saying: "Hear, ye people, a new view of life revealed only to this prophet, which you or your ancestors had never heard. **It proclaims itself to be a reminder and reviver of eternal truths contained in former Scriptures, but either forgotten or perverted by their misguided and benighted followers.**

Neither did Islam claim to be a religion taught for the first time by Muhammad. The Qur'an says that this has been the creed of all the inspired prophets. Laws and rituals have been a variable element suiting the times and circumstances, but the basic truth of belief in an omnipotent and good God along with inculcation of basic morality, has been a constant element wherever a true religion has been taught. God has been raising His prophets and messengers in every nation. **The originality of Islam lies in the fact that it taught the world what the world had forgotten or perverted.** Islam gathered the half-truths of the followers of different creeds and made them whole by supplying what had been dropped. It removed the veils of mythologies, superstitions and mysteries that had coveted simple rational and natural truths. It reminded humanity that there is only one omnipotent, just and merciful Creator and Sustainer, and all the rest are His creation and creatures bound to obey Him by choice or by inherent nature.

It taught humanity that this world is real and rational and not a place of perversion and punishment. It taught that all nature is God-created, and existence is not divided between the Realms of Darkness and Light with God and the angels ruling in one and the devils creating or dominating the other. It taught humanity that the essentials of religion consist mainly of pure morality; mere beliefs and dogmas, and worship and sacraments are of no avail if a person is not just and merciful.

In the realm of morals and spiritual life if one means by originality an idea or an utterance not found previously in any creed or philosophy, or never before inculcated by any moral and spiritual leader, then surely you cannot find it anywhere. Neither Abraham nor Moses nor Jesus nor Buddha nor Muhammad said anything that you could not find either in the religious tradition in which they were born or in creeds and philosophies in other times and places.

Spiritual life is like a living organism which derives all its constituent elements from environment and heredity,

but transforms them into its own distinctive and unique life by a mysterious and miraculous bio-chemistry. Many of the great moral teachers often make a direct reference to others, and even if they don't, one can relate their ideas to something that has gone before. Goethe said that if you tried to understand him by analysis, then you might find out and calculate all the food that had gone into him, so much milk and vegetables, and so many cattle and sheep and pigs, and so much air and water, and organic and inorganic material. The same is the case with the intellectual and moral outlook of man; you may analyse it into its elements but you can never explain away the distinctive outlook of the individual.

Great religious geniuses – geniuses in the other realms of life – are distinctive and unique personalities. None of them duplicates another, though there may be a broad and general resemblance. Surely, Muhammad was not original in his uncompromising monotheism, nor in proclaiming that existence is governed by a rational and moral order which comprehends the seen as well as the unseen; nor in reminding human beings of the essential unity and solidarity of mankind; nor saying that basic morality is ingrained in unspoiled human nature; nor in making prayer the chief medium of communication between the helpless finite and the omnipresent and omniscient infinite. Those critics who say that there is nothing original in Islam are really repeating the saying that there is nothing new under sun. This is true in a way but the other side of the picture is that history or Nature never repeats itself exactly and that every phenomenon is a unique phenomenon which never occurred before and shall never occur again in exactly the same manner. This is true of life much more than of matter where there is an apparent repetition. The higher the life, the more unique and original it is. Life everywhere is a creative synthesis.

The distinctiveness of Islam which made it a dynamic forward movement, creative of new values, lies in this that it reconciled the apparent opposites of various creeds and ideologies, transcending everywhere the thesis and the antithesis, and transforming them into a higher synthesis, retaining the values of both. There is a saying of Jesus having universal import: *Let not man cut asunder what God has joined.* Christianity made a limited and, I believe, wrong application of it to prove the inadmissibility of divorce under any circumstance, because in marriage as a sacrament, the couple were joined by God.

The Qur'an also repeated this pregnant utterance without

narrowing it down or misinterpretation. It derived the unity of all existence from the unity of a single universal Creator. Hindu metaphysics sundered the universe from God by declaring the former as a realm of ignorance and illusion for which the transcendent Divine Reality could not be held responsible. Zoroastrianism made existence an eternal battleground of Light and Darkness, God and the Devil, so that everything in existence, plants and animals, bad men and the destructive forces of Nature that were considered to be injurious were the creation of Ahriman, Evil personified. Greek philosophy too could not successfully surmount this dualism and declared the realm of matter and change to be unreal. Christian theology, influenced by these extraneous ideologies, went the same way and started the dualism of the spirit and the flesh, which resulted in a life-negating ascetic outlook.

