A photograph of a red wooden bench in a snowy field. The bench is the central focus, with snow covering the ground and some dry grasses visible. The background shows a line of trees under a pale sky.

THE SEEKER'S GUIDE

A POCKET EDITION

MAULANA
WAHIDUDDIN KHAN

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CHAPTER 1

THE WISDOM OF LIFE

What is your advice to parents of young children?

The advice is that you should not favour your children at all. They should be given a chance of self-development. If they fall, let them fall and get back on their feet. I had met a Parsi in Pune about whom I learnt that he once made his child stand on the table and asked him to come. When the child leaped towards his father, he moved behind and the child fell down. Then he said to his son, 'Do not trust anyone; not even your father. Trust your own abilities.' This is a realistic approach to parenthood.

Why is it so difficult to accept defeat?

It is difficult because people are not ready to accept the role of the law of nature in deciding a result, be it success or failure. Man is often governed by his ego and whims, which makes him a case of failure. The logo of The Times of India bears the following inscription, 'Let truth prevail'.

On the same lines I would say in real life, the principle to be followed is: 'Let the law of nature prevail'. If, however, we desire that our ego prevails, it would be hard for us to accept failure and draw a positive lesson from it. On the contrary, if we accept our shortcomings, not only are we able to accept failure but also work towards self-improvement.

If someone misuses freedom beyond a limit, we must react, else we would be taken for granted. Reaction checks the continued misuse of freedom — what is your opinion on this?

The misunderstanding here is that reaction 'checks' the misuse of freedom, whereas in reality, reaction only aggravates the situation and this leads to the development of a chain reaction. In the tribal age, a vicious cycle of revenge used to get created and a chain reaction used to continue for hundreds of years leading to bloodshed and in-fighting.

We should think of what options we have and should unilaterally exercise patience. I once met a person who paid me a visit from Basti, UP. He had obtained a license and bought a lorry. The minister of his area saw that it was very useful and parked the lorry in his own house as the license was taken in his name. He later started taking the revenues that the lorry used to earn. The man objected to the minister and the minister ridiculed him by saying that the lorry was his. This man came to me for advice and I said to him:

Remember, every revenge shall be avenged!

So, the question is till when would keep on fighting, knowing that one's revenge will be met with another revenge. Will one continue fighting till the dying day? The above man followed my advice and consulted me on what he should do with the money he was left with. I told him to start a business with whatever he had. He accepted my suggestion and left. After a few years, when he met me, he had significantly grown his wealth. I told him that if he had avenged, the minister's sons and grandsons would have killed him. The great wisdom of life, therefore, is in unilaterally putting a full stop to any form of reaction.

When does self-respect become ego?

Some take self-respect as an excuse to play a demanding and revenge-seeking role. What they do not realize is that being demanding and revenge-oriented is a negative manifestation of 'ego,' which has no place in Islam. Islam teaches its proponents to be firm when it concerns a duty; not to be stubborn in demanding a right.

A duty-oriented mindset looks at fulfilling the rights of others whereas the mindset of seeking revenge simply aggravates the negative effects of a person's ego. A very important principle to keep in mind is that doing one's duty is a virtue only when it does not create another issue.

The Companions of the Prophet had migrated from Makkah to Madinah. When Makkah was brought back into the fold of Islam, many Companions said that they should take back their property which they had left behind in Makkah. When the Prophet came to know this, he announced that they all should immediately return to Madinah – he did not allow the redeeming of lost property, as it would have opened up a new chapter of avenging what was once lost. Those who were occupying the property would not have given it up so easily.

During my days at my home village, a person once usurped an area encompassing thirty trees from our orchard. A village neighbour, when he learnt of this, told me that he would help me retrieve the ownership on gunpoint! I refused. I told him that retrieval would not put an end to the chain reaction that would begin.

In essence, we must always think if a new problem is getting created or getting resolved. After thinking on these lines, we should determine our course of action.

What defines a good citizen?

In my view, a good citizen is one who has a predictable character to assess the comfort of others as well. His fellow human beings can be confident of his behaviour, beforehand. For example, while planting saplings, a gardener assumes that no one would harm what he is planting. A gardener expects this good character in his fellow human beings. Similarly, if you are driving on the road and do not blow the horn excessively because people would be bothered by it, you pay heed to the needs of others and can be rightfully called as a good citizen.

What is the sense of accountability and how do we develop this?

There is no answer possible for this in the secular culture. The idea of accountability inherently brings about the idea of a Creator, an all-powerful and all-aware Being before whom we would be accountable. It is a matter of developing conscientiousness.

Should I stop getting offended for everything?

Yes, absolutely! If we criticize the parents of a person, they would get offended. God does not help such people. God helps those who take themselves to such levels of objectivity that they are not offended at all. God loves the one who does not get offended whatever be the situation – when a person does this, all angels would rush in his direction, exclaiming: ‘Here is the kind of a person we were looking for!’ Trivial matters should not offend you.

Who suffers from inferiority complex?

Each person who tries to crush another suffers from inferiority complex. A political party that spends resources to crush its opponent, in reality, suffers from inferiority complex. On the contrary, a party that is confident about its approach would not waste time in demeaning its competitor; rather it would work towards strengthening its own approach and agenda in order to win.

Similarly, one needs to develop a sense of self-confidence. The sense must be so strong that nothing that anyone says – positive or negative – should leave behind an impact on one's personality. In doing so, one trains one's mind to remain positive and strengthens its intellectual abilities.

How can a person identify his shortcomings?

In order to identify one's own shortcomings, we must possess an objective mindset and should not get offended by what another person tells us about ourselves. We should imagine the other person to be like a mirror, which gives us an exact reflection of ourselves.

Either one becomes angry on criticism or overjoyed upon being praised; both these situations are improper. Criticism should be welcomed and due thought should be given to the message being conveyed without becoming disturbed by its tenor. However, one gets offended when one's ego is touched and that happens even when someone speaks the truth.

Being a realist does not only mean to not react, as our dormant ego may still get aroused on provocation. A true realist is one who has an awakened mind, one that is able to gauge the slightest of deviation from the path of realism. He accepts feedback as it is and introspects to realize and overcome his shortcomings.

How do I control my anger?

I have spent significant time on this topic and my conclusion is that nature has instilled a special mechanism in a person by which he can control his anger. When angry, all one has to do is observe silence. Anger incites a psychological fire within a person and in the resulting rage, he is not able to control himself. But when one becomes silent in moments of anger, the rage instantly begins to take a downward trend. So, when someone provokes us, we must simply become quiet.

At all such times, I myself do not react and I have experienced that anger takes no time in subsiding. Reaction leads to chain reaction and not reacting stops the chain reaction, but in order to stop the chain reaction, one needs the power of self-control. Only the spiritually strong can break the chain reaction in a situation involving provocation and rage. It is a sign of great strength. As per a tradition of the Prophet Muhammad:

The strong man is not one who is good at wrestling, but the strong man is one who controls himself in a fit of rage. (Sahih al-Bukhari, hadith no. 5763)

It has also been alluded to in the Quran that one may earn a position in Paradise by being forgiving at times of anger:

for those who spend, both in prosperity and adversity, who restrain their anger and are forgiving towards their fellow men—God loves those who do good works. (Quran 3:135)

Even I used to get angry in my early days, but my anger led me to self-thinking, which made me realize that anger yields no result. I then concluded that it was futile to waste energy on anger.

During 1975, I had written an article for the publication, Al-Jamiat,

where I had narrated the story of how I was invited to Ahmedabad by a young Muslim engineer who had set up a factory there. The engineer was a very competent person. As he was showing me around the place, we came across a new kind of machinery which was produced at that time only for export purpose. While demonstrating the prowess of the machine, he first pushed on a button and its flywheel started rotating at top speed. He then pushed another button and the flywheel immediately changed its direction and started rotating opposite to the previous position. As I saw this, it struck me that when matter (or machine) has the quality to change its direction within seconds, then a human being should have this ability manifold. After this incident, I started training my mind to change my emotion within seconds whenever a situation requiring so arises.

Hence, in moments of rage when our natural tendency is to speak or react aggressively, we need to instantaneously change the direction of our flywheel and remain silent. Without doubt, the anger shall dissipate and we shall be in a position to prudently handle the situation.

How do I build patience?

If you become a realist, patience will follow. We must learn that things are never going to be according to our desire; they would be according to the laws of nature. I have always been very fond of trees and in my youth. I once wanted to see a green tree in the courtyard of my home. I thought that if I planted a sapling, it would take a long time to grow into a tree. So, I went to my garden and selected a fully-grown tree. I then employed several labourers to dig it up and then transport it to my courtyard where I had it planted. But the next morning when I looked at the tree, I found that its

leaves had begun to wither, and after a few days the whole tree dried up.

A similar story had featured in the Readers' Digest where a reverend Father had attempted a similar planting exercise. He was very happy and was thinking to himself: I have travelled a long journey in a single day. Planting a sapling or a seed would have been a lengthy business and now I have found a quick way of having a lush green tree. Naturally, he was disappointed. One of his friends visited him and found him in a very sad mood. On being asked the reason, he said: 'I am in a hurry, but God isn't.'

This story informs us about the law of nature, which is based on gradual development and not on sudden leaps. One who follows this law of nature will be successful, while the one who fails to follow it, will never succeed. If we analyze what happened, we would realize that whatever happened was what was going to happen; there was nothing else that could have happened.

This law of nature does not exclusively apply to trees: it is a universal law. In every field, we need to realize that nature shall follow its own course and consequently it would take its own time to get the desired result. Only then can we observe patience and calm; otherwise one cannot attain any worthwhile goal by deviating from laws of nature and realistic thinking.

What can I do to bring value to this world?

There is a very illustrative lesson from the life of George Bernard Shaw, the Irish playwright and critic. In earlier times, Ireland was not a place for quality education. Once an Irish person expressed his despair to Shaw about the community lagging behind in education. Upon enquiring, Shaw learnt that the person was also uneducated. Shaw told him to first go and secure education for himself so that at

least one person in the community shall no longer remain illiterate. So, the message is: Identify where the world lacks value and then fill that gap by first starting from yourself.

What wisdom can we gain from nature?

Nature manifests wisdom in all phenomena. If we can observe nature and understand its language, if we are prepared to extract lessons from these kinds of news items, then certainly we shall live in peace and tranquillity.

A human being is an imperfect being in the midst of a perfect world. The stars and the planets, wind and water, trees and animals, are all just as they should be. They do not deviate from the path prescribed for them in nature. The very fact that our imperfect human world lies in the midst of a much larger, perfect natural world, shows us what our aim in life should be. We must first try to understand the world around us, and then strive to base our lives on the principles that function in the rest of the universe.

The law of nature in this world is that difficulties and problems will always exist alongside happiness and joy. One cannot be detached from the other. Just as we cannot detach thorns from a rose plant, similarly we cannot detach unpleasant circumstances from situations of joy. No person can enjoy a life of absolute comfort such as when he is completely devoid of sorrow. But this should not worry us. As the Quran says:

With every hardship there is ease. (Quran 94:5)

Lesson from Flowing Water

Human life can be likened to a flowing river. In the river fresh water is being added to the existing water at every moment. This everyday phenomenon is responsible for the freshness of the river water.

If a person's life is like flowing water, in which fresh water continues to be added every moment, then it will always remain fresh and will never become stale. Our life should not be monotonous, we need to always fill it with fresh activities and change our routine every now and then. Water which is lying in a closed place, where fresh water is not being added, will lose its freshness. It will become unhealthy. In this matter, the flowing river is a healthy message given by nature and the experience of human history testifies to this in practice.

Lesson from the Honeybee

It is the honeybee's culture to travel every day and reach places where flowers are available for it. The bee extracts nectar from the flower and returns to its abode. It does not care about anything else.

Where there are flowers, there are also other things like thorns, leaves, and stem. It simply extracts nectar from the flower and returns without objecting to the thorns. This behaviour of the honeybee gives a lesson to man in a symbolic manner: Live like the honeybee. Extract what is good for you and leave what is unwanted for you. Do not waste your time in complaining and protesting about it.

People generally get offended upon hearing criticism against them. This behaviour is quite against the scheme of nature. In doing so, they pay a heavy price. They deprive themselves of the "nectar" that is available for them in everything and every experience — a good lesson to be learnt and a wise advice you can forward. Every person's environment has "nectar". One should take the "nectar" and like the honeybee, ignore the "thorns".

Living with a focused mind is very important for every man and woman. Only a focused mind is a developed mind. When you get offended or provoked, it means you have allowed another person to

disrupt your focus and break your concentration. You should neither be offended nor get provoked. You should adopt the honeybee culture.

My Spiritual Tree

In front of my house, in New Delhi, there is a full-grown tree, in whose shade I am in the habit of sitting. I call it my spiritual tree. In fact, this tree is my teacher, although a silent one. The previous summer, this tree, like many other trees, shed its green leaves. Gradually, it became simply like dry wood. I was doubtful whether it would ever again turn green. But in the spring, the whole scenario changed. My spiritual tree again became a tree with lush green foliage.

The rebirth of this tree was a great lesson. My spiritual tree turned into a speaking tree. It gave me a significant message: “Don’t be hopeless in any situation. After every dry season, there is a good harvest. After every spell of hopelessness, there is new hope, and after every failure, there is a great success. After every dark night, there is a bright morning.”

My spiritual tree never left its allotted space. It did not protest against anyone; it never demanded that others find it new, living leaves. It remained at the same place and started a new process within itself. What was this process? The process was to get its food from below as well as from sunlight. The strategy worked. The whole of nature came to its aid and after some months, it gained its lost greenery once again. This is the lesson I learned from my spiritual tree.

No protest, no complaint, no demand, no street activism or stage activism: simply trust your own natural abilities and work silently. Try to reshape your destiny. And very soon you will be glad to discover that you have regained your life.

In this life often, you face experiences when a person abuses you, troubles you, provokes you. In that case you have two ways of responding to them. One is the way of 'tit for tat'. Just as you have been troubled, you do the same to the other person. You also abuse him, trouble him or harm him. You are provoked to another's provocation. The one who responds in this manner develops a negative personality in him. On the contrary, another person is the one who responded in a positive manner to negative behaviour: the one who was abused by others but himself did not abuse anyone. Others tormented him but he did not torment others. The one who was harmed, but did not harm others. These are the characteristics of a truly enlightened and wise person, one who has learned well from nature.

**What would you choose from these three:
money, health or peace?**

The first choice is health. By birth, man is a weak creature. He cannot tolerate even a minor disturbance to his health. A person who does not enjoy good health cannot do anything properly. It is therefore rightly said, 'Health is wealth'. One who has good health, can accomplish all tasks in life. According to a hadith, the Prophet said:

Ask God for pardon and health, for verily, none has been given anything better than health after faith. (Sunan al-Tirmidhi, hadith no. 3558)

According to another hadith, the Prophet is said to have remarked;

And in God's eyes praying for good health is dearer to praying for anything else. (Sunan al-Tirmidhi, hadith no. 3548)

Some people believe that by giving higher education to a Muslim girl, makes her rebellious and takes her away from the Muslim tradition. What is your opinion on this?

I strongly disagree with this. The women in my family, for example, have received higher education. My granddaughters have either completed or are pursuing their doctorates and have been an integral part of my mission to spread peace and spirituality. My daughter, Professor Farida Khanam, has tirelessly worked for translating my works into English including the Quran and its commentary.

A large number of learned women are mentioned in history as authorities on various Islamic sciences such as Hadith, Islamic jurisprudence, Seerah (biography) of the Prophet, commentary on the Quran, and so on.

Those who do not educate their girls need to change their mindset. The issue is not that giving higher education to girls would make them rebellious; the real issue is that parents are unable to train their children in a rational manner. They only know and speak the language of dos and don'ts and impose other such restrictions, which fails to address the mind of children.

Islam attaches great importance to learning and education and considers it to be the starting point of every human activity. The female members of a family must therefore be given all opportunities to learn to grow and play a constructive role in the progress and development of society at large.

Is religion necessary in today's world?

Religion undoubtedly is more than a necessity for this world. The strife in this world is because people have become materialists. The aim of religion is to make people spiritual instead of being

materialists. If the world has to have peace, religion should become more widespread.

What causes depression and indecisiveness?

Depression and indecisiveness are the outcome of not being able to understand reality.

Often people see the truth or right and wrong in an absolute sense. However, the reality is that the truth or right and wrong are relative in nature; some may adhere to it in one way and some may adhere to it in another way. It is this difference in the way the model is observed, which causes indecisiveness.

For example, if the boss does not listen to the subordinate, it ends up making the subordinate angry because he is not able to make his senior realize what he feels is the truth. We must let the reality prevail. In practical life, one person is a giver and another a receiver. The one who gives holds leverage over the one who receives. So, imagining that the giver would listen and follow the receiver's model is being impractical.

Once Mr. Nelson Mandela visited Delhi for a conference. I was given a ticket to visit the conference and when I reached the venue hall, I realized that I had a back seat. I expected my seat to be in the front few rows and was not appreciative of it until I realized that the arrangement was in line with the prioritization done by the organizer. This prioritization by others was irrespective of my self-image. I realized that 'truth' is a relative term, which we must be prepared to re-discover. Reality in the eyes of God is absolute, but reality in society is a relative term. This is so because man has freedom and he is free to use or misuse his freedom in society. For instance, if I want a house, it is a realistic target but if I want a house free of outdoor nuisance, it is not solely determined by me

and therefore it is an unrealistic target. I have no control over others causing nuisance on the streets in front of my house. I will have to delink the two, otherwise I will succumb to depression because of non-achievement of an unrealistic target.