Violent and cruel attempts were made to mortify the flesh, the enemy of the spirit. The physical and mental mortification of some of the Christian saints makes gruesome reading. To seek God you had to renounce the world and enter a cave or a monastery, where life was a perpetual round of self-mortification, ritual and prayer. Human society, which ought to be an indivisible whole, was split up into priesthood and laity, the priest cut off from life and the layman only superficially and secondarily connected with religion.

A Roman Christian is reported to have characterised the associates of Muhammad as a curious lot: "Cavaliers in the day and monks in the night." Ascetic creeds had sundered even man and woman by declaring all sex relations, even within lawful wedlock, as unspiritual, and to be tolerated only in the unregenerate.

Islam recombined all that these creeds and philosophies had sundered and, on that very account, was stigmatised as a sensuous and materialistic creed. Comprehending life in all its variety and diversity, and a constant attempt to harmonise multiplicity into a consistent unity, is the distinguishing feature of Islam.

Greek philosophy in the teaching of Aristotle, Socrates and Plato had made that attempt intellectually, but it proved abortive, because rigidly separated castes, as we find in Plato's Republic, could create no harmonisation of individuals and classes by that unnaturally forced pattern. Hinduism practised this caste system on a gigantic scale for more than two millenniums with extremely inhuman and pernicious results, culminating in innumerable types of segregations which engendered

the vicious custom of untouchability, degrading millions of human beings below the level of animals. You may touch a cat or a dog and remain religiously pure, but the touch of the pariah would require a ceremony of purification by using the excreta of the cow. Hindu civilisation sagged from within. It disintegrated into countless creeds and castes in its vile attempt to sunder what God had joined. In the Christian West the Church and the State stood against each other as two rival powers and a good deal of European history revolves round this rivalry. The struggle is not yet over, though the Church as a powerful organisation is fighting a losing battle.

The comprehensiveness of Islam and its attempted harmonisation of the various spheres of life under an all-embracing ideal was embodied in the life of the Prophet. We do not find any founder of a great religion whose life embraces even one-tenth of Muhammad's richness of experience and practical guidance. The Hebrews produced great prophets from Moses to Jesus. Moses delivered his community from the abject thralldom of the Egyptians, and gave them laws and a ritual, but died before their wanderings in the desert had come to an end. The other prophets of Israel arose at intervals to warn them of Divine punishment for their iniquities and violations of the Covenant with Jehovah, but their cry was a cry in the wilderness, their people would pay no heed to them. Some of them were persecuted and some were killed. Their lofty ideas, their moral struggle, their exhortations, their sense of Divine justice, their fears and their hopes have given the world a soul-stirring literature, but none of them could serve as a comprehensive guide in the practical affairs of life.

None of them could be considered to have been successful, if we mean by success the triumph of a cause and the actualisation of ideals in the remoulding of the life of the nation. Jesus too gave his people great truths and spiritual attitudes, but left the laws and institutions entirely intact – only with one or two exceptions. He said in clear words that he had come not to destroy laws but to fulfil them, meaning thereby that if the spirit of the law be disregarded, then its external observance is of little or no value. If Jesus had attempted practical transformation of the life of his people, he would have been obliged to change a good deal of Mosaic Law and the innumerable accretions that had become an indispensable part of it. The Jews had become victims of a cruel and cumbersome legalism, but Jesus did not touch it, declaring instead that whoever changed or violated a jot or tittle of it must go to hell. Jesus wanted

only to fulfil it in spirit and not to change it. But St. Paul later on went further and said that the Law had been transcended by Love. The attitude of St. Paul seems to be like that of a modern writer who said, "Let me make a nation's songs, and I don't care who makes its laws," meaning thereby that good songs must nourish fine emotions which will be embodied in good laws.