In this world, one invariably suffers losses, even Mr. Donald Trump, President of the United States of America, the most powerful person in this world is reported to have said that he felt like he is living in a cocoon in the White House with all the protocols and restrictions. That is his reality. He can be the most powerful person in this world but he cannot change his reality.

Everyone suffers losses. If loss is considered a matter of fact, everything falls into place, otherwise not. In order to determine reality, we must not get emotional. Being objective about reality entails acceptance of what we have received. Any other criterion to evaluate reality is incorrect.

We should learn the practical way to approach life. How workable should our targets be and not give into frustration when things are not happening our way. There are always two kinds of factors in every situation, extrinsic and intrinsic. For example, we can be the most responsible driver on the road but we can still land into a fatal accident due to someone else's mistake. Similarly, we can be the best prepared for an exam but we can never actually have any influence over how the question paper is designed. We can sit for an interview fully prepared but we can never actually guarantee that we will be selected or how the selection committee will review our candidature. The realistic approach is to factor in the extrinsic elements in life and accept them as a reality over which we have no control. This is the only way we will not depress ourselves asking questions such as 'Why me?' and 'Why isn't it working after all my efforts?'

What are the signs that you are wasting your life?

The worldly criterion to evaluate the success of life is to measure it against results. If you are getting results for the goals you had set out for yourself, then life is not being wasted away. Otherwise, you are wasting your time.

It is often said to aim high, but the correct approach is to aim realistically high. It is only when our ambitions are realistic in nature that we will observe desired results due to our hard work. The approach should not be to work hard towards anything but to work hard towards what is 'workable'. We must therefore envisage realistic and unemotional targets. A realistic target would never lead to frustration whereas an unrealistic target would cause depression and frustration.

What is patience?

In my view, patience is the ability to remain normal when I cease to be effective. This retains normalcy and intellectual balance in situations where I know I am no longer effective. In doing so, I save myself and allow my intellectual activities to continue unhindered. Patience is exercised for oneself and not for others.

Patience is the virtue of exercising restraint in trying situations, which enables the individual to proceed towards worthy goals, unaffected by adverse circumstances or repeated provocations. If he allows himself to become upset by opposition, taunts or other kinds of unpleasantness, he will never reach his goals. He will simply become enmeshed in trivialities.

The only way to deal with the irksome side of daily living is to observe patience. Patience will ensure that whenever one has some bitter experience, he would opt for the way of tolerance rather than

that of reaction to provocation. It will enable one to absorb shocks and to continue, undeterred, on one's onward journey.

Patience, as well as being a practical solution to the problems faced in the outside world, is also a means of positive character building. One who fails to exercise patience, gives free rein to negative thoughts and feelings, consequently he develops a negative personality, while one who remains patient is morally bolstered by his own positive thoughts and feelings and as a result develops a positive personality.

Patience is no retreat. Patience only amounts to taking the initiative along the path of wisdom and reason as opposed to the path of emotions. Patience gives one the strength to restrain one's emotions in delicate situations and use wisdom to find a course of action along result-oriented lines.

The present world is fashioned in such a way that everyone is necessarily faced with unpleasant matters at one time or another. Things, which are unbearable, have somehow to be borne; harrowing events have to be witnessed and all kinds of pain have to be suffered. In such situations, succumbing to impatience leads to unnecessary emotional involvement, which is always counter-productive, while a demonstration of patience has a healing, beneficial effect, allowing one to tread the path of discreet avoidance. Success in the present world is destined only for those who adopt the path of patience in adverse circumstances. The entire spirit of the Quran is in consonance with this concept. The Quran attaches great importance to patience. In fact, patience is set above all other Islamic virtues with the exceptional promise of reward beyond measure:

Truly, those who persevere patiently will be requited without measure. (Quran 39:10)

Patience implies a peaceful response or reaction, whereas impatience implies a violent response.

What are your spiritual values?

Each individual has different spiritual values because the meaning of spirituality differs for all. However, there are two major schools of spiritual discipline: one based on meditation and the other on contemplation. The former relates to the heart and the latter relates to the mind.

Spirituality of the heart is generally taken to mean the opposite of worldliness. It advocates only one way to preserve one's spirituality, and that is to retire to a desolate place, leaving behind one's homes representing material life and undertake meditation in an environment where there is no provocation. It is this viewpoint, which is presented in the well-known book titled *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari*.

I subscribe to the school of contemplative spirituality. Therefore, for me the biggest thing is intellectual development, whereas for those whose spirituality is based on heart, peace is the biggest thing. I want the process of thinking in my mind to continue non-stop and therefore I ignore all kinds of nuisance.

Man is an intellectual being. He is endowed with a mind, which is his greatest faculty. Real spirituality or contemplative spirituality is that which has the power to address our minds. Any kind of spirituality attained at a level lesser than that of our mind is not true spirituality.

According to me, true spirituality is based on contemplation or reflection or pondering, which has all to do with intellectual activity. The journey of spirituality begins with the urge to search for the

truth. When a seeker discovers the truth and learns the creation plan of the Creator, his life enters a new phase, i.e. that of building of the human personality according to spiritual principles. This journey is entirely intellectual in nature. Its quest is two-fold, one is to solve the riddle of why, all men and women undergo negative experiences in this world and the other is to offer positive solutions. It addresses the paradox of human beings having been given the freedom to make their own moral choices, and their frequent misuse of this freedom – a course of action which causes them to repeatedly face situations in which people do each other harm; losses are incurred because of others' injustice; severe provocations are suffered because of untoward experiences. At such times spirituality teaches us to convert negativity into positivity through the art of conversion. True spirituality, an intellectual activity, is a science of inner development and material things indirectly contribute towards that development. In fact, material life is made more meaningful by the pro-active role played by spirituality in intellectual refinement and the consequent progress of humanity. Spirituality does not, as some may imagine, arrest the thinking process, but rather enhances intellectual activity in the complete sense of the word.

Why do people suffer from inferiority complex?

I think it is a result of artificial thinking and happens because of not knowing oneself. Thinking that one is superior or inferior – both are a result of artificial thinking. One's thinking should become so developed that we are able to save ourselves from both kinds of complexes. We need to realize ourselves and our potential such that we do not position ourselves as superior or inferior to anyone.

How should we learn to respect all?

We must become hate-free. In social life, other than religion there are several reasons that cause differences. They are a part of life. When such a difference is against us, we get angry and develop hatred. We will have to understand that difference is a part of life, it is a part of creation. We will have to therefore accept it, there is no other option.

What is solution to despair?

Why does despair take place? Despair is a result of lack of deep thinking. In my own experience, there are several instances which led me to despair. Today when I look back and think that whatever happened was best for me. Why does this happen? Because man has limitations and does not have knowledge of the future. When I think in retrospect, those situations that led me to despair turned out to be the points from which I gained greater success. The best solution is to keep faith in God and remember what Caliph Ali said: 'Whatever happened, happened for the good.'

Is ego-based action self-justified action?

Self-justified action is a result of lack of introspection. At all times, one should feel, "Maybe, I am wrong!" Only a person with such an attitude will study and discuss. After going through this process, what his evaluation will be right. If a decision is arrived at without going through this process, it would not be the right way of formulating an opinion. A person must examine and re-examine his ways in order to detect his mistakes. This is equally applicable to both religious and secular areas. Without this, one cannot develop right thinking.

How can we develop our mind and learn to respond positively in delicate situations?

Developing one's mind is both easy and difficult. It is easy if one introspects, but if one does not introspect, then it becomes difficult. If one realizes that a situation is not in one's control and would be subject to some external factors, this mindset will inculcate patience in him and he will be able to tackle the situation in a positive manner. However, in order to do so, one must stay alert and save oneself from negative reaction.

Why do you not speak against atrocities committed against Muslims?

The Prophet is enjoined thus in the Quran:

Arise and give warning...shun uncleanness. (Quran 74:2-5)

Here 'uncleanness' means negative thought arising from others' negative behaviour towards the Prophet. This injunction therefore implies that even the Prophet was required to only perform the duty of conveying the message of Islam and was enjoined by God to ignore atrocity and unpleasantness from others. God had directed him to focus solely on his work.

How do we bring back our enthusiasm towards something?

This is not a problem; fluctuation is part of human nature and will always be there. The feeling that my enthusiasm has fallen low re-energizes the mind and motivates one to carry on work with renewed vigour.

**I am very dejected in life and everyone calls me so.
Can I commit suicide and will God forgive me?**

Such a state of mind prevails when one is not able to discover oneself. You need to decondition yourself from what society has told you and figure out things for yourself. God shall not forgive you if you commit suicide – this is not an option. It is clearly stated in a hadith that when a person commits suicide, he will be punished by God. The only option is to discover your potential and to avail of the opportunities around you. Committing suicide is like casting a ‘Vote of No Confidence’ against God and this is not acceptable in Islam and from a person who has faith in God’s plan. The Quran says:

God does not charge a soul with more than it can bear.
(Quran 2:286)

We must always be hopeful of God, keep our trust in Him and move on in our journey of self-discovery.

Why are today’s generation dissatisfied with Islam?

The method of our scholars is to present a list of dos and don’ts, which the younger generation does not understand. Traditional scholars show Islam as a superstitious religion, instead of basing it on reason. Today’s youth have reason-based thinking. If the teachers of today use the language of earlier times, the minds of the addressee would not be addressed. This is a matter of communication gap. According to the Quran:

Speak to them in such terms as will address their minds.
(Quran 4:63)

My experience is that if we talk to them in such a language that addresses them, then they do understand. Otherwise they will remain

indifferent. So, it is an issue of the right kind of communication and not of dissatisfaction.

How can we make our mind free of complaints?

Complaint culture is the most depraved culture. I was once thinking that my body has 78 organs that are ensuring its full functioning. All this is not based on my instruction, it is rather automatic. If I had to manage it myself, I would not have been alive! There are numerous such things – life support system around us provides us with life-giving sustenance. If a person discovers and realizes these things, he will begin to think of living in complaints as the most degraded plane. How can a person who lives in the midst of so many blessings, he forget all of this and lead a life of complaints? The most effective way to root out complaints is to remember the blessings of God, which you receive every moment of your existence.

Often we are surrounded by negative people, which sometimes derails us – how can we save ourselves from derailment and stay positive?

You should think it is a great blessing of God that you have been saved. If you eventually stay positive while being surrounded by negative people, it is an occasion of being grateful to God, as He saved you from becoming thankless. When I see a thorn, I think God could have made me a thorn but He did not make me a thorn or a mosquito! He made me a human being and a positive thinker. Occasions to thank God for are so numerous that one should remain grateful to God and should be immersed in positivity. This is a matter of developing the right way of thinking.

Negative experiences will keep happening to a person till his death and there will always be traces of negativity – how shall such a person qualify for Paradise?

The goal to become positive is full of struggle and this struggle deals with negative situations and happenings. This is what a spiritual struggle is all about. This is why negative items provide support to us in our journey to become spiritual. If there were no spiritual struggle with negative thoughts, a positive mind would not be formed in the first place. If there is no struggle, life will stagnate.

How can a person become wise?

I can narrate my own finding – wisdom was always my subject and I think that no standard dictionary can define wisdom precisely. I have discovered what wisdom is. I define wisdom as ‘the ability to discover the relevant by sorting out the irrelevant’.

Time to time, I continue to feel the emotional pain of losing my kids at an early age. How should I manage it?

The Quran tells a formula for this: if children die at an early age, they will attain Paradise. Thus you must know that they are very fortunate – their place in Paradise has already been determined and now you have to make yourself paradisiacal so that you can meet your children after death.

How can a person maintain positivity always?

My simple formula is: when I get a negative thought, feel offended or angry, I begin to think who will suffer out of the manifestation of my negative thinking? Every time, I realize that I will be the sufferer and not the other person. So, if I will be the sufferer then

why should I harm myself? All negative thoughts only make us suffer – so why should we indulge in it. This idea keeps my positive thinking alive.

Should we not accuse those who do wrong to us?

These days, Muslims are engaged in bad-mouthing. Muslims have to decide whether or not they will follow divine commandments. When the Prophet Muhammad was in Makkah, severe atrocities were inflicted on him, but when he reached Madinah he never spoke ill of his Makkan opponents. The first sermon of the Prophet upon his migration to Madinah does not carry a word of how people from Makkah cast him away or of any atrocity he faced at their hands. The Prophet's first sermon in Madinah was only about the message he had received from God about the reality of life and death.

Muslims have to realize that God will not be pleased by their negative thinking for others. He will be pleased only if they follow the Sunnah of the Prophet, that is, forgetting complaints and grievances.

Is there any possibility to get a 'perfect' partner in this world?

A perfect partner is a thing to groom, not to find or receive. Study tells that every man and every woman has been created according to a different mould. When no two have been created alike according to the creation plan of God, how will you exactly find the person whom you desire? You can only make your marriage favourable by training the person whom you get married to. One condition for this is that you accept criticism from your spouse in a positive sense, without getting offended.

How to increase your power of grasp?

The more a person saves himself from distraction, the more his power of grasp develops. The worst thing is to live in distractions. A person can know of his distractions on his own. The more focused a thinker you are, the more you are able to set aside non-trivial issues as secondary and the more you will be able to develop your ability to grasp.

How can I become a recipient of wisdom?

Wisdom is written on every leaf of a tree, on every atom of a molecule! All you need to do is to develop the ability to 'read' wisdom. People have become violent and that is what leads to problems. If one becomes as peaceful as a bird, then there will be no issue. The Prophet said:

God will settle those people in Paradise whose hearts will be like the hearts of birds. (Sahih Muslim, hadith no. 2840)

This means that one who lives with the heart of a bird in this world will get a place in Paradise in the Hereafter. The matter revolves around your expanding your horizon, training your way of thinking and saving yourself from distraction.

How to apply Quranic teachings in my daily life despite my high-pressure job?

This is very easy. All you need to do is remember God wherever you are. You do not need to do anything special. At all times, you must think how your needs are getting fulfilled – discovering, realizing and making up your mind on these lines is all that is required.

If out of arrogance, I have done a wrong act that has caused trouble to the other person – would God forgive me or would I be punished for the act?

You should seek forgiveness from the person you demonstrated arrogance with. If that person is not available, then pray for him. The principle is that if the person is available, go and seek forgiveness from him, but if he is not available, pray for him.

As we continue to have busy work schedules, how do we extract wisdom from our daily experiences?

There is a lesson given in the Quran in Surah An-Nahl. According to it, the honeybee goes into the world of flowers and takes away nectar from it. Similarly, while living in this material world a human being must extract spiritual food from his daily experience and observation. Wherever you may be, in business, job, or shopping centre, you should keep your mind active. In this way it will keep extracting spiritual nectar for your soul.

The nectar for the bee is not kept elsewhere, but inside the flower it goes to. In the same way, the nectar for a person is also not kept anywhere special, rather it is in every sphere of life.

Should one lead a contented life or a discontented life?

The life of contentment is not possible because what we want cannot be had in this life and no one is an exception to this rule. Bill Gates is the richest person, and Donald Trump is the most powerful man – but both live in discontentment! By nature, the only possibility is to live in discontentment because living in contentment is not possible. We have to find the reason as to why the Creator made the world such that we lead a life of discontentment. The answer I have

found is that this is so because our intellectual development process continues non-stop. If we lead a life of contentment, there will be stagnation rather than development.

The Prophet said: ‘Seek knowledge even if you have to go as far as China.’ What does ‘knowledge’ here refer to?

Every form of knowledge is knowledge – anything that has wisdom and is useful, must be learnt. We should look at knowledge and learning not by virtue of being a Muslim, but by virtue of being a human being. There is only one thing which is wrong according to Islam, that is, hatred or violence. Everything needs to be look at from the spirit of enquiry.

Why is the first step towards intellectual development?

The first step is to say: ‘I was wrong’. When you say ‘I am right’, you remain stagnant, but when you admit your mistake, you gain something in return. That is, you realize where you were at fault and thus show willingness to correct yourself and learn that which is right.

How to cope with the loss of a parent?

God shall make one meet one's pious parents in the Hereafter. This is like giving a positive turn to the event of their death. Those who lose a parent have been given a goal that if they keep working towards making themselves righteous, God will join them with their parents in Paradise in the Hereafter.

How do we know if by following religion we have become hardliners?

Hardliners are a result of religion, but a result of erroneous interpretation of religion. When you only define religion in terms of form, it makes you a hardliner. If you define it in terms of spirit, you will not become a hardliner.

I have a 15-year old son who is very short-tempered. How should I convey the importance of patience to him?

You do not have to change the boy, you have to change yourself. All children become so as a result of the pampering of their parents. You and your spouse should stop pampering your child. All parents without doubt and without exception pamper their children. Even my father used to pamper me when I was a child and whenever my uncle used to stop my father from doing so, the latter would say that he did not do any pampering at all. My father died when I was six years old and I was a pampered boy until then.

Is there a limit to patience? What if some community takes advantage of our situation?

Patience is a form of worship – then why a limit has to be assigned to it? Patience is held as the highest worship in the Quran, so will it have any limit? When there is no limit to the reward to patience, why should there be any limit to patience? The highest reward in the Quran is for keeping patience and therefore there can be no limit to it.

Exercising patience is actually continuing a process of personality development, something that must continue unhindered in our lifetime. Patience is not a standalone act, but a part of life.

Do you think industrialization is misleading the generation towards material greed?

This is a point of ignorance because temptation should not be mixed with the industrial age – temptation will never finish. Temptation was there even at the time of Adam when only he and Eve were the two people who existed. We must only look at opportunities – today there is peace, ease of travel, communication and open-mindedness. These opportunities are very favourable for religion, as due to these changes of the present age people ask for the Word of God themselves! It is temptation, and not the industrial age per se, that misleads people.

What are the reasons for increasing divorce rates?

According to a research survey published by TIME, women were found to be more emotional as compared to men. The root cause of the problems is that on the one hand, women are emotional and on the other hand, men are unable to tackle these emotions. It is this inability to tackle on their behalf that becomes a source of friction.

When an issue arises between a couple, one of the two must play the role of a pacifist. But this does not happen and the problem only escalates. Both man and woman begin to think the issue is beyond management for them, whereas in reality the problem is that they both do not know how to manage it. Consequently, they arrive at the conclusion that separation is the only solution.

On the contrary, if either of them or a mediator takes time to pacify the matter, the situation could be dealt with differently. Emotions are temporary and once they settle normalcy prevails. All one needs to do is to carefully navigate through the time during which emotions subside. It is the lack of maturity on the part of those involved that leads to a stalemate and consequently the relationship breaks down.

As Dale Carnegie once said:

When dealing with people, let us remember we are not dealing with creatures of logic. We are dealing with creatures of emotions. (Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1937))

It must be noted that friction between couples usually starts on trivial matters. Issues that are significant and involve their mutual interest (such as children, property, etc.) serve as an impediment to drift apart. Once a judge said, ‘A little youngster born to a couple is an assurance that their marriage would not be dissolved in a divorce court.’

As emotions are to women, stubbornness is to men. This stubbornness is an equal contributor to friction between couples. So, in essence, a couple should either have a mediator or one of the two must have the wisdom to settle the matter on their own.

As per the philosophy of Absurdism, there is an idea that ‘if you have to die one day, then what is the purpose of planning for life?’

A philosopher is one who is a realist. Philosophies such as these are not realistic. Whatever a person plans and leaves behind is passed on to next generations, and this is the crux of social development. Such development is slow and gradual in nature. Seldom does the person behind a change or revolution gets to see its effect. Inventors, architects and other pioneers in history who have contributed largely with their work died without getting to see how greatly mankind has benefited from them. Had they thought along the lines of the philosophy of Absurdism, they would have made no sincere effort in their fields and the human civilization would have never progressed. Social development requires assiduous planning.

For instance, the modern civilization has developed in four hundred years!

People have gone to great lengths to work on the aircraft. Many have even lost their lives. Despite all their work and research, the Wright brothers once expressed: 'No flying machine will ever fly from New York to Paris.' Today, airplanes fly and glide all around the world, all thanks to the contribution made in the beginning by the Wright brothers. However, the Wright brothers never got to see this day. Had they acted on the philosophy of Absurdism and not worked on the flying machine, the world today would have been unimaginable.

If Rockefeller would have thought about the disadvantages he had, America would have been deprived of some great institutions. America relentlessly did phenomenal work in the field of research which cost it billions of dollars, although every time research does not yield an immediate outcome. The price of development and planning is future progress.

What is a realistic approach to life?

The realistic approach is 'the art of the possible'. That which is not possible only leads to violence. A gardener once planted flowers in the park in front of my house. Some kids came and plucked them out. A vegetable vendor on the road saw this happening from outside and scolded the children away. The children returned crying with their parents and they troubled the vegetable vendor so much that he had to move his shop away from there. He interfered with something that was not in his domain. This is an example of being unrealistic. The society or the park authorities should have intervened in the matter – why did the vegetable vendor speak up?

The realistic approach is to approach the real stakeholders and not step out of one's own domain.

What is your biggest learning in life?

I was a seeker throughout my life. My pursuit began with the question I used to pose to God. I would often say to God: 'O God, when will you come and till when should I wait for You to come?' I used to often ask my self the question: If there is a Creator who exists beyond me, how should I discover Him? I had left Islam for about five years and had become an agnostic. I then discovered God and wrote the book, Islam Rediscovered. So, I found Islam as a matter of discovery and my belief is a self-discovered one, and not one of blind practice. This has been the biggest learning in my life.

How do people become ungrateful?

People become ungrateful when they take things for granted. They even take for granted the freely available life-support system that nature provides them.

CHAPTER 2

GOD AND HIS CREATION PLAN

If there is a God, who created God?

The answer to this question is in what the French philosopher Rene Descartes had said, 'I think, therefore I am.' To prove God's existence, I extend this logic to say, 'If I am, therefore, God is.' This is because a human being is like a mini-god, one who possesses all divine qualities in a smaller magnitude. If a mini-god's existence is possible, the Almighty God's existence is possible too. The choice before us is not between 'a universe with God' and 'a universe without God', the real choice instead is between 'a universe with God' and 'no universe at all'. The rationale is that when there is no option for you, the available option becomes the only choice.

Creation cannot be traced back endlessly. At some point, we will have to agree that there is someone who has brought creation into existence. If we do not accept this, the phenomenon of creation would be rendered endless and hence non-workable. Somewhere, we will have to put a full-stop, and agree that there is one all-powerful Creator.

What should be the right prayer that we should make to God?

In this world, every person is born to lead a different life, each with its own set of opportunities and challenges. Hence, one cannot follow a 'one-prayer-fits-all' policy in life.

A believer may pray to his Creator regarding anything, without any constraints. However, the manner in which the prayer is answered shall be governed by divine will. At times, prayer is answered instantly and at other times, there passes a long time before one's request is fulfilled. A verse in the Quran gives us the prayer of the virtuous in these words:

Our Lord, grant us good in this world as well as good in the world to come, and protect us from the torment of the Fire. (Quran 2:201)

The essence of a true prayer is patience. A believer must submit to the divine will and entrust his matters to his Creator. He should pray to God for guidance and sustenance. Prayer is not the mere repetition or usage of specific words, rather it is the expression of the believer's deep sentiment, entreating divine succour. The Quran mentions several expressions of prayers through which divine guidance is sought.

Can I ask God for death?

No, this is completely forbidden according to Islamic teachings. This has been alluded to in the following hadith:

Sad ibn Ubaid narrated that the Prophet once said, 'None of you should long for death, for if he is a good man, he may increase his good deeds and if he is an evil doer, he may stop the evil deeds and repent.' (Sahih al-Bukhari, hadith no. 7235)

Hence, the longer you live, the more opportunities you get to do good deeds, or repent if you have committed any bad ones. Keeping this wisdom in mind, one should always pray for well-being and happiness and not anything negative. According to the creation plan

of God, the hour of death for every individual has been appointed by God Himself. We should accept our natural time of death, as God knows what is best for us.

Why did God allow Satan to tempt us when He knew Satan could tempt us into Hell?

This is a negative approach to the subject. In reality, Satan is a source of struggle for human beings. If there were no struggle, there would be no development at all. The development of a person's mind is a result of his response to challenging situations. If there were no Satan, there would be no field of struggle left for an individual, his mind would not unfold and he would not be able to tap into his potential.

Satanic temptations give a person the opportunity to develop resilience and patience by not succumbing to them. According to a verse of the Quran, man is asked to seek refuge from the temptation caused by both Satan and man's own soul. The verse is as follows:

Say, 'I seek refuge in the Lord of people, the King of people, the God of people, from the mischief of every sneaking whisperer, who whispers into the hearts of people, from jinn and men.' (Quran 114: 1-6)

Why does everyone talk about fearing God?

We do love God. He is our supreme benefactor, the most gracious and the most merciful. Piety in human beings is a manifestation of the love they have for God. Having fear of God is not in the same sense as having fear of a ferocious animal. Rather, fear of God is positive fear and can be understood in the context of obedience to God. While God is compassionate and benevolent toward human

beings, He is also very just. Thus, fear of God is a result of the realization that God has the ability of punishing wrongdoers for their evil deeds. God is all-knowing and nothing is, or can be, hidden from Him. A person who has fear of God constantly lives with the sense of being accountable to Him. Even if his fellow human beings do not have the power to implicate him for his wrongful actions, a person who has fear of God knows that in the Hereafter he will surely be answerable to the Almighty for his actions, big or small. It is this that causes a believer to naturally fear God, a concept which serves as a source of reform in his life.

How do we understand God's omnipresence, omnipotence and omniscience?

God is omnipresent on the basis of His knowledge of things. It does not mean that God is physically present everywhere but that nothing escapes his knowledge. This also explains his omniscience. His being omnipotent means that he has set the laws of nature and without any exception, every human being is bound by it. No one can eliminate or alter these laws, we can only discover them and work according to the principles God has set for this world. His being omnipotent also implies that it is only He who can truly reward, punish or forgive us for our actions.

Will all Muslims eventually go to Paradise, even if they temporarily have to go to Hell?

This is not true. According to the Quran, after the creation, God Almighty settled man on the planet earth. The planet earth is a selection ground. Here man is constantly under divine watch, and God Almighty will select those men and women, on the basis of merit, who prove to be deserving candidates for Paradise.

Being a candidate for Paradise is not a matter of being a ‘Muslim’. When we use the term ‘Muslim’, it connotes a person who is a member of a certain community. According to Islam, the selection for Paradise depends completely on an individual’s personal record and not on his or her being a member of a particular community.

A common misconception is that those who are not practicing Muslims, God shall temporarily keep them away from Paradise and later wipe out their sins. Eventually, they too shall be made to enter into Paradise. I, however, do not subscribe to this notion, as it is not validated from the Quran. Some unauthentic traditions are the basis of this misconception.

The Jewish community also held this misconception during the time of the Prophet Muhammad, in which context God sent the following revelation:

They say, ‘The Fire is not going to touch us, and [even if it does], it will only be for a few days!’ Say [to them], ‘Have you received a promise from God—for God never breaks His promise—or do you attribute something to God which you do not know?’ Truly, those who do evil and are encompassed by their misdeeds, shall be the inmates of the Fire. Therein they shall abide forever, but those who believe and do good works are the heirs of Paradise; there they shall abide forever. (Quran 2:80-82)

These verses of the Quran clarify this misconception held by many Muslims.

The sole concern of Islam is to inculcate piety and God-realization in human beings. It is this that will qualify them in the category of those deserving of the eternal abode of the Hereafter. There is no exception to this rule, even for one who is born in a Muslim

family. God Almighty shall judge all human beings with the same yardstick.

What is the Islamic concept of Paradise?

Paradise is the name of the ideal world, the desire for which is lodged in the hearts of every man and woman. Paradise is a place where people will have no sorrow. It is Paradise where the personality of a human being shall achieve fulfilment in the complete sense.

Paradise is that world in which a creation such as man attains his complete fulfilment, where he thinks the way he wants to think; where he sees what he desires to see; where he listens to the sounds that give pleasure to his ears in the real sense; where he has the company of those people who make his life highly meaningful.

Paradise shall be a world that would have everything that a person can think of and more. It would be a world devoid of limitations, disadvantage, illness and unfortunate circumstances. The same concept of Paradise is also found in the Bible.

Who is God? Why do we pray to Him?

God is the Creator. When I see my existence, it is but natural for me to think how this existence came into being. The renowned French philosopher Rene Descartes said, 'I think, therefore, I exist.' Following this dictum, I would say, 'I exist, therefore, God also exists.' Because when there is a creation, a Creator is also bound to exist. Modern science tells us that our universe is vast, proportional and continuously expanding. It is an intelligent universe, but a right approach would be to say that the universe is the work of an Intelligent Creator.

In order to better understand the idea of creation, let us also reflect

on the development of human knowledge. Human knowledge has two different phases—the pre-Einstein period and the post-Einstein period. In the pre-Einstein period, knowledge was confined to the macro world, which was observable and measurable. It was believed that matter was eternal and had not been created. But, in the post-Einstein period, with the development of quantum physics and discovery of the phenomenon of the Big Bang, this thinking changed.

When the atom was split, the world of logic underwent a colossal change. Splitting of the atom revealed the micro world. It came to be known that subatomic particles, which constitute matter at the most fundamental level, cannot be observed even by the most powerful microscope. The question is when we cannot see them, how do we believe that they exist? They cannot be visually seen, but every scientist believes in their existence, for the reason that although we cannot see these things directly, we can measure their effects. We believe in the existence of all of these things, not by observation but by the effects they produce. In other words, the existence of these unobservable particles of the micro world can be proved by way inferential argument – they cannot be seen, but can be known by way of their effects. And if inferential argument is valid with regard to the unseen elements of the micro world, it is also valid with regard to the existence of God or the Creator.

Moreover, scientific studies of today tell us that about 13 billion years ago there occurred a big bang in space. After this, our universe came into existence. Scientists have found evidence to believe that in the beginning there was what they call a cosmic ball. All the particles now present in the universe were tightly bound to each other in this cosmic ball in a highly compressed and dense state. Then, according to astronomical studies, this cosmic ball suddenly

exploded. The compact particles scattered outwardly and as they were moving away they started interacting and the present universe as we see it (galaxies, stars, etc.) came into existence. This was the beginning of matter, but the question was which external source caused the intervention so that the compact particles scattered outwardly?

Worship

Worship means acknowledgement. It is inherent in human nature to acknowledge the Benefactor. Our Creator is our biggest benefactor who brought into existence the entire universe, which is custom-made to human needs and has a life support system to ensure our sustenance. How can we then not acknowledge the greatest of all Benefactors? Man, as a creation, has his limitations; no human being is all-powerful. When a person seeks to do something, he often finds out that he has limitations. It is this helplessness which leads him to pray to and seek help from God.

How can I converse with God when it seems that all the doors are closed?

I would say that those who are engaged in table talk cannot converse with God. If you are really serious about it, then you will have to pay a price, that is, you will have to become very keen on what you want. Let me give you an example. At a very young age, I had some problem with my eyesight and for this I visited several eye specialists – from Sitapur to Rome to the United States – I consulted doctors everywhere but I never became comfortable with any doctor.

For the first time, I became comfortable with Dr. Choudhary who had a clinic in Noida, India, but he recently passed away. I was quite

worried and I prayed to God. When Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru was the Prime Minister of India, he had kept the portfolio of Kashmir to himself instead of placing it under the Home Minister (which was the protocol). On being asked the reason for his action, he replied that the issue of Kashmir was very complex, and that he alone could deal with it. With this reference point in mind, I prayed to God:

O God, You alone can deal with my problem, so please take my problem into your Hands!

Then situations took such a turn that I was introduced to an able eye specialist, Dr. Safeena Tabassum, my current doctor from Ajmer, who has shifted to Delhi. I am fully satisfied with her treatment. God helped me. So, a believer can certainly have a conversation with God, but only when he is very keen and serious about it. There are many things in your life that will work out if you are dedicated and keen. God provides for His creation.

How do people reach atheism?

Becoming an atheist is more an outcome of being against theism than a self-discovery of the non-existence of God. Atheism was earlier backed on scientific validation, however, it has now lost its foundations and has become anachronistic in nature. For those who still claim scientific backing for atheism should learn about what some of the authorities in science have said about the topic.

Once Einstein was asked if he was an atheist. He said:

You may call me an agnostic, but I do not share the crusading spirit of the professional atheist whose fervor is mostly due to a painful act of liberation from the fetters of religious indoctrination received in youth. (Sept. 28, 1949 letter to Guy Raner Jr.)

This means scientists are not in a position to say that there is no God, they can just take a sceptical stand on the existence of God. This is because the accepted base for belief in something in the intellectual world is scientific, but since there is no scientific discovery about the non-existence of God, this is still subject to interpretation.

Towards the end of the 19th century, there was a strong wave of what was popularly called 'scientific atheism'. The argument often offered to negate the existence of God was His being invisible. But new scientific investigations carried out at the beginning of the 20th century started turning the tide against the credibility of this position, it becoming accepted that there are many aspects of nature that are invisible yet they exist. One of the books written on this new world discovered by science is *Science and the Unseen World* by Sir Arthur Eddington.

At the beginning of the 20th century Sir James Jeans declared that the universe which had been discovered by modern science was not compatible with the mechanical interpretation that had gained ground since past several decades. The age of quantum mechanics has established that nothing is fully observable. Contrary to previous belief, it was not the atom that was the last fundamental particle that constituted matter, rather there were unobservable subatomic particles that served as the building blocks of atoms. In a book published in 1988, entitled *A Brief History of Time*, Stephen W. Hawking (one of the foremost physicists of present times) explains the Big Bang Theory, according to which the universe is constantly expanding. After working out the relevant mathematical equations, Hawking has reached the conclusion that the expansion of the universe is taking place according to a well-calculated scheme. The initial rate of expansion must have been fixed with great accuracy so that it would always be less than the critical rate, i.e. the rate at

which the universe would begin to collapse again. This view cannot be explained unless it is accepted that the rate of expansion of the universe has been determined with the utmost precision. Stephen Hawking writes:

It would be very difficult to explain why the universe should have begun in just this way, except as the act of a God who intended to create beings like us. (p. 127)

One of the most amazing qualities of the universe is that there is no interpretation or explanation of it, other than that which allows for God's existence, despite the fact that the best brains in every age have attempted to unravel its mysteries. It has been claimed that the universe has always been in existence in its present form. It has also been claimed that it came into being on its own and that it goes on on its own. Cause and effect have been said to have created everything, and attempts have also been made to prove the law of evolution to be the creator of the universe; which however can be only a process of nature, but never its creator. The more a man learns about the universe, the more absurd do these theories appear to him; the stranger does it seem that something, or some being other than God Almighty should be the Lord and Master of the Universe. The universe, by its very existence, testifies to the fact that God is its Creator. I find other claims to be without concrete foundation. Whatever arguments or opposing opinions have been expressed to propagate this theory have proved erroneous by the knowledge acquired to date through human research.