The sincere follower of every great prophet holds his spiritual guide as an exemplar, desires to imitate him and seeks his guidance in the struggles and conflicts of life. But if he has received from his exemplar only broad moral and spiritual ideas, and their application to the various spheres of life is left to his own individual judgment, there is greater possibility that his judgment will be twisted by personal interests and prejudices. Vicious, cruel and egotistic individuals work havoc with principles when their interpretation as well as application is left to them. Take, for instance, the beautiful teaching of Jesus that the essence of spirituality is non-violence and love to the extent that even enemies are to be loved. Then look at the religious wars and persecutions of Christians by Christians.

There have been cruel fanatics in the history of every religion, but persecution and torture in the name of religion practised with all conviction and sincerity is unparalleled in the history of intolerance and fanaticism. Excruciating tortures were invented by the Inquisition in Spain and elsewhere. This is sufficient to establish the fact that broad moral and spiritual principles are never sufficient to reform humanity. Some great souls have to put them in practice and tell humanity by example and practical demonstration in what manner ideals are to be implemented in actual life situations. If Muhammad was more successful than any other prophet, and is a better exemplar than any other spiritual guide, it is not only because he presented exalted ideas and beautiful ideals, but because he put them into practical form and demonstrated their utility in all spheres of life. It is a distinguishing feature of the life of Muhammad that there is nothing that he preached and demanded from others which he did not practise himself. It was the perfect concord of word and deed that was the source of his spiritual power and moral influence. His life is so rich in practical demonstration that there is hardly any problem that arises in the lives of individuals and nations on which the guidance of the Prophet is not available.

Starting life as a poor orphan, he lived through so many phases of life that he has an unexampled biography. Among the founders of great world religions, he is the

only one who stands in the broad limelight of history. His was an open life, exposed to public view day and night; neither in his teaching nor in his conduct had he any secrets. He exhorted people to go and broadcast to everyone what they saw him doing or saying. No biography of any great man can offer such richness of details reported by hundreds of his contemporaries to the generation that followed. This transmission continued orally for more than a century before a scholarly and critical sifting process began to compile well-authenticated and standard collections. It was a task of great responsibility and was discharged in a manner unequalled in historical research.

This research brought into being a new science called *Asthma'-ur-Rijal* – inquiry into the status character and veracity of thousands of people in the chain of transmitters. The Hadith literature, consisting of sayings and doings of the Prophet, was thus graded on the basis of more or less reliability. Even after sincere and stupendous efforts the judgment of the critical collector is not immune from error, and every generation can exercise its own judgment again. But nobody can deny that, not only in broad outline, but often in point of detail, the Hadith record is more trustworthy than the life of almost any other great man in the past.

Of course the most reliable record of the life and character of Muhammad is the Qur'an itself, whose standard edition was compiled by his most intimate companions and successors. The teaching and the conduct and character of the Prophet were so identical that when someone asked 'A'ishah, the wife of the Prophet, about the character of Muhammad, she replied, "Don't you read the Qur'an? It is a record and mirror of his character." From the point of view of textual authenticity, no scripture can equal the Qur'an. No other scripture can claim to be the actual book of the founder of a religion. The other Scriptures, written by scribes centuries afterwards, cannot claim even the reliability of Hadith, because no compiler sifted them as critically as was done in the compilation of the Prophet's traditions. Higher criticism of the Old and New Testaments has shattered the reliability of these records. The modernist Christian frankly admits that the New Testament is not an exact record of the sayings and doings of Jesus, but is a description of his life and teaching as the writers of the Gospels understood and viewed them. Nobody could make such an assertion about the Qur'an and, therefore, the Qur'an is a standard of judgment about Hadith literature as well. Any Hadith which in letter or spirit contradicts the Qur'an is to be rejected outright. But this

can happen only in a few cases. With regard to the rest of the Hadith literature, it is on the whole a reliable record of the life and character of the Prophet and stands critically on a firmer level than the Scriptures of other religions.