One of my early works on this subject include the book *God Arises: Evidence of God in Nature and Science*. It establishes the existence of God according to modern scientific findings. It has been translated into several languages.

What is actually within man's control?

Natural laws will always remain as God has ordained them. These are laws which God has defined. They are every physical law known to man, and man cannot alter them. What a human being does have is the freedom of choice. This is our test. For example, a person cannot change the natural laws governing water. But he can choose whether or not to drink water. It is not within a person's control to remove the cloud between him and the sun, but he would be held accountable for the choices he made in life, something entirely in his control.

The Quran says that those who dwell in Paradise would say that in Paradise what we got was similar to what we received in the world. (Quran 2:25)

What does this mean?

We should be a seeker of Paradise in this world and we should be able to discover Paradise in everything we have here. We are sitting here – around us is pleasant weather, green meadows, nice people – a small sample of Paradise can be seen by us here in this world itself. When you have this realization in the present world, it would make you a deserving candidate for Paradise. If you live in this world with complaints, you will risk your entry to Paradise. Everything in this world gives you a glimpse of Paradise. A person must understand that he has to discover Paradise before he can be settled in Paradise. Complaining, stooping to negative thinking and developing hatred are not simple matters. By doing all of this, you are risking Paradise in the world Hereafter. The Quran says about those who will find a place in Paradise:

He will admit them into the Garden He has already made known to them. (Quran 47:6)

If in this world you discover only negativity, then you are risking Paradise.

I want to develop strong conviction in God, but find myself lacking in it. How can I develop it?

There is just one formula – save yourself from distraction. People remain engaged in and distracted by other-than-God and at the same time desire to attain conviction in God. Till the time you do not steer yourself away from distractions, you will not be able to focus on God.

After doing wrong, the power of repentance becomes low. How should we repent?

This is against the nature of a human being. It is interwoven in human nature that when a person does a wrong, his conscience calls out to him. The power of repentance only becomes stronger in such cases.

How can we regain our enthusiasm towards something?

This is not a problem. Fluctuation in enthusiasm is part of human nature and will surely happen. The feeling that my enthusiasm has fallen low re-energizes the mind and strengthens the incentive to carry on the work.

How important is it to convey the message of God to humanity?

Without conveying the message of God, faith remains incomplete. This is because a believer is to be a well-wisher, so, a true believer who has discovered that entry to Paradise will be for those who

believe in God will not be able to remain silent. His sense of well-wishing and desire that others also enter Paradise will undoubtedly cause him to make God's message known to people.

What is the best act to thank God?

According to the Quran,

Those who believe love God most. (Quran 2:165)

What is love? Love is a result of discovery. When you discover that God has already given me great reward in this world in the form of His numerous bounties, you become immersed in a sea of gratitude for Him, which in turn produces love for God.

How should the creation plan of God be conveyed without giving an impression that it is some sort of propaganda?

You should not aim to do everything in one sitting. This work is a process. You should discuss with the audience only as per their ability to accept. For the remainder, you should share books. During discussion, often a person's ego comes to the fore, while when he is reading a book, he is able to absorb a lot more. So, there are two aspects to presenting the creation plan of God to a person: one aspect is through discussion and the other aspect is conveyed through giving of books.

How do we discover God's powerfulness?

The secret of this discovery lies in comparison. We should compare God's power of bringing about rain with our powerlessness and inability to bring about rain, grow grain and make the sun shine. And if a person cannot do it, he should think how all this is happening

on a universal level? If I could not put in place the life support system, how did it come about? If we make this comparison, then on the one hand we will discover that we are all powerless and that God is all-powerful. If you become sick, you should not become a victim of frustration, rather discover that I am powerless and there is a Creator above me who is powerful. Then you will discover both the Creator and yourself.

Is being too optimistic in life a bad idea?

There is no 'more' or 'less' when it comes to optimism. Being optimistic is a part of life. You must always live in hope; this is a teaching of Islam. Optimism is a part of nature and a part of the creation plan of God.

What is the Plan of God for the mentally disabled people?

As a young person when I started working, I used to see often see written in places 'For Disabled Persons', but now we come across the words 'Differently-abled persons'. It has been found out that disability is not disability alone, rather one who is disabled in a certain way is abled in a different manner. Louis Braille, who invented the Braille system of writing for the visually impaired, was blind. When John Milton wrote his magnum-opus Paradise Lost, he too was blind.

There are newer ways of providing education for the mentally-challenged children. The parents of such children should be aware of the world they are living in. Parents only know of pampering; they should rather discover the quality their children possess and should nurture that particular quality. And if a person is disabled on one account, he is super-abled on other accounts.

Why should the Quran be distributed to all mankind?

The Quran is not a religious book in the limited sense of the term. It is a Book that tells people about the creation plan of God, and the scheme of things of the One who has created the entire Universe. This is not a matter of religion alone. For example, the Quran has a verse:

Surely, with every hardship there is ease. (Quran 94:6)

This means that if a problem befalls one, one should not get hassled; rather one should do peaceful planning. Nations like Germany, for example, could enjoy success because they planned on the basis of what remained with them and not on what they had lost. Similarly, the Prophet Muhammad had lost Makkah, but gained Madinah – so he planned on the basis of Madinah and not on the basis of Makkah.

The Quran is not a book of jurisprudence or a book of dos and don'ts about rituals. The Quran informs people about the laws of nature. It is not a book of Muslims, it is a Book of God. So, it becomes imperative that it be taken to all mankind.

What is honest repentance?

When a person does something wrong, he feels guilty. We make a mistake as a result of succumbing to emotions. But emotions do not last for long. When emotions subside, conscience emerges and when this happens, one must not neglect to pay heed to one's inner voice.

The Creator has placed a special feature in human psyche—and that is what is called 'repentance'. Repentance is a wonderful means of mercy for human beings. For those who repent, the Quran says:

God will change the evil deeds of such people into good ones. (Quran 25:70)

The transformation that this Quranic verse refers to takes place if sincere repentance wells up inside a person after he does something wrong. A positive aspect of repentance is that it engenders a strong determination in a person to reform himself, and, after having done something wrong, to firmly walk on the path of goodness thereafter. It is this positive enthusiasm that follows from repentance that changes an evil deed into a good one.

If you make a mistake that arouses anger in another, but then you repent and say, 'Please forgive me, I was wrong,' this will certainly cause the aggrieved person to undergo a change of heart. Such an apology will, on the one hand, inculcate positivity in your soul and, on the other hand, it will promote a culture of love among people you are living with. In family life as well as social life, untoward events are unavoidable. Such happenings sour relations and create distance between people. The best solution is to repent sincerely. Do not wait for others to take the lead.

If, after doing an evil deed, one chooses to continue on the same path, it makes a person even more inclined to evil. On the contrary, engaging in introspection would cause him to make up his mind not to indulge in evil again. If he does so, the evil deed he commits becomes a cause of leading him to goodness.

Repentance is an instrument of self-correction, initiating a process of self-assessment. This process is vital, as it enhances your intellectual calibre and leads to spiritual development. Repentance is an inner spirit, a readiness to atone for every kind of mistake.

The source of repentance is one's conscience (zameer). It is not possible that a person does something wrong and that his conscience does not get affected by it. The only condition is that a person should be honest with his conscience so that he does not neglect the voice of his conscience. Gandhi used to say, "Thus my inner sight

speaks”, and when this inner sight speaks, one must pay heed to it. There is no other criterion for sincere repentance.

**How do we see God as most-kind, most-merciful,
most-powerful and most-loving, given the
current state of the world?**

This is a very old question. I feel it is a very short-sighted approach to look at some events transpiring in the world and formulate an opinion based on them. We should first develop an understanding of the creation plan of God and then evaluate events in the light of this Plan.

History shows that difficulties and hardships have also played a vital role in the progress of many countries and have been their maximum contributor. For example, one of the greatest calamities to have hit the human race was the dropping of atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. But the aftermath of this event had a great lesson for humanity, that is, the discovery of the principle of positive planning. The Second World War had created a compulsion for Japan as its defeat in the war was so grave that Japanese were left with only one way to plan for their future, and that was, to plan on the basis of what remained with them. The Japanese had no resources to forcibly retrieve what they had lost and as a result, they were compelled to plan on the basis of what was left with them. Thus, Japanese adopted a diligent program of nation-building and worked hard towards it to emerge as a global leader. Today it is a nation known for its most dedicated and ethical work culture in the world. The tragedy, consequently paved way for Japan to develop its prowess as a global giant in the area of innovation and technology. Another example of such intense nation-

building is Germany, which revived its strength to become the most powerful European country.

The negative events of the Second World War culminated in setting successful examples of re-planning. It taught people the way forward after having incurred losses and defeat. Any disadvantageous situation creates a compulsion, which leads to new and positive developments. I can cite my own personal example. My ancestral land in my home village of Azamgarh was unjustly taken away by a person. Due to this usurpation of my property, I had nothing left to do in the village. This was when I was compelled to shift to Delhi. It was here that I was able to initiate my mission of peace, which has now spread across the whole world.

God creates compulsions to guide people in the right direction for people to learn and take heed. Many communities have risen to great heights starting from utter distress.

Another point often raised in this issue is that innocent children become victims of natural disaster, which is plainly unjust and abhorrent. As far as Islam is concerned, children who die in youth age will be rewarded with Paradise in the Hereafter. The prayer read at the funeral of these children is:

O God! Cause this child to become a means of salvation for us and cause him to become a means of reward and recompense for us [in the Hereafter]. (Mishkat al-Masabih, hadith no. 1690)

The prayer means that in the Hereafter when these children see their parents, they will come towards them and hold on to them. Thus, the prayer is an invocation to God to make these children – to whom Paradise has already been granted – a means to take their families also to Paradise.

What is the meaning of prayer? Why should I pray to God?

Prayer is the compensation of a person's helplessness. An individual, again and again, experiences helplessness and prayer is his response to such occasions. He calls out to a Being that is above and beyond him.

The Second World War was fought between the Axis Powers and the Allied Powers. During the war, there was a time when it was not sure who would win. The victor side became clear after the atom bomb was dropped. In the famous Yalta Conference, heads of three countries, Russia, Great Britain and the US, had gathered to find a strategy to contain the Axis Powers. Joseph Stalin was representing Soviet Russia. He was given to read the draft of the strategy and after reading it, he exclaimed suddenly: 'May God prosper this undertaking!'

At the point where man feels helpless, his nature is bound to call out to the One who is beyond human beings. Therefore, though there is no scientific proof of prayer, it is undoubtedly the experience of every person to call out to the Supreme Being when he feels utterly helpless.

In the sea, when a ship is on voyage and a storm strikes, there is nothing that a person sees except huge waves of water ready to engulf the ship any moment. It is in such times of helplessness that one spontaneously calls out to God. I had once read that a Russian pilot, who was an atheist, was as usual flying a plane. When his plane got stuck in thunderstorm, he was heard saying, 'Peter, save us!'

Is there a positive aspect of the phenomenon of death?

Yes, the positive aspect of death is the sense of urgency that it creates in a person. That is, the thought of death makes a person realize that whatever needs to be done should be done at the present moment. Whether or not a person believes in religion, the concept of death would still instil a sense of urgency in him.

CHAPTER 3

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE IN ISLAM

What is the real message of the Quran, the Bible and the Torah?

The common message of these three religious scriptures is monotheism, or the concept of unity of God. There is a verse in the Quran that reads:

The believers, the Jews, the Christians, and the Sabaeans, all those who believe in God and the Last Day and do good deeds, will be rewarded by their Lord; they shall have no fear, nor shall they grieve. (Quran 2:62)

What is the significance of Jerusalem for Jews, Christians and Muslims?

Jerusalem holds utmost importance for Jews because an important prophet of Judaism, Solomon, was born there. He established Jerusalem as the capital state of his kingdom. He built a Jewish Synagogue (or Solomon's Haykal) in 975 BC. For Jews therefore, Jerusalem holds direct significance. Solomon's Haykal has been razed down twice in history. The first incident was in 586 BC when the King of Babylonia, Nebuchadnezzar II destroyed it. After a long period of time, the Jews re-built their place of worship. This was again brought to ruins in 70 AD by the Romans. Today certain groups of Jews have made it their duty to restore and re-build the Haykal as it was originally built by Solomon. However, according

to the Torah, Solomon's Haykal can be re-built only by a prophet born in their midst.

Jerusalem holds an important historical significance for the Christians since after being born in Bethlehem (Palestine), Jesus Christ, once came to Jerusalem where he lived and preached.

Muslims attach importance to Jerusalem on account of the spiritual journey, Isra, that the Prophet Muhammad had undertaken and also due to his changing of the direction of prayer from the Kabah in Makkah towards Jerusalem for a temporary period while he was in Madinah.

What bridges the gap between followers of these faiths is that they have common prophets. Hence, from a historical perspective, the Kingdom of Solomon and the birthplace of Jesus Christ are indirectly significant for Muslims.

What are some things Muslims can learn from non-Muslims?

Life is all about mutual learning. All of us should interact and learn from one other. Learning is a process and is not restricted only to some specific issues. This is the age of knowledge explosion and learning. One should imbibe the spirit of learning and must learn from one and all. By virtue of being different, each person has experiences to share and learnings to offer to another.

Learning is to be had from everyone, it is not a question of Muslim or non-Muslim. Just as two stones create sparking when rubbed against each other, similarly mutual learning causes brainstorming and leads to emergence of new ideas.

Should we not encourage Muslims to open communication with other communities?

Yes, this is definitely required. When the Prophet went to Madinah, half of the population comprised of Jews. The direction of prayer for the Jews was not the Kabah, rather it was facing Jerusalem. The Prophet adopted the Jewish qiblah for the Muslim prayer as well. Today, education is secular and the state too is administered along secular principles. Why do Muslims not accept this? If you do not change now, you shall have to pay the price of being called backward.

Does Islam allow Muslims to wish non-Muslims on their festivals?

Absolutely! Opportunities for engaging in interaction should never be lost. Greeting others is a part of social ethics, and not a part of belief system. One must strive to live peacefully and humbly in society. A society is the sub-unit of a nation, which is diverse yet interconnected. When the members of a society acknowledge their diversity despite having different beliefs, they nurture a healthy atmosphere of open interaction, mutual learning and peaceful coexistence.

Can a Muslim be secular?

Yes. First, let us understand that secularism is not an anti-religious idea. There is a book in 20 volumes called Religion and Ethics. It is a compendium of the writings of some great scholars and is considered to be a very authentic and authoritative compilation. There is an article on secularism in this book which runs into twenty

pages. It says that secularism is another name for the policy of non-interference. Secularism in itself is not anti-religion, but rather it is following the principle of non-interference in matters of religion. A secular person is one who practices his own religion and does not interfere with the religious practice of other people.

CHAPTER 4

ISLAM AND THE QURAN

How can busy people find time for dawah work (the task of conveying God's message to others)?

Today, we are living in the age of social and print media. I had found an answer to this question way back, even before I had shifted to Delhi. I had once gone to South India in a train. When I alighted, a Christian father and I started walking together towards our nearby destination. I was carrying a suitcase with me. The father told me that he had to go in the same direction. At a crossroad, when I turned to go in a different direction, he opened his suitcase and gave me a small leaflet which was very well printed and had been published in Ohio. At that time, I had discovered that doing dawah work is very easy in today's world – all you have to do is carry literature with you and give it to people around.

Why did Muslims not win in the Battle of Uhud?

You will certainly have to pay the price of your mistakes, even if you are a prophet. Muslims had made a mistake during the Battle of Uhud.

'Uhud' is the name of a mountain in Arabia and the battle was fought in the shadow of this mountain in the year 624 AD. The commander had instructed the archers positioned at the top of the mountain to not leave their places at any cost, as that would cause the enemy to attack from the rear. During the course of battle, the

archers positioned at the top of the mountain felt that the Muslim side had won and so they left their positions early in spite of being instructed to not do so. This gave the opponents an opportunity to come from the rear and attack the Muslims. So, when the Muslim archers left their spot, the armies of the opposite side attacked from behind and decimated the Muslim forces. The Muslim defeat was bound to happen, as it was the consequence of a mistake made by few Muslims themselves. The occurrence of loss or defeat is a way of instilling the sense of responsibility in a person, so that he can assume full ownership for his actions.

What is the circumstance of this phrase *Lakum deenukum waliya deen*?

The verse referred to in the question is from Chapter 109 and is as follows:

You have your religion and I have mine. (Quran 109:6)

This verse was revealed towards the end of the Makkan phase of Islam, which lasted for 13 years. Several Islamic scholars believe that this verse served as a last admonition to the Prophet's opponents (the Quraysh tribe). It means that the verse came down at a point when the Prophet had fulfilled his responsibility of dawah (conveying the message of God) with respect to the Quraysh.

It is commonly held by scholars that if a community persists in its denial of the messenger, it shall suffer consequences. However, in my opinion, this verse of the Quran was in the language of 'divine hammering.' Its purpose is to invoke in the reader a sense of seriousness towards the message and to make him ponder over its meaning. As we learn from the history of Islam, the Makkans who had become dire opponents of the Prophet (and also the immediate reference of this verse) eventually embraced Islam.

I derive an extended meaning from the words of the above verse, which pertains to peaceful co-existence. The verse means that a believer must follow one and respect all religions.

What is ijtiḥād in today's world?

Ijtiḥād is a principle to be followed in every age. It was used even at the time of the Prophet. Ijtiḥād means to reapply the teachings of Islam to a new situation. We have an example of this during the life of the Prophet.

Once, the Prophet sent a group of his Companions to the tribe of Banu Qurayzah. Before sending them off, he advised them:

Do not offer the Asr prayer until you have reached Banu Qurayzah. (Sahih al-Bukhari, hadith no. 946)

Asr is the afternoon daily prayer, the time for which ends at the beginning of sunset. The group of Companions had not yet reached Banu Qurayzah when the sun began to set. Some of the Companions said that they should offer prayer as the time for Asr would end by the time they reached Banu Qurayzah. Certain other Companions said that they would strictly follow the Prophet's advice and would not pray until they reached the camp of Banu Qurayzah. The former group of Companions explained to the latter that the Prophet's words should not be taken literally, as he had actually wanted them to walk fast so that they reached their destination before the time of the Asr prayer came to an end. The Prophet did not mean that they should offer the Asr prayer only after having reached the destination, come what may. So, the Companions eventually offered prayer before reaching the Banu Qurayzah, which was contrary to the literal advice of the Prophet. Thus, on this occasion they re-interpreted the words of the Prophet. This incident is an example of doing ijtiḥād or reapplying a teaching of Islam in a changed situation.

In today's age also, ijtihād is a necessity. For example, the Quran says:

Call mankind to the Pilgrimage. They will come to you, on foot, and on every kind of lean camel, by every distant track. (Quran 22:27)

This verse calls on all Muslims to perform the pilgrimage to Makkah on camelback. In today's times, this command cannot be followed literally, and is taken to mean: 'Use the available means of transportation for the pilgrimage.'

In life, situations and circumstances always change and thus there is a need to re-study and re-apply the original teachings of Islam.

What is the duty of Muslims towards Al-Aqsa Mosque?

According to Islam, there is no duty that Muslims have towards the Al-Aqsa Mosque. The Mosque which can be seen in Jerusalem today with the name of 'Al-Aqsa' was actually built many years after the death of Prophet Muhammad by the Umayyad Caliph Abd al-Malik and later finished and expanded by his son al-Walid in 705 AD. It was originally erected as a small prayer house by the second caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab.

The name 'Masjid al-Aqsa' was given to the newly-built monument by Muslims because of the reference found in the following verse of the Quran:

Holy is He who took His servant by night from al-Masjid al-Haram to al-masjid al-aqsa. (Quran 17:1)

The misconception many have today is that they think that the present-day Masjid Al-Aqsa is the same 'masjid al-aqsa' mentioned in the Quran. In reality, Masjid al-Aqsa did not have any physical existence at the time of the Prophet. In the verse quoted above,

‘Masjid al-Haram’ is a proper noun and refers to the Kabah in Makkah, while ‘masjid al-aqsa’ is only used as an adverb. The literal meaning of the term ‘masjid al-aqsa’ in this verse is ‘a far-off masjid’ (‘far’, because it was far from Makkah – the place from where the Prophet started his night journey). This far-off masjid was the sight at Jerusalem where the Prophet was taken during his night journey and is said to have prayed. So, the place where he prayed was just a space and had no physical building in the form of a mosque. This is why the term ‘masjid al-aqsa’ in the above verse is not a proper noun, referring to a physical mosque which existed when the Prophet went there, rather, it means a far-off place (which was Jerusalem) where the Prophet prayed.

It was only later on, after the death of the Prophet, that Muslims constructed a physical mosque at this sight in Jerusalem where the Prophet had prayed during his night journey. After construction, Muslims gave it the name ‘Masjid Al-Aqsa’. Thus, the accurate translation of the verse would be:

Holy is He who took His servant by night from al-Masjid al-Haram to a far-off masjid.

The above verse just refers to a far-off place where the Prophet prayed during his night journey, it does not refer to the particular physical structure of the mosque that presently exists in Jerusalem. God has bestowed no duty to Muslims towards the present Masjid Al-Aqsa.

Does spirituality exist in Islam?

Yes. Our world is a dual world – a world of ‘material things’, and a world of ‘inner meanings’. When one raises oneself to a level where material things become secondary and inner meanings become of prime importance, then one is a spiritual person. There are two

major schools of spiritual discipline: one based on meditation and the other on contemplation. The former relates to the heart and the latter relates to the mind.

Meditation-based spirituality

Spirituality of the heart is generally taken to mean the opposite of worldliness. It advocates only one way to preserve one's spirituality, and that is to retire to a desolate place, leaving behind one's homes and worldly life, where there is nothing to divert one's attention. Here one is required to completely focus on meditation. It is this viewpoint, which is presented in the well-known book *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari*.

'Heart-based spirituality' takes one to a level, which is, in fact, one of ecstasy. Particular practices and chants produce an ecstatic feeling within the practitioner. There are many methods of meditation in the spiritual discipline, which have been prevalent in one form or the other since ancient times. Whenever a person raises himself above worldly matters and devotes his life to becoming one with the non-material world through meditation, he experiences a very different kind of feeling. When he enters this state of ecstasy, he experiences an unknown pleasure. On the basis of this experience, people associate ecstasy with spirituality. However, ecstasy is nothing but a reduced form of spirituality. Personally, I subscribe to the school of contemplation, rather than meditation.

Contemplation-based spirituality

A human being is an intellectual being. He is endowed with a mind, which is his greatest faculty. Real spirituality or contemplative spirituality is that which has the power to address our minds. Any

kind of spirituality attained at a level lesser than that of our minds is not true spirituality.

According to me, true spirituality is based on contemplation or reflection or pondering, which has to do with intellectual activity. Such spirituality is produced when one gives serious thought to such questions pertaining to life, for example: Who am I? What is the purpose of my life? What is this world around me? What is the creation plan of the Creator? Is my life governed by destiny or free will? What is my purpose in life? A seeker is able to find true spirituality by finding rational answers to such questions, whereby he receives spirituality at the mind or thinking level.

Indeed, the journey of spirituality begins with the urge to search for the truth. When a seeker discovers the truth and learns the creation plan of the Creator, his life enters a new phase, i.e. that of building of the human personality according to spiritual principles. This journey is entirely intellectual in nature. Its quest is two-fold, one is to solve the riddle of why, all men and women undergo negative experiences in this world and the other is to offer positive solutions. It addresses the paradox of human beings having been given the freedom to make their own moral choices, and their frequent misuse of this freedom - a course of action which causes them to repeatedly face situations in which people do each other harm; losses are incurred because of others' injustice; severe provocations are suffered because of untoward experiences. At such times spirituality teaches us to convert negativity into positivity through the art of conversion. This is the ideology of spirituality as presented in Islam.

When a scientist discovers the scientific world, he doesn't leave the material world, but rather stays here, studies and makes discoveries in this very world. Spirituality is also a science. Consequently, in spiritual science the same method is valid, i.e. undergoing spiritual

experiences while remaining in the material world. Spirituality, in fact, is a process of converting our everyday material events into spiritual experiences. While living his social life, man is affected by events, which trigger negative thoughts such as malice, lust, anger, arrogance, greed, etc. But when man raises himself above his immediate surroundings, i.e. from the material level to a higher level of thinking, he experiences real spirituality. At this elevated level, man is able to eradicate his negative thoughts and replace them with positive ones. In this state, he learns to convert non-spiritual matters into spiritual matters.

This is the principle on which the entire material world is based. It may be called the principle or art of conversion. For instance, let us take the case of water. Two gases separately are not water, but, when they combine and convert into another form, they take the form of water. The same is true of the tree. A tree is, in fact, the result of the conversion of non-botanical matter.

All these processes use the principle of conversion. In the same way contemplative spirituality through the principle of conversion makes man spiritual. True spirituality, an intellectual activity, is a science of inner development and material things indirectly contribute towards that development. In fact, material life is made more meaningful by the pro-active role played by spirituality in intellectual refinement and the consequent progress of humanity. Spirituality does not, as some may imagine, arrest the thinking process, but rather enhances intellectual activity in the complete sense of the word.

What are the five daily prayers in Islam?

Prayer is form of worship of God. Prayer has been enjoined on believers five times a day at appointed hours:

Believers are under the obligation to say their prayers at the appointed hours. (Quran 4:103)

These prayers are performed either individually at home or in congregation in mosques. A believer begins his prayer by uttering the words “God is Great”. These words acknowledge that all greatness belongs to God and that the worshipper will lead a life of modesty and humility. Each prayer is segmented into several rak’ah, or units. In each rak’ah a person stands, bows and prostrates, reciting verses from the Quran and other prayers. These are the five obligatory prayers:

1. Early morning prayer (Fajr): two rak’ahs between dawn and sunrise
2. Noon prayer (Zuhr): four rak’ahs, between noon and mid-afternoon
3. Afternoon prayer (Asr): four rak’ahs. The time for prayer starts when the length of any object’s shadow reaches a factor (usually 1 or 2) of the length of the object itself plus the length of that object’s shadow at noon. The time for the prayer ends at sunset.
4. Sunset prayer (Maghrib): three rak’ahs between sunset and early evening
5. Evening prayer (Ishaa): four rak’ah from the disappearance of twilight until dawn

During the prayer, a believer refreshes his memory about God’s commandments regarding himself. Then he kneels and prostrates himself before God, in physical expression of the idea that the only course that befits him is to lead his life according to the creation

plan of God. The prayer is concluded by turning the face first to the right side, then to the left, and uttering the words Assalamu-alaykum, which means, 'May the peace and blessings of God be upon you!' This is a demonstration that spiritually conditioned by prayer, the worshipper is now entering into the world with no other thoughts and feelings in his mind but those of mercy towards others and peace for all mankind.

Prayer strengthens a believer's resolve to remain a peaceful member of the society, and to harbour no ill-feelings towards anyone. Prayer in one respect is to surrender before God, attributing all kinds of greatness to Him alone. In yet another respect, prayer prepares the individual to lead a worthy life among fellow human-beings, adopting an attitude of modesty, sympathy and good-will in all his dealings. In short, prayer perfects a person's relation with God as well as with other human beings. According to a verse, a believer is enjoined thus:

Prostrate yourself and come closer to God. (Quran 96:19)

The cadence of praying five times formally was prescribed so that congregational prayers could be undertaken. A believer otherwise must engage in prayer in an informal way throughout the day, whereby he remembers the blessings of God and shows gratefulness to his Creator. This has been alluded to in the Quran in the following words:

When you have finished the prayer, remember God while standing, and sitting, and lying on your sides. When you feel secure, say your prayers in the prescribed form. (Quran 4:103)

In Islam, how can a woman divorce a man?

Islamic law on marriage and divorce provides for almost all eventualities including a woman's right to divorce her husband. Islam has two provisions through which a woman may give divorce, however, we must first understand that marriage is the rule of life and divorce is only an exception. But the latter must also be accepted as a reality. Separation is strongly advised against in case of minor provocations. It is meant only as a last resort, when it has become truly unavoidable.

The first method of divorce for a woman is to present her case before a religious scholar, or a body of religious scholars. They give consideration to her circumstances in the light of the Quran and the Hadith, and on reasonable grounds for separation, they decide in her favour. This is termed as khula.

The second method is called talaq-e-tafweez (or delegated divorce) in which a husband may delegate to the wife the authority to pronounce talaq or divorce. It works when a prenuptial clause is inserted in the marriage document. The woman can tell her husband any time in her life that she wants to divorce him for certain reasons. The husband is bound to agree if she seeks separation. The parents of the woman can secure this right for their daughter at the time of her marriage. But the elders of both families are expected to advise and oversee that the rights of neither party are being misused.

What is your interpretation of hijab or the veil mentioned in the Quran?

Burqa, or purdah is generally looked upon as an integral part of Islam, but this is not so. In reality, the burqa is a part of Muslim culture and not a part of Islamic teaching. There is a great difference between Muslims and Islam. If it is claimed that the burqa is a part

of Muslim culture, then I would say yes to that, but if it is claimed that the wearing of it is a part of Quranic teaching, then I would say no. The source of Islam is the Quran and not Muslim culture. Muslim culture is a social phenomenon, while the Quran is the Book of God as revealed to the Prophet of Islam.

According to linguistic history, the word burqa was in use in Arabia before the advent of Islam in the first quarter of the seventh century. At that time the word burqa meant a piece of clothing that was used as a protection, especially in winters. The well-known Arabic dictionary *Lisan al-Arab* gives us two examples of its use during the pre-Islamic period: the first, as a cover for animals during the winter season and the second, as a covering or chaadar, like a shawl, for village women. Although the word burqa existed in the Arabic vocabulary at that time, the Quran did not use this word for women's purdah.

History shows that the present veil or burqa first came into vogue in Persia. When Islam entered Persia, a complete civilization was already in existence there. Many things were introduced into Muslim culture from the Persian culture. As per the pre-Islamic Persian culture, even the Iranian kings used to keep their women separately and would make them wear a veil. Under the influence of Iranian culture burqa was adopted by Muslims. Gradually, it became a part of Muslim culture.

At present Muslims use the term hijab as equivalent to burqa, but the word hijab is likewise not used in the Quran in this sense. Hijab literally means curtain. Hijab is used in the Quran seven times, but not in the sense that is prevalent among the Muslims today, rather it is used in its literal sense of 'curtain'.

Regarding women's purdah, two words have been used in the Quran: jilbab (33:59) and khimar (24:31). But again, these words are not

used in their present connotation. It is a fact that both words have a similar meaning, that is, chaadar or duppatta, that is, something which covers the body of a woman and not her face. So, it is very clear that the present burqa or hijab are not Quranic terms; both are part of Muslim culture and not part of Quranic commandments. The concept of hijab as understood in the popular sense today has emerged from Fiqh.

In reality, Islam talks about adopting simplicity and modesty.

In terms of outfit, the Shariah prescribes women to cover their body with clothing which is not tight fitting and not meant to attract others. (Quran 24:31, Tafsir Usmani)

It is noteworthy that the well-known Arab scholar, Sheikh Muhammad Nasiruddin al-Albani, clearly endorses the above-mentioned position of the Shariah in his book on this subject, *Jilbab al-Mar'ah al-Muslimah fil Kitab was-Sunnah* (The Veil of a Muslim Woman in the Light of the Quran and Sunnah). He goes on to say that it is clear from the Quran, the Hadith and the practice of the Companions and the Tabiun (Companions of the Prophet's Companions) that whenever a woman steps out of her home she should cover herself completely so as not to show any part of her body except the face and the hands.

During the Prophet's time, Muslim women were active in different fields, such as agriculture, horticulture and social work. Islamic literature mentions some pious women who have played a highly creative role in their society, like Hajira, the wife of the Prophet Abraham; Maryam, the mother of Jesus; Khadija, the wife of the Prophet of Islam and Aishah, the wife of the Prophet of Islam. According to books of Hadith, Fatimah, the Prophet's daughter, used to take part in campaigns, undertake the work of providing first-aid and giving the injured water to drink and food to eat.

These women, accepted as models in the society of believers, are good examples for the women of today. There are many such incidents which show that Islam accords equal freedom to a woman and a man. The Prophet of Islam said:

Men and women are two equal halves of a single unit.
(Sunan Abi Dawud, hadith no. 236)

This is the best expression of gender equality.

Is it true that the Quran teaches killing of all non-believers?

Referring to certain verses of the Quran, there are some who attempt to give the impression that Islam is a religion of war and violence. This is totally untrue. Such verses relate to a specific situation and are meant in a restricted sense; they are not of general applicability. Observe the following verse:

And fight in God's cause against those who wage war against you, but do not commit aggression – for surely God does not love aggressors. Slay them wherever you find them [those who fight against you]. (Quran 2:190-91)

Fight them until there is no more fitna [religious persecution] and religion belongs to God alone. If they desist, then let there be no hostility, except towards aggressors. (Quran 2:193)

The above verses do not convey the general command of Islam. The truth of the matter is that the Quran was not revealed in the complete form in which it exists today. It was revealed from time to time, according to the circumstances, over a period of 23 years. If this is divided into years of war and peace, the period of peace amounts to 20 years, while that of war amounts only to 3 years. The revelations

during these 20 peaceful years consisted of the peaceful teachings of Islam as are conveyed in the verses regarding the realization of God, worship, morality, piety, justice, etc.

This division of commands into different categories is a natural one and is found in all religious books. For instance, the Gita, the holy book of the Hindus, pertains to wisdom and moral values. Yet along with there is also an exhortation by Krishna to Arjuna, encouraging him to fight (Bhagavad Gita 3:30). This does not mean that believers in the Gita should wage war all the time. Mahatma Gandhi, after all, derived his philosophy of non-violence from the same Gita. The exhortation to wage war in the Gita applies only to exceptional cases where circumstances leave no choice. But for general day-to-day existence it gives the same peaceful commands as derived from it by Mahatma Gandhi.