The question of sources about the data of the life of the Prophet is of paramount importance. As we have said, the Qur'an is the most reliable source. The Book not only offers the fundamentals of Islamic religious faith and its views about God, man and the world, but is also a record of the struggle of the Prophet to uphold and promote his cause against formidable odds. It tells us how the Prophet met every challenge and dealt with changing circumstances in the light of his principles. But the Qur'an is not an encyclopaedia of all the major and minor events of his life. Throughout his prophetic life individuals brought before him their problems for advice, and multifarious situations arose which required to be dealt with in the best possible manner. Hadith literature may, in general, be considered a record of the Prophet's advice, either offered voluntarily, or in response to the inquiry of a questioner. Hadith is the implementation and amplification of the fundamental principles enunciated in the Qur'an and, after the Qur'an, is to a great extent the best source for the biography of the Prophet. But Hadith is, nevertheless, a product of historical research and history, in the enumeration of details – particularly if recorded through generations of oral transmission – leaves room for doubt and further criticism. The pious, sincere and indefatigable collectors of Hadith, like Bukhari and Muslim, never claimed immunity from error of judgment. The orthodox Muslim still claims the right of revision and reconsideration, if something is found in this record which is inconsistent with the rest, or is unbelievable on rational grounds, or obviously runs counter to the entire spirit of Islam and the Prophet's attitude towards life and human relations.

The third source of the life of the Prophet is the biographies of the Prophet compiled during the early centuries of Islam, the most famous being the *Sirat* of Ibn Ishaq and *Sirat* of Ibn Hisham. But, unfortunately, these early biographers dealt primarily with the military expeditions in which the Prophet took part, for which reason these biographies have been called *Maghazi*. In a number of cases, these biographies descend to the unreliable level of ordinary history wherein the purely individual beliefs and attitudes of the writer add, subtract or modify transmitted material, and personal bias gives fiction and mere hearsay the status of historical fact. These biographers, who called the biography of the

Prophet *Maghazi*, or campaigns, do not seem to be interested in the basic teachings of Islam, or the precept and example of the Prophet about the legal or moral aspect of multifarious affairs. All Arabian tribes were martial and, as their entire life revolved round their feuds and fights, the account of their triumphs and defeats was their staple literary diet. But the Companions of the Prophet, whose outlook on life had been transformed by Islam, began to consider these fights as an evil imposed by the necessity of establishing lasting peace and law and order. For them the thing of vital importance was the new moral teaching and laws and regulations promulgated by Islam to establish a new social order.

So we find that in the authentic collections of Hadith the account of some of the campaigns is only incidental and forms a very small part of the narrative. But the common mentality of the masses remained very much unaltered in this respect, and they loved much more to hear about military exploits than about moral exhortations and questions of law. Writers like Ibn Ishaq and Waqidi catered to this vulgar taste. When the scrupulously critical traditionists read their books, they were filled with indignation, encountering silly and unfounded narrations in them. Nevertheless, there are some critics who consider Ibn Ishaq trustworthy, although in the opinion of others he is unreliable.

As to Waqidi, almost all serious writers of Islam have called him a consummate liar. Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal was sorely indignant about these writers and Imam Shafi'i calls Waqidi a confirmed liar. Khatib Baghdadi says about Ibn Ishaq that his unreliability rests on the fact that instead of resorting to reliable Muslim sources, he quotes from Jews and Christians.

Even the long and sustained efforts of the Prophet had not been successful in eliminating the hypocrites from Islamic society. They were people who had entered Islamic society only because they could not openly oppose Islam any more. There was quite a large number of them in Medina. They were always looking for opportunities to vilify and misrepresent the Prophet as well as Islam. After the conquest of Mecca, the Arabian tribes in large numbers thought it expedient to submit to the political power of Islam and sent deputations to pay homage to the Prophet. They claimed to have become believers, but God and His Prophet knew that faith does not enter the human soul when an individual is overpowered politically and sees no alternative to submission.

There is a verse in the Qur'an referring to this false claim:

The dwellers of the desert say: We believe. Say: You do not believe but say, We submit; and faith has not yet entered into your hearts. (Qur'an 49:14).

Later on, when Jews and Christians (called *Ahl al-Kitab*, people with scriptures, by the Qur'an) became Muslims, they found a good deal apparently common between their creeds and Islam. They had an abundant lore not only Biblical but based on accretions and additions of all kinds of myths and tales. These things were circulated among the Muslims and unwarily accepted by them. A good deal of this stuff entered the early commentaries of the Qur'an and was added to the undesirable element carelessly or deliberately inserted by the writers of *Maghazi*. A non-Muslim writer antagonistic to Islam, who wants to paint an unpalatable picture of this religion and its Prophet, need not invent and fabricate vicious and dubious accounts, as Medieval Europe ignorant of Muslim sources used to do. During the nineteenth century a new species of Islamists arose in European countries. These Islamists became scholars of Arabic. They thought that the best way to discredit Islam was to attack it from Muslim sources and from authorities and books that have become respectable with antiquity. The Qur'an was difficult to attack and misinterpret when it was understood from within itself, some verses clarifying and amplifying the meaning of other forming a consistent whole.