Similarly, Jesus Christ said:

Do not think that I came to bring peace on Earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. (Matthew 10:34)

It would not be right to conclude that the religion preached by Christ was one of war and violence, for such utterances relate purely to particular occasions. So far as general life is concerned, Christ taught peaceful values, such as the building up of a good character, loving each other, helping the poor and needy, etc. The same is true of the Quran. When the Prophet of Islam emigrated from Makkah to Madinah, the idolatrous tribes became aggressive towards him. But the Prophet always averted their attacks by the exercise of patience and the strategy of avoidance. However, on certain occasions no other options existed, save that of retaliation. Therefore, he had to engage in defensive battle on certain occasions. It was these circumstances which occasioned the revelations relating to war. These commands, being specific to certain circumstances, had no

general application. They were not meant to be valid for all time to come. That is why the permanent status of the Prophet has been termed:

‘a mercy to all mankind’. (Quran 21:107)

In principle, the Quran teaches peace and complete freedom of thought and religion, and does not, to any extent, advocate for the unjust killing of non-believers.

Why do most Muslims have a tendency to try to convert people to their religion?

Islam does not subscribe to the concept of conversion. It believes that religion is a matter of individual choice. The search for the truth should be every person's individual effort and the decisions one then takes in the matter of religion is completely personal.

The concept of religious conversion is alien to the Quran. It has no basis in the Quran. The Quran speaks of *marefat*, which means God-realization or the discovery of God. So, the truth is your own discovery, your own realization. It is a personal choice. If you want to know what the purpose of life is, what life and death are about, and so on, you have to study, reflect and discuss with learned people. And after that, you may reach some conclusion. And that is your religion. So, your religion is your own discovery.

In religious ‘conversion’, there are two parties: the converter and the converted. But this is not the concept in Islam. In Islam, there is only one party—and that is you. If you want to find the truth, you have to reflect and study on your own. And when you discover something as the truth, you opt for it.

How are the Prophet Muhammad and the Prophet Abraham related?

The Prophet Abraham was born in Ur (Iraq). His sons, the Prophet Ismail (Ishmael) and Prophet Ishaq (Isaac) were ancestors to two streams of prophets. The Prophet Isaac was the forefather of the line of prophets starting from the Prophet Jacob until the Prophet Jesus. The Prophet Muhammad belonged to the tribe of Quraysh, which traced its origin to the Prophet Ishmael.

The period between the era of the Prophet Abraham and that of the Prophet Muhammad is over two thousand years. But all the prophets from Ishmael and Isaac to Muhammad (including Jesus and Moses) share a common lineage going back to the Prophet Abraham. This is why Judaism, Christianity and Islam are called Abrahamic religions.

What was the character of the Prophet Muhammad really like?

The Prophet of Islam, Muhammad ibn Abdullah, was born in Arabia on 22 April 570 AD, and died on 8 June 632 AD. He grew up orphaned and his childhood gave indications of the sublime and dynamic personality that was to emerge. As he grew up, the nobility of his personality, soft-spoken and genial disposition made him a benevolent member of the society. A balanced personality—tolerant, truthful, perspicacious and magnanimous—he presented the highest example of human nobility. According to Daud ibn Husayn, he became known as the most chivalrous among his people, tolerant and forbearing, truthful and trustworthy, always an epitome of good behaviour. He would stay aloof from all quarrels and quibbles and never indulged in foul utterances, abuse or invective. People even left their valuables in his custody, for they knew that he would never

betray them. His unimpeachable trustworthiness won for him the title of al-Amin, an unfailing trustee, and of al-Sadiq, the truthful.

As a Prophet, he was an embodiment of virtues a true believer must imbibe and uphold. A prophet is a well-wisher for mankind and the entire life of the Prophet Muhammad is a testament to this fact. He never discriminated between people on the basis of their colour, creed or social status; in the heydays of slavery, he advocated freedom of slaves; in an environment full of resentment and staunch opposition, he always adopted a forgiving approach, never avenging any wrong done to him.

His experience at Taif is an example. The leaders of the Thaqif tribe in Taif refused to extend their support to his mission and let loose street urchins after the Prophet who continued pelting stones at him until the cover of night made him invisible. Despite being humiliated, injured and wearied, the Prophet did not resort to cursing the people of the Thaqif tribe, rather books of tradition tell us that

He prayed for their guidance. (Sahih al-Bukhari, hadith no. 3231)

His wife Ayisha said about the Prophet Muhammad, "He would not follow an evil with an evil, rather he would pardon and forgive." (Musnad Ahmad (vol. 6, p. 174)

He once was asked by the people to curse an aggressor and he replied:

I have not been sent as the invoker of curse, but I have been sent as mercy. (Sahih Muslim, hadith no. 2599)

The Prophet Muhammad taught the believers to become conscientious members of society. He advised that, 'A

Muslim is one from whose tongue and hand people are safe.’ (Sunan al-Nasai, hadith no. 4998)

He propagated caring and supporting the sick, feeding the hungry and being kind, living as no-problem persons for neighbours, refraining from using offensive names and caring for animals. He encouraged responsible living and judicious utilization of natural resources, such as water, even if has limitless access to them. Once the Prophet passed by a Companion when he was performing ablutions and said to him:

‘What is this extravagance?’ The Companion asked, ‘Can there be extravagance in ablutions?’ The Prophet replied, ‘Yes, even if you are on the bank of a flowing river!’ (Sunan ibn Majah, hadith no. 460)

The Prophet Muhammad exemplified peace and tolerance throughout his life. Once, on being asked for a master advice, he replied: ‘Don’t be angry.’ He said that the strongest among us is the one who can control his anger. He propagated the pursuit of the easier choice of peace and tolerance as against being intolerant or violent.

During the course of his lifetime, there were certain defensive skirmishes that took place. Even during these, Prophet Muhammad strictly prohibited the ill treatment of non-combatants and prisoners of war. For example, the Prophet did not approve of any ill treatment of prisoners of war that were taken after the Battle of Badr:

He instructed Muslims to share equal food with the prisoners. (Majma ul Zawaid, hadith no. 10007)

He declared that any prisoner who could teach ten children of Madinah to read and write would be set free. (Musnad Ahmad, hadith no. 2216)

It is also worth noting that in future battles, no prisoners of war were taken in by the Muslims.

The Prophet Muhammad taught believers to be virtuous and compassionate towards fellow human beings. He preached selfless service and development of piety and modesty amongst individuals. He believed that a Muslim is soft, simple and lenient. He cautioned Muslims from falling into extremism:

Those who go to extremes are doomed. (Sahih Muslim, hadith no. 2670)

Who is a kafir?

The word kafir has never been used in the Quran to mean either a non-Muslim or an infidel. In fact, this term was applied solely to contemporaries of the Prophet. Kafir (pl. kuffar) was used to refer to those people who had completely understood the true message of Islam and refused to believe in it due to stubbornness. The Prophet peacefully conveyed to them the divine message over a long period of time, but they refused to follow the truth of his words. God, therefore, declared those people, the contemporaries of the Prophet as kuffar that is, the deniers. The use of the word kafir for anyone other than the contemporaries of the Prophet is not permissible.

The most important point to be grasped on this subject is that the word kafir denotes an individual rather than a certain race or community. It is in no way a group appellation. However, the generally held view is that one who is not a Muslim is kafir. This is an entirely baseless supposition. The word kafir is not synonymous with non-Muslim or a non-Muslim community.

Being a kafir is a matter of the heart, which God alone knows and therefore no person has any right to accuse a fellow human as being

kafir. Kafir was a term of reference, restricted in place and time, and which is no longer relevant today. Now all are equally human beings and they have to be dealt with as human beings.

There is a relevant story in the life of the Prophet of Islam that aptly illustrates this principle. The Prophet of Islam migrated from Makkah to Madinah in 622 AD at which time there were some Jewish tribes living in Madinah. One day it happened that the Prophet of Islam, seated at that time, saw a funeral procession passing through a street in Madinah. On seeing the funeral, he stood up in deference.

One of his Companions said, ‘O Prophet! That was the funeral of a Jew, not a Muslim.’ The Prophet replied: ‘Was he not a human being?’ (Sahih al-Bukhari, hadith no. 1312, 1313)

The Prophet could discover a commonality between himself and a Jew, because both were human beings and creations of God.

Present-day Muslims often callously use the term kafir. They must bear in mind the following hadith of the Prophet of Islam where he condemned mindless usage of this term and said:

If one accuses another of being a kafir and the accused is not one, then the word will return to the accuser. (Sahih al-Bukhari, hadith no. 6045)

Muslims must therefore absolutely refrain from alleging anyone as being a kafir or a denier.

Does Islam have a concept similar to karma?

No, Islam does not believe in the concept of karma. The concept of karma rests on the notion of the perpetual re-birth of a person until the soul is cleansed, after which it finally joins the divine.

According to this concept, it is the outcome of the karma of a person that determines his next form in his re-birth and this cycle continues.

According to Islam, a person's life is eternal, a fraction of which he spends on the planet earth. The time he spends on earth is a test. How he has performed in this test will be evaluated after his death on the Judgment Day. The Quran says:

On that Day people will come forward in separate groups to be shown their deeds: whoever has done the smallest particle of good will see it; while whoever has done the smallest particle of evil will see it. (Quran 99:6-8)

Is it my right as a Muslim man to force my wife to wear a hijab?

No, the husband cannot impose hijab on his wife. In fact, a husband must not impose anything on his wife. Islam accords equal status to women as that to men. The Quran says:

You are members, one of another. (Quran 3:195)

This means that there is no difference between the two as regards status, rights and blessings both in this world and in the Hereafter.

In case a man requires something out-of-ordinary from his wife, a special provision has to be agreed upon between the two – husband and wife. It should be done at the time of or before marriage itself and with mutual consent. This special provision works both ways and the wife can ask for something out-of-ordinary from her husband as well.

What are your views on India's Supreme Court ruling of Triple Talaq?

As an Islamic scholar, I would say that the Supreme Court's judgment delivered on August 22 – striking down instant triple talaq as being unconstitutional – is totally right. Triple talaq is not a principle of Islam, but is rather a ruling of certain Muslim jurists, adopted in the later period of Islam. In this matter, Muslim jurists need to correct themselves instead of wrongly justifying triple talaq. In Islam, talaq is seen as an undesirable practice. But in rare cases, a couple may feel that their marriage is not working, and in this situation, divorce is allowed. However, there is a prescribed method laid down by the Quran (2:229). That is, a divorce is finalized over a period of three months. In the first month, the husband tells his wife that he has given her one talaq. Both then wait for a month during which they could reconcile. After the first month, he may either take back the talaq or pronounce it a second time. Both wait for another month, at the end of which, if he pronounces a third talaq, the divorce becomes final.

This pattern was adhered to during the time of the Prophet and the first caliph Abu Bakr. There were rare cases, when a man would come to the Prophet or Abu Bakr, saying that he had divorced his wife by saying talaq three times in one go. Then the Prophet and Abu Bakr would consider this an instance of talaq being said in anger and so would not finalize the divorce. Rather, they would tell him that his uttering 'talaq' three times in one instance would be regarded as only one pronouncement of talaq.

During the time of the second caliph Umar, the number of people who began to pronounce talaq in one sitting increased. Umar, in a few cases, ruled the saying of talaq three times in one go as final and annulled the marriage. But he would also flog such men as deterrent

punishment. This helped in curbing instances of saying talaq in one go. Certainly, Umar's practice was not a Sharia law. His step was rather an example of hukm al-hakim, or an executive order. His annulment of marriage in cases where men said talaq three times in one go was an exercise of the discretionary power of a ruler. Such executive orders are applicable to particular cases and do not have the status of Sharia law.

In the British period, men again began to divorce their wives in one sitting. Now Muslim jurists belonging to the Hanafi school of law revived Umar's order and made instant triple talaq valid. The Hanafi jurists cited Umar's precedent, but this reference was unwarranted, because Umar had done so by way of an executive order while, in the later period, Hanafi jurists did so by issuing a fatwa. Moreover, Umar would also flog men as deterrent punishment, while Hanafi jurists were not in a position to flog anyone.

In such a scenario, my advice to Hanafi Muslims is to take the Supreme Court's verdict as a reminder and review their practice. They should consider uttering talaq thrice in one go as a case of a decision having been taken in anger and consider it only one as talaq – as had been done during the time of the Prophet.

Why is there difference among scholars when it comes to the commentary (tafsir) or interpretation of the Quran?

Tafsir involves application of the Quran. When you do commentary of a verse in an applied way, there will naturally be differences in interpretation. For example, the Quran says, 'Do not worship idols'. (31:13) About this, one commentator would say it means one should not worship stone idols, while another would say it also means that one should not give excessive importance to human beings, as that would mean making them one's idols (object of veneration) instead

of God. So, wherever there is an issue of application of the verses of the Quran, there will be differences.

Consider another example. The Quran says at one place:

Fight in God's cause against those who wage war against you. (Quran 2:190)

A certain commentator would say this verse means that fighting is an eternal teaching of the Quran. However, another would say this is a temporary injunction and the verse relates to a period when there were no world bodies such as the United Nations, no pacts between countries and no universal norms governing relations between nations. But now since we have all of these, there is no need for going to war. The only option before people and nations today is that of peaceful negotiation. So, two different commentators would give different interpretations of this verse.

Even in the Gita there are differences in commentary. For example, Mahatma Gandhi has said that war mentioned in the Gita is meant in the spiritual sense, that is one should engage in 'spiritual war', while there are some other scholars who say that war in the Gita is real physical war on the battlefield. So, there will always be such differences. This is the case even when it comes to the interpretation of the Constitution of India.

One has to study oneself to know which interpretation is correct. There will never be compulsion in this matter – that is, never will it become absolutely clear as to which interpretation is right and which is wrong. One will have to do deep study to understand this. Only in physical sciences are there no such differences, but there will be differences in social sciences or humanities. In physical sciences, mathematics provides certainty. But in the field of humanities, there would always be subjectivity.

What is the Islamic way – debate or peaceful dialogue?

The way of Islam is peaceful dawah or dialogue, not debate. A believer should never engage in a debate. Islam does not make you a debater, but rather a dayee, that is one who peacefully conveys the message of Islam to others.

Can women travel without mahram?

According to popular fiqh, Muslim women cannot travel without mahram. But in today's age, travel has become so convenient, safe and secure that I think it is lawful for women to travel without mahram. The Prophet once said in this regard:

If you should live for a long time, you will certainly see that a lady in a Howdah travelling from Al-Hira will (safely reach Makkah and) perform the Tawaf of the Kabah, fearing none but Allah. (Sahih al-Bukhari, hadith no. 3595)

It means that at the time of peace and convenience, the condition of mahram is optional. Islam however, does not permit the free mixing of men and women. For instance, in the view of Islam, it is not suitable for a man to share a room with a woman if they both are unrelated. Islam asks its followers to maintain a distance of respect, dignity and modesty with each other. This is a safeguard for the personal and private spaces of both genders.

Who is a pure Muslim?

There is no such term as 'pure Muslim'. A true believer is one whose heart is pure, and only God knows the state of one's heart. We, humans, do not know what a person is in his heart and so we

cannot determine a person's purity. This matter is solely between God and man.

How was the Prophet Muhammad able to influence so many people to accept Islam? What did he want to achieve by promoting it?

The Prophet Muhammad had sent his messengers to heads of tribes, states and kingdoms inviting them to the message of Islam. The heads of states in return sent their delegations and scholars to the Prophet to confirm if his claim of being a prophet sent by God was correct. The delegations used to ask him questions which would seek to confirm the veracity of Islam. For this reason, several verses in the Quran regarding Jesus and Moses were revealed during this time. It was these peaceful and intellectual means that led to the spread of the message of Islam.

This was a phenomenon of that age. It was an age where if a king or tribal chief adopted a religion, it was cascaded to the entire population in that area. If the head of the tribe accepted Muhammad as a prophet, then everyone in his tribe would embrace Islam as per tradition. Just as, when Constantinople had adopted Christianity, it had led to a mass conversion of all his subjects to Christianity.

In the words of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the primitive society was a tribal society and the chief of the community was the head for the whole of the community. But this age has now come to an end and this phenomenon shall not repeat itself.

It is common that every truthful person, who has attained realization, wants to spread the truth to others. The truth is a motivating spirit and anyone who believes in it shall leave no stone unturned to convey it to people around him. For example, Swami Vivekananda

reached the US without any wherewithal and despite great difficulty only so as to transmit the message he believed in.

Can I read the English translation of the Quran without wudu (ablutions)? Can I gift a non-Muslim friend the English translation of the Quran knowing the fact that he's going to read it without wudu?

Yes, absolutely! The misconception of not reciting the Quran without performing ablutions comes from a misunderstood hadith of Umar ibn al-Khattab.

According to a tradition in Musnad al Bazzar (hadith no. 279), when Umar heard the recitation of the Quran from his sister's house, he went inside and asked for the pages from which the Quran was being read. At this, his sister asked Umar to first perform wudu (ablutions) before he could read the Quran. This was a psychological gesture from a sister who requested his brother to clean himself before he read the Book of God.

The fact that one does not need to perform ablutions is affirmed by another incident of Umar ibn al-Khattab. During the days when Umar was caliph, he was once sitting with some persons and discussing a verse from the Quran. During discussion, Caliph Umar stood up and took out a copy of the Quran from a shelf and starting reading the verse being discussed. One of the onlookers asked if Caliph Umar had performed ablutions before reading the Quran. Caliph Umar became furious at this and he strongly condemned it by saying:

Did Musaylama (the false prophet) give you a fatwa in this regard? (Musanaf Abdul Razzaq, hadith no. 1318)

In other words, he meant: ‘Which hypocrite told you of this wrong practice?’

When Umar’s sister had asked him to clean himself, she said it out of the leverage she had over her brother. We may not have the same leverage over others in our life. Cleanliness is a form of respect a reader gives to God’s word, however, imposing this practice keeps people away from comfortably reading or gifting the Quran and above all prevents people from knowing the message of God.

In Islam, can we see Allah if we go to heaven?

Yes. According to a hadith, the Companions once asked the Prophet if we would see God in Paradise. The hadith is as follows:

During the lifetime of the Prophet some people asked, ‘O God’s Messenger! Shall we see our Lord on the Day of Resurrection?’ The Prophet said, ‘Yes. Do you have any difficulty in seeing the sun at midday when it is bright and there is no cloud in the sky?’ They replied, ‘No.’ He then said, ‘Do you have any difficulty in seeing the moon on a full moon night when it is bright and there is no cloud in the sky?’ They again replied, ‘No.’ The Prophet said, ‘(Similarly), you will have no difficulty in seeing God on the Day of Resurrection, just as you have no difficulty in seeing either the sun or the moon.’ (Sahih al-Bukhari, hadith no. 4581)

Does the Quran permit slavery?

Islam does not promote slavery. According to Islamic teachings, all human beings are alike. At the time of the Prophet Muhammad, in the first half of the seventh century, industrial revolution had

not taken place and thus slavery was a means for the poor to live in shelter and have regular meals for themselves. It was a social phenomenon and not something introduced by Islam.

It was due to the age factor that slavery was not radically abolished, as this would have made people devoid of their means of livelihood. The Prophet had taken several steps to abolish slavery. Islam discourages the taking of a free person into slavery. There are several hadith in this regard, such as:

The Prophet said, 'God said, "I will be an opponent to three types of people on the Day of Resurrection. One of them is the one who sells a free person and eats his price."' (Sahih al-Bukhari, hadith no. 2270)

The Prophet said: 'There are three types of people whose prayer is not accepted by God. One of them is a man who takes into slavery a free person.' (Sunan ibn Majah, hadith no. 970)

There was great wisdom in not instantaneously abolishing slavery. Islam made the removal of slavery from society a gradual process, so that on the one hand, the society could be made free of this practice and on the other hand, in the process, the poor and would not suffer.

Let me cite an example to put this into perspective. I once met an activist in Delhi who told me how he had freed some youth and allowed them to be set free. He was accompanied by one such youth who later told me that while they had become free, there was nothing for them to earn their livelihood from. It was this social atmosphere that made slavery thrive.

When the world changed, people got employment and there was no reason for slavery to continue.

The Quran and Islam have always advocated for the freeing of slaves. This is evident from the verses below:

What will explain to you what the ascent is? It is the freeing of a slave; or the feeding in times of famine of an orphaned relative or some needy person in distress, and to be one of those who believe and urge one another to steadfastness and compassion. (Quran 90:12-17)

Quran has stated the freeing of slaves as one of the definitions of charity:

Alms are only for: the poor and the destitute, for those who collect zakat, for conciliating people's hearts, for freeing slaves, for those in debt, for spending for God's cause, and for travellers in need. It is a legal obligation enjoined by God. God is all-knowing and wise. (Quran 9:60)

What is a fatwa?

Fatwa literally means an 'opinion' and it is not legally binding. A fatwa is applicable only to the person who has asked for it, and it is he or she who can decide whether or not to accept it.

If a believer wants to know about his personal behaviour, for example, if he wants to know about his way of worship or whether his personal choices are in accordance with Islam, then he may visit an Islamic scholar and put these personal questions to him. And, that scholar may give him his opinion according to his knowledge of Islam. That is a fatwa. That is all there is to it.

Fatwa is non-binding and can only be solicited for one's personal matters. For instance, a person cannot solicit a fatwa on the outfit worn by another person such as Sania Mirza. Fatwa cannot

be solicited for another person. Doing this is unacceptable and forbidden in Islam.

The Sharia distinguishes between fatwa and qaza. The former refers to the opinion given by a mufti when someone consults him on a personal matter. Qaza, on the other hand, refers to a judicial verdict. No mufti is allowed to issue a qaza, which is the prerogative of only a state-authorized court and is binding on everyone. Qaza is given on an issue which is in the domain of a judge. In such matters a mufti is not supposed to issue fatwas on his own. In this case, either the government appoints a judge or someone gets a special sanction for issuing binding awards on the parties involved. In modern English language, qaza is equivalent to legislation.

What is the value of a mother in Islam?

A mother solely bears the burden of her child for at least two years, hence there is a special regard given to a mother. She is the most respectable family member. According to a tradition:

Abu Hurayra reported that a person came to God's Messenger and said: 'Who among the people is most deserving of a fine treatment from my hand?' The Prophet replied: 'Your mother.' He again said: 'Then who (is the next one)?' He said: 'Again, it is your mother (who deserves the best treatment from you).' He said: 'Then who (is the next one)?' He (the Prophet) said: 'Again, it is your mother.' He (again) said: 'Then who?' Thereupon the Prophet said: 'Then it is your father.' (Sahih Muslim, hadith no. 2548)

According to another tradition:

Abdullah ibn Amr said, 'A man came to the Prophet, may

God bless him and grant him peace, wanting to do jihad. The Prophet asked, 'Are your parents alive?' 'Yes,' he replied. The Prophet then said, 'Then exert yourself on their behalf.' Then your jihad would be with them' (i.e., in looking after them and being at their service). (Sahih al-Bukhari, hadith no. 3004)

The Quran instructs us to be kind to our parents and pray for them and this is looked at as among the best of deeds:

We have enjoined on man kindness to his parents: his mother bore him, in pain and in pain she gave birth to him, and his bearing and weaning takes thirty months. At length, when he reaches the age of full maturity and attains forty years, he says, 'O my Lord! Help me to be grateful for Your favours which You have bestowed upon me, and upon both my parents, and to do good deeds that will please You. Grant me righteousness in my offspring. Truly, I have turned to You and, truly, I submit to You.' We accept from such people the best of what they do and We overlook their bad deeds. They will be among the people of Paradise—this is a true promise that has been given to them. (Quran 46:15-16)

The Quran also talks about how we should treat our parents:

Your Lord has commanded that you should worship none but Him and show kindness to your parents. If either or both of them attain old age with you, say no word of contempt to them and do not rebuke them, but always speak gently to them and treat them with humility and tenderness and say, 'Lord, be merciful to them both, as they raised me up when I was little.' (Quran 17:23-24)

What is Islamic Shariah and who decides it?

Shir'ah or Shariah literally means 'method'. It is not equivalent to law or political injunction. Even when there is only one believer, he needs to follow the Shariah in his private life, way of worship, ethical behaviour and personal dealings with other fellowmen. This is Shariah and in this sense, the word 'Shariah' has no political connotation at all.

The Shariah in its present form was an innovation of the later-day Muslims; it was not revealed in the Quran. Let me share an example. The Constituent Assembly of Pakistan adopted the Objectives Resolution soon after Pakistan became an independent nation. The resolution proclaimed that the future constitution of Pakistan would not be modelled entirely on a European pattern, but on the ideology of Islam. The resolution, in its entirety, has been made part of the Constitution of Pakistan under Article 2(A), which meant that the legislation of Pakistan would be in the light of the Quran and Sunnah. The added injunction introduced in the Constitution of Pakistan was that anyone who goes astray from Islam should be killed. This was a clear innovation in religion and was not mentioned in the Quran. The Quran states about those who would turn away from the revealed religion:

Whoever of you turns back from his faith and dies as a denier of the truth will have his deeds come to nothing in this world and in the Hereafter, and he will be an inhabitant of the Fire, to abide therein forever. (Quran 22:27)

Here, it is clear that the act of going astray from Islam is a matter that lies between man and God, and God alone shall deal with such a person. A person who commits a sin has his entire life to repent for his actions. So, anyone who takes such a person's life on account

of apostasy or blasphemy commits a heinous sin, as by killing the person they also take away his opportunity for doing repentance.

It is important to understand that the Shariah is a self-managed system and an optional framework. It is to support the organized working in a Muslim society and is not to be enforced upon. This is because in Islam, an action becomes rewardable when it is done without any compulsion and under self-decision. That which is done out of compulsion or is done under an imposition from an authority is not worthy of being rewarded.

It is the role of the ulema is to clarify this and interpret the Shariah in the modern idiom. For instance, there is a verse in the Quran:

Call mankind to the Pilgrimage. They will come to you,
on foot and on every kind of lean camel. (Quran 27:22)

There is consensus among ulema that the reference in the above verse is to a mode of transportation (camel) that was used in earlier times. This mode of transportation is now no longer in use, so whatever is prevalent (cars, buses, airplanes, etc.) will be used to go for the pilgrimage. This example signifies the only role the ulema have to play is in clarifying the Quranic verses and making them understandable in today's age. The ulema do not have the responsibility to provide a political framework based on the Shariah.

What are the Islamic directives for clothing?

Islam has only one direction with regards to clothing: it prohibits nudity. An outfit which does not promote nudity is allowed. A revealing or transparent dress must be avoided. Hijab, in the sense of burqah or veil, is not prescribed in Islam; burqah is in fact a cultural phenomenon seen in Muslim society. Islam supports a simple sense of dressing. According to a verse in the Quran:

Do not flaunt your charms as they used to flaunt them in the old days of pagan ignorance. (Quran 33:33)

A kind of dressing which represents pride is also not preferred in Islam. Islam aims to make its followers modest and humble, and not to have pride in their hearts. Clothing which flaunts the social status of a person is not an Islamic type of clothing.

When the Prophet Muhammad died he left behind nine widows. Who then ordered Muslims to marry just four wives?

One of the commandments given in the Quran as a matter of social organization concerns polygamy, that is, permission for a man to marry up to four women:

If you fear that you cannot treat orphans with fairness, then you may marry such women (widowed) as seem good to you: two, three or four of them. But if you fear that you cannot do justice, marry one only. (Quran 4:3)

The background and wording of this verse appear to express a commandment that should be only temporary in effect. That is to say, it applied only to a particular state of emergency when, for example, due to a loss of men in battle, the number of women exceeded the number of available men.

All the wives of the Prophet Muhammad, except Hazrat Ayesha, were divorcees or widows. The Arab custom at that time was such that marrying in a certain tribe ensured the tribe's allegiance to the son-in-law. In case of the Prophet therefore, these marriages were a form of war management which eventually culminated in a bloodless revolution. It was a measure taken in order to manage

the potential tribal conflicts that could have emerged in the hostile environment of Arabia of that time.

What is bid‘ah in Islam?

What sort of bid‘ah can be accepted?

Bid‘ah refers to innovation in religion. According to a hadith, every innovation in the religion of Islam must be rejected:

Aisha has reported that God’s Messenger said: ‘He who innovates things in our affairs something, which does not belong to it, then it will be rejected.’ (Sahih Muslim, hadith no. 1718)

No one has the authority to change the religion of God. Cultural aspects are subject to change, but this is not the case with religious matters. Bid‘ah is to introduce in Islam a religious practice which was originally not a part of Islam.

Can a Muslim sell alcohol and other haram products?

There are two aspects to this situation. Firstly, if you are a businessman and are making these items available for sale, then you are doing so voluntarily to augment your profits. Such an approach is not advisable. Secondly, if you are a part of an organization (hospitality or aviation) where you are required to serve such items, and there is no choice, then as a worker you should follow the norm until you get a chance to change your situation.

**Is it mandatory to say *sallallah alayhi wasallam*
(may the peace and blessings of God be upon him)
after the Prophet's name?**

It is not mandatory, as your love and respect for the Prophet lies in your heart. Let me explain this through an incident which had taken place in Madinah after the demise of the Prophet Muhammad. When Abu Bakr (Prophet's closest companion and the first caliph of Islam) arrived in Madinah and saw the inconsolable state of the other Companions, he said the following:

No doubt! Whoever worshipped Muhammad, then Muhammad is dead, but whoever worshipped God, then God is alive and shall never die. (Sahih al-Bukhari, hadith no. 3667)

Abu Bakr did not use any suffix with the name of the Prophet because the respect one has in one's heart cannot be measured by the use of prefixes or suffixes. It is important to distinguish between true respect and paying lip service. Respect comes from within and does not have to become a matter of ritualistic lip service.

Can one practice polygamy in today's age?

Monogamy is the rule in Islam and polygamy only an exception. In terms of birth rate, the number of men and women in a given society is approximately equal. But often, for a variety of reasons, especially during war, the number of men in society decreases, leaving an excess of women. Now the question arises as to what the solution to this problem should be. In view of the inevitability of this imbalance, how is a healthy relationship between the two to be established? The choice for us, therefore, is not between monogamy and polygamy, but rather, between lawful polygamy or illicit

polygamy. Secondly, Islam permits polygamy on the precondition that a man be able to justly treat all the women he marries.

Which reforms are most required among the Indian Muslim community?

I have studied this issue in detail and have written about it extensively. There are two reasons for the overall backwardness of the Indian Muslims: their backwardness in education and the prevalence of the mindset of loss. By education, here, I mean secular education. There are madrasas (Islamic seminaries) in every Muslim locality, but madrasas only educate you about religion, about how to pray and so on. But to understand how to live in this world, how to live in society, requires more than madrasa education. It requires secular education, in the true sense of the word, such as what prevails in countries like Japan and Germany. This does not mean that the Indian Muslim community needs to completely give up on religious education, but that it needs to go ahead in secular education. Future religious scholars and leaders of the Indian Muslim community need to be well updated with the developing world and receive secular education today so that they can help extricate the Indian Muslim community from their current state of backwardness.

There is no discrimination against the Muslim community in today's society. The fact is that Muslims are backward in secular education, because of which they have become incompetent to thrive in the modern world. And therefore, they are unable to avail opportunities. Almost all the jobs and other opportunities are for those who are trained in modern disciplines, and especially for those who have professional education. Some Muslims have now started entering the field of secular education. They began setting up modern schools and have even started to update the traditional madrasa

curriculum. This is the correct approach, but one should make sure that these schools are not ghettoized to just one community but have admissions open to all. History is replete with examples of communities that supported and invested in education to progress and meet the modern standards of development.

Secondly, the mindset of loss is a major roadblock to the progressive Muslim mind. The granting of the minority reservation was a great disservice to the community because it fostered in them a perennial sense of loss or deprivation. Once the term 'minority' is labelled over a community, a natural sense of loss gets inculcated in their minds. It makes them feel that they have lost out on something important for their progress. This, along with lack of interaction with the outside world and the receiving of selective information over the news toxically combines into a feeling of being unwelcomed in their own domicile country. No community could progress with such a mindset. They need to realize that there is an equal opportunity for everyone in this country – from primary education to jobs – it needs to be availed through hard work.

Does Islam prohibit art and music?

Art and music are your personal choices. Islam does not interfere with this, as it is not in the domain of faith. Islam neither prescribes these as lawful nor unlawful.

If someone committed shirk, is it punishable and do we have the right to implement this punishment.

Is this what Allah desires from us?

This is entirely wrong. Nowhere in the Quran is it written in the Quran that one who does shirk (associate partners with God) should be killed or punished. This is highly baseless. This is a deviation

from the freedom that human beings have been given by God in this world. Crime is the name of a social harm – like committing murder in society. Such a crime deserves punishment, but holding a certain belief or idea is not something that invites punishment. The Quran teaches:

So exhort them: your task is only to exhort, you are not their keeper. (Quran 88:21-22)

No person is accountable to another person, he is accountable only to God. Implementing punishment in matters of thought or belief is to position oneself on the throne of the Creator.

Why is the spirit of Islam being lost in Muslims?

The degeneration that we see in present Muslims had been predicted by the Prophet. According to a hadith:

A time will come when nothing except the name of Islam will remain [among Muslims] and nothing except the words of the Quran will remain [among Muslims].
(Shuab al-Iman, al-Bayhaqi, hadith no. 1763)

This is not surprising because every community undergoes degeneration and Muslims are no exception to this principle. This degeneration does not set in in the first generation, but in the generations that follow. This is why reformers are required to suggest what work needs to be done to revive degenerated people. To regain the spirit of Islam, we need to identify the right reformers from the wrong ones.

What is the full scope of religious freedom in Islam?

Islam has total freedom. Only one thing is taboo in Islam, that is, violence. Once the Prophet was sitting in the mosque and an Arab who had not accepted Islam came to him. He said to the Prophet:

You are a condemned person. I deny you. (Musnad Abu Yala, hadith no. 53)

The Prophet simply smiled at these words. Why did he do so? Because the Prophet knew that this man has the freedom to say whatever he chooses. He was not hitting the Prophet with stones, but only expressing his ideas. If a person is peaceful, he has the right to say anything. If he does violence, then that will be considered a criminal act. Peaceful expression of thought is totally allowed in Islam. In Islam, whenever there is a negative statement, it must be made a point of discussion. Muslims often get irate on the concept of freedom of expression. But freedom is a bilateral concept, it is not unilateral—the other party enjoys as much freedom as we do. This is a very conducive concept of freedom as it allows for as much right to freedom to us as it does to the other party.

What is the mission of Islam?

The Islamic mission is tazkiya (purification) of an individual. The target is that every person should discover God, develop spiritually and be devoid of malice in his heart.

What is the best way of doing dawah work (conveying God's word to people)?

The best way is to become a well-wisher for mankind. This should be the motto of a dayee, or a person who engages in dawah. He

should be positive to the last extent, not get offended and be empty of negative thoughts for others.

I once met an ultra modern person who had studied philosophy and history. He said during conversation, “If Muhammad is removed from history, what shall be lost from history?” Apparently, it was a provocative statement but I did not get provoked. I kept thinking and increased my study. After this study, I published the book, *Islam: The Creator of Modern Age*. The book was a result of the thinking that developed in me due to the comment made by the above person. Dawah work should be done purely on the basis of the Quran and Hadith and not on the basis of communal or national sentiment.