As in many other rich and classical languages, in Arabic, a word sometimes has several meanings. One way of distorting the meaning of a Qur'anic verse is to adopt a meaning which would spoil its real sense. Even with the best of intentions on the part of the translator, the Qur'an in many of its most significant and characteristic parts is untranslatable. Sir Hamilton Gibb is of view that translating the Qur'an into any other language is tantamount to turning gold into clay. But when the translator is already biassed, and considers this book to be a monument of imposture, the translator's clay becomes worse than dirt. When a prejudiced translator, whose conscious or subconscious purpose is to pull down Islam as low as possible, adds his own notes and commentary also, his task is made easier by drawing upon some Hadith whose authority is repudiated by Muslim scholars, or some *Maghazi*-writers like Waqidi, or commentaries embodying Israelite fables and superstitions.

In this book we propose to draw directly from the Qur'an and supplement it with only that part of Hadith literature whose authenticity has stood the test formulated by scholarly critics of ancient and modern times. Where necessary we will get our material from books of *Sirat* and *Maghazi*, separating the wheat from the chaff. We will ignore legends that usually accumulate around the birth, life and death of all great founders of creeds. We will also avoid mention of miracles which, though recognised as possible, are not an essential part of the Islamic faith. As a matter of fact, the Qur'an has repeatedly upbraided those who seek miracles. We will present the Prophet as a superb human being, distinguishable from other human beings only by the revelation of eternal truths especially granted to him. He claimed no divinity for himself and asked his followers to call him the Servant of God. He claimed no knowledge of the Unseen nor any universal knowledge of all reality. In the affairs of life he considered himself liable to error. Having an exalted ideal of pure and dignified conduct, he was extremely sensitive even about minor slips and constantly prayed for forgiveness. He considered his special mission to be the restorer of a pure monotheistic faith, faith in a God Who is omnipotent, wise, just and merciful. For him, the purpose of life is nothing else than the service of God, and by serving God he meant the actualisation of high and noble ideals rooted in the attributes of God. He considered life to be real and earnest, replete with infinite potentialities for good. He repudiated asceticism as a source of spiritual well-being. He did not believe in the dichotomy of the life of the spirit and the life of the world. For him, religion meant living a full life here with a spiritual and idealistic orientation which transforms the meanest act into an act of worship. He wanted to establish, and did actually lay the foundations of a State and Society where fundamental human rights were secured for all citizens irrespective of differences of wealth, race or creed. He preached and practised equality of all citizens before the law and perfect freedom of conscience and worship. He did not attempt to establish a theocracy, or even an unbridled democracy, but what might well be described as a theo-democracy. His religion is as free of dogma as it is possible for a religion to be – unless you consider belief in God and his own mission to be a dogma. He did not want any intermediaries between an individual and his Creator, Who, according to the Qur'an, is nearer to him than his own neck-vein.

God is to be approached, and life ameliorated, by

rational and moral living and by communion through prayer. All powers of Nature are made potentially subservient to man. He has to understand and conquer Nature within and without and not to bow to it in superstitious fear. Neither is any man, however pure and exalted, to be worshipped as God. Islam means surrender to the will of God, which is not a passive submission but the identification of our desires and purposes with the Will of God so that a Muslim's foremost duty is to actualise that Will in high and noble actions. But this identification is volitional and emotional, not the complete identification of the being and essence of the Creator and that of the creature. God remains God, howsoever much He may permeate His creation, and the creature remains a creature even when spiritualised by complete harmony with the Will of God. Life here, as seen and experienced and lived, is not the whole of reality. Our purpose should be better and higher life both here and hereafter. We reap what we sow.

1. The Prophet and His Message, by Dr. Khalifa Abdul Hakim, Published by the Institute of Islamic Culture, 2 Club Road, Lahore, Pakistan ©1987