How can people start to learn about Islam?

Islam is that which you have discovered on your own. Islam is the name of marefat or self-discovery of truth. One must discover the creation plan of God and the laws of nature. If one only follows Islam because others have told him to do so and has not questioned or discovered it himself, then his conviction would not be of the highest quality.

Please explain this Quranic verse: ‘Indeed, man shall be a witness against himself.’ (75:14)

This verse means that every human being has a conscience or an inner voice. A person desires that his conscience should justify his actions, but one’s conscience will never do such a thing. In this sense, it would be a witness against one’s deeds.

The whole life of the Prophet of Islam was based on dawah mission, but the entire Muslim world is not aware of this. What led to the shift of emphasis?

I often experienced this when I spoke to several educated Muslims and asked them why do they not do dawah work? They said that dawah work was only the Prophet's work, while their own work was to pray, fast and establish seminaries. This is wrong thinking. The Prophet had to spread his message to his contemporaries, but what will have to be done with the generations that follow? The importance of doing dawah work was almost deleted from recent Muslim history. Some focused on the revival of the Muslim community, while others on different aspects of religion. However, nobody worked for revival of dawah work.

This should raise our sense of responsibility. We should understand that we must now rigorously work for dawah, which the Muslim community has least focused on.

Often people return the Quran presented to them saying it may be a book of magic. What should be done in such a case?

People in this world have spirit of enquiry. It should be left to the choice of the receiver to read the book you present to him. You can at best tell them that they if they want they could read and that the book is not being enforced upon them. Misunderstandings should be made a point of discussion and not of offensive feeling.

How can we revive Islamic spirit among Muslims?

Muslims should be able to revive the Islamic spirit by reading the Quran in a language they would understand. I was once travelling

with a Muslim who used to carry a pocket Arabic Quran and used to keep reading it as and when he got time. He told me that he had been doing this for fourteen years. I asked him what he thought was the gist of the Quran. He said that he read the Quran for receiving reward and not to derive meaning by studying it. This is generally the case of those who read or recite the Quran. To tell Muslims that they must read the Quran so that they understand its meaning would inculcate the spirit of Islam in them.

How to keep our belief alive at all times?

The concept of iman, or faith, that people generally have is wrong. They think that the mere recitation of the kalimah (Islamic creed) gives a person iman. This is a wrong concept. Iman is another name for discovery of the truth. When you observe and study the universe, reflect on the creation and ponder over the phenomena of nature, you are led to the discovery of the Creator. This realization is really faith. This is such a significant event that it transforms your entire personality. Imagine if you are able to observe the solar system from space! This would be a very compelling scene – so many planets are orbiting around the sun – in the middle there is the tiny earth where we have our tiny houses. This will be a mind-boggling thought! Iman, or faith, is another name of discovery of the Creator and His creations. When this happens, the personality of such a person will be completely transformed. His belief will remain alive at all times as he has discovered it himself.

Dissent quickly leads to violence and terrorism.

Is dissent advantageous in religion?

The biggest shortcoming of present Muslims is that they have lost tolerance. They do not know how to engage in a peaceful

discussion on any issue. Muslims only know how to debate, if any issue emerges. Issues of difference should make way for peaceful discussion.

How should we strive to understand the undeclared meaning of the verses of the Quran?

The Quran has its own style. The Quran is not narration of history nor is it a novel. The truth is that the Quran is a book of wisdom. In the language of wisdom, some things are between the lines or undeclared. Thus you have to reflect to understand the message that lies between the lines. For example, at the time of the Battle of Uhud, seventy Companions of the Prophet were killed. The verses that were revealed afterwards, did not tell Muslims that the opponents were their enemies and that they should invoke curse on them. Instead the verse that was revealed on this occasion said:

He [God] paid you back with one sorrow after another, so that you might not grieve for what you lost. (Quran 3:153)

The wisdom behind this verse of the Quran is that after every loss, we need to adopt the attitude of re-planning instead of becoming hopeless or engaging in complaints against others.

What does Islam say about domestic violence?

According to Islam, domestic violence is a crime.

People go to perform Hajj multiple times because they can afford it. Does it mean that they will get more reward?

Performing Hajj multiple times only because you can afford it is not the right attitude. If you are a person of means, you should divert the money towards other work such as dawah. The Prophet performed only one Hajj in his lifetime.

Is conversion the purpose of Islam?

Conversion is not at all a goal of Islam; there is no point of converting others. According to Islam, religion is a matter of self-discovery. Conversion has no value.

Can prayer be offered in languages other than Arabic?

All ulema have said that salah (prayer) should be performed in Arabic. However, some scholars (such as Abu Hanifa) have given this exception for those who are yet to learn the language. So on a temporary basis they can perform salah in their own language until they learn Arabic, after which they are required to pray in Arabic. This is the practice followed in all other religions as well, that is, worship is generally performed in religious language.

How can we understand the deeper meaning of the Quran?

According to the Quran, the deeper meaning of the Quran can be understood through contemplation (tadabbur) and such reading should be done with an open mind, not with a conditioned mind. Only if a person reflects objectively, he would be able to reach the deeper meaning of the verses of the Quran.

What do you have to say about those who believe that offering prayer makes people virtuous and will take them to Paradise?

Worship has a certain form and a spirit. If you carry out the form alone, then that will not be of any value. The real value is of the spirit of worship. Once a person performed salah (prayer) in the mosque. When on completion he came to the Prophet, he said to him:

Go and read namaz again. (Sahih al-Bukhari, hadith no. 757)

The reason was that the Prophet had observed that the person had prayed without any spirit and had simply repeated the form of prayer. Today the crowds we see in mosques is a fulfilment of a prediction made by the Prophet:

A time will come when mosques will be full of people, but empty of guidance. (Shuab al-Iman, al-Bayhaqi, hadith no. 1763)

I have suffered a huge loss in my business. I feel weighed down by my condition and pray to God. Please let me know how can I find a solution in my faith.

Islamic way of finding a way out is to do introspection. I have guessed that your circumstances may have been good earlier, which made you an easy-goer, making you lose your seriousness and sincerity. This may have caused you to start wasting money. So you did not make better use of the time when you were prosperous. Now you need to re-plan and resolve not to repeat your mistake. You should take every penny you receive with gratitude and spend it with a lot of planning. No mysterious chanting of religious words

would solve your problem. All you need to do is to admit your previous mistakes, accept your losing of opportunity and re-plan to make a new beginning.

I work as a mechanic and my duty time is such that I end up missing my Asr prayer. What should I do?

I will tell you a saying of Imam Abu Hanifa which gives a very appropriate answer to this question. He was once asked, 'If I am hungry and food has been served before me, but it is also the time to pray, then what should I do?' He replied:

I will prefer being concerned about my prayers while eating than being concerned of food while praying. (Al-Arf al-Shazi, Anwar Shah Kashmiri, vol. 1, p. 344, hadith no. 353)

Similarly, if you are doing office work, it is better to remember and worry about your prayers during your work instead of worrying about your work while you are praying.

Is there any reward for the mere recitation of the Quran?

The giving of reward is entirely upon God, but mere recitation of the Quran is not the right way to seek reward. No Companion of the Prophet believed in this concept. You must either understand Arabic or read along with the translation so that you can understand the Quran, follow its teachings and become deserving of rewards.

With so many different sects in Islam today, could there be a convergence point?

This is the approach that the Companions adopted. When there is no difference amongst you and others, you must work together.

If you realize that a difference has come about between you and others, then deal with it through peaceful discussion. When there is a difference, it calls for discussion. This would help in preserving unity.

**Did the Prophet Muhammad fight only in self-defense?
What led to the Battle of Khandaq
(the Battle of the Trench)?**

All skirmishes that we see in the life of the Prophet were in self-defense. None was done as offensive action directed against others. The Battle of the Trench happened in 627 AD. When the Prophet came to know that people were coming from Makkah to attack the Muslims of Madinah, he gathered all of his Companions and asked them how to deal with the situation in a non-confrontational manner. One of them, Salman Farsi who was from Persia, said that in Iran whenever kings have to avoid a battle, they dig a trench around their area. The Prophet liked this idea and all of the Muslims together dug a trench around Madinah. Madinah was covered from three sides: on one side there were dense date palm trees and on two sides there were mountains. So only one side of the city was exposed to entry, while three sides of the city had natural obstructions. On the exposed side, the Muslims dug a trench so that the army of the opponents could not reach Madinah. When the leader of Quraysh saw the trench, he exclaimed:

By God, this is a strategy which the Arabs know not of!
(Sirah ibn Kathir, vol. 3, p. 202)

The digging of the trench was a matter of strategy. A few skirmishes did take place at the time of the Battle of Khandaq when some people from the other side tried to get over the trench, but these were only one-to-one engagements.

Should certain verses in the Quran be updated?

If the text of a book is compromised fully or partially, then the veracity of the book becomes doubtful. This was conveyed by the advocate Nani Palkhivala in the context of the Indian Constitution. He said that the Constitution had been lengthened unnecessarily by hundreds of amendments, the result of which was that in the present day no longer any sanctity is attached to the Constitution of India. In my younger days, people were very fearful of lawlessness. First of all, it was Gandhi who broke the law by Namak Satyagraha. He forgot that he was not breaking the law of salt, but the sanctity of law itself. For this reason, in Britain there is no written constitution rather laws are made only based on tradition. Similarly in the US extremely few amendments are made. The reason for this is that both the British and the American know that the Constitution signifies a sanctified code of law. If you separate sanctity from law, law is reduced to being nothing.

In India, each time there is a new government, a new bill that is passed. Palkhivala had written that the British had ruled India for two hundred years and made only 500 acts, while our governments in fifty years after Independence had made 5,000 bills! Hence no one knows how many acts and bills there are.

The Quran was given the status of a religious sanctity and its text was preserved for all eternity; had this not been the case, people would have changed the very text of the Quran.

If certain situations arise then an 'executive order' can be issued by the head of state and whatever changes are required should be implemented as executive order of the ruler, while the text of the Quran should not be altered.

For instance, Umar ibn al-Khattab during his time as caliph had issued an executive order of validating the utterance triple talaq in

one go, thus finalizing the divorce of a man who pronounces the word 'talaq' to his wife thrice in one sitting. This was a temporary ruling and did not have permanent applicability. If people knew that Umar was a caliph with the power of giving out an executive order, they would have taken his ruling in the matter of divorce as applicable only to his time. But our ulema made Umar's executive order as a part of the Shariah. This was a mistake, as Umar's directive was different from the method of divorce prescribed in the Quran. The Quran asks a man to divorce his wife by pronouncing the word 'talaq' on three separate occasions over a period of three months and not instantly in one go.

The law as has been laid down in the Quran must not be changed, although there should always remain scope for interpretation. Interpretation of law does not create problem, but if you change the text, then that would be tantamount to creating problems.

Sanctity of law is more important than the law itself. This why the entire British legal system is based on tradition, there being no written Constitution. The reason is that they are aware that sanctity is very important. If sanctity is compromised, respect for law will also be gone.

**Belief in angels is a part of the Islamic religion.
Man can discover God by observing creations,
but how can he discover angels?**

The quantum theory made inferential argument as valid as direct argument. For example, subatomic particles are not visible and can be known only through their effects. Their effects lead scientists to conclude that subatomic particles do exist. The same argument is applicable to religious matters. That is, although we do not see angels directly, we can believe in them indirectly by their effects.

How do things around us function? How does photosynthesis take place in the leaves? How does cow take in grass and make milk? How does the salty water of seas get converted into fresh water in the rain? How is everything in nature so systematic? These effects would lead to an inference that there is someone who is controlling all these natural processes. God has His angles positioned to take care of these processes. One may say that these processes are 'automatic processes' or 'self-occurring processes', but I would say these are just another name of 'angelic processes'. Someone may use the word 'automatic', I use the word 'angelic'. Thus, the concept remains the same.

What is charity and what is the Islamic concept of charity?

Charity in Islam (zakat) is the giving of alms out of one's own private means at a minimum fixed rate. This money is given in the name of God and is to be spent on worthy causes and on meeting the needs of the poor and the helpless. Charity is a reminder to a person that everything he possesses belongs to God.

A person himself plays only a very small part in obtaining whatever he owns in this world. Were he not to have the benefit of God's endless bounty, he would neither be able to grow grain, raise cattle, set up industries nor accomplish any other work of a useful nature. The system of life created for him by God, meeting as it does all of his requirements from those of his inner being to those of external environment, is one of greatest perfection. Were God to withdraw even a single one of His blessings, all of man's schemes would lie in ruins and all his efforts would be in vain. All productivity would come to a grinding halt and life itself would come to a standstill.

Charity is a way of acknowledging this fact of life. Islam desires that private wealth should be considered as belonging to God.

In so doing, no one should consider that he is conferring a great favour upon those less well-endowed than himself and should in no way be condescending to the recipients of his charity. When a man gives alms to others, he should do so in the knowledge that they have a rightful share in his wealth, for this is as God has ordained. He is doing no more than give others their due.

Everyone is required to recognize the rights of others, just as everyone is expected to sympathize with those afflicted by adversity. This feeling should be so well developed that one has no hesitancy about sharing one's possessions with others, or coming to their assistance, even when it is clear that nothing can be expected in return. Even where there are no ties of friendship, one should wish others well and guard their honour as if it were one's own. According to a hadith:

Charity (zakat) should be collected from their rich and distributed among their poor. (Sahih al-Bukhari, hadith no. 1395 and Sahih Muslim, hadith no. 19)

One unfortunate aspect of human relationships is that people tend to give to others only when they hope to gain something in return. Money, they feel, should be returned with interest. When such an understanding becomes a factor in our social organization, exploitation becomes rampant; everyone is ready to plunder everyone else. This results in society falling a prey to oppression and disorder.

Society should be so ordered that the 'haves' are able to assist the 'have-nots'. Believers have the assurance of God that if they give to others, whatever they give will be returned to them many times over in the next world; their trust in God's promise is complete. In a

society ordered in this way, feelings of antagonism and indifference are not allowed to develop: people are not bent on exploiting one another. There is never an atmosphere of mutual resentment and dissatisfaction, for everyone lives in peace with his neighbour. Such a society, in short, is a haven of contentment and well-being.

Did the Prophet Muhammad live a simple and humble life, or did he have limited means and live a poor man's life? For short, what was his wealth status?

The word used in the Quran for money is qiyam, which literally means a place to settle down. God has made wealth a means of qiyam for people, that is, it works to provide a base to people for their livelihood. We need money as a base for what we do in this world; we do not require money for luxury. Here, 'base' means that money forms a kind of material support for the purpose we have to achieve in life. For example, installation of an elevator in a house could be done as a display of wealth, or it could be done to facilitate movement of the elderly and those who may not be able to use the staircase. The former approach would be against the teaching of Islam. But the latter approach, which is to facilitate movement, shall be looked upon favourably. Everyone is allowed to earn money to acquire a base for the work they have to do in life. The quantum of wealth earned by an individual is not the concern of Islam; the individual must simply earn his livelihood honestly and spend it on utility rather than on vanities.

Once Umar ibn al-Khattab came to the Prophet's house and saw the latter lying down on a mat. The Prophet's body had marks from the substance the mat was made of. This made Umar weep, as he realized that the Prophet, being a messenger of God, was living in difficulty while his contemporary kings were leading luxurious

lives. The Prophet explained to Umar that we must be satisfied with what fulfils our need. Kings and emperors are concerned about living in luxury, but for the Prophet whatever fulfilled his need was enough. In today's age, several things have become our need, such as a phone for communication and other gadgets to get our work done. All these are classified as needs and Islam does not prohibit acquiring them.

Also, the definition of 'need' may vary. Something that may be the need of one may not be the need of another. So, there could never be a universal yardstick defining 'need'; a conscientious individual is the best judge of his needs and well understands when it becomes greed.

Does Islam support the concept of organ donation after death?

Yes, undoubtedly Islam supports donation of organs after death. This is because there is a concept in Islam, called *sadqah-e-jariyah*, which means continued charity or on-going charity – this is charity which comes to benefit people even after the person who made the donation has passed away. Other examples of this form of charity may be to open a school which continues to benefit people after one's death, or planting of a tree, the shade of which may be used by travellers in future.

Moreover, the fact that our body accepts organs from another's body is because our body has been naturally made in this way. That is, it is a natural law. If organ donation was unnatural then it would not have been possible for us to donate in the first place. If God has made our body in this way – that is, it can accept organs from others, then it means that it is part of God's will that one person should donate to another. Hence, there is no question of lawful

or unlawful when it comes to the act of organ donation. God has Himself kept the possibility in human body to accept organs from others. Therefore, those who have discovered the principle of organ donation have done an Islamic act indeed. When you add fertilizers to soil, it accepts it. This means that soil already had acceptability for fertilizers; this acceptability was not created in it by anyone external to it. It is a natural law. Similarly, the acceptability of others' organs by a particular person shows that receiving of donated organs is normal. Organ donation is thus availing of a natural opportunity and highly rewarding.

What is the concept of Judgement Day according to Islam?

According to Islam, God created man as an eternal being, but divided his lifespan into two: the worldly life and the post-death life. While the pre-death period is temporary, the post-death one is eternal. To illustrate this, let us compare human life with an iceberg. The iceberg is a huge mass of ice floating in the ocean, but only about 10 per cent of it is above the surface of water, and the rest of it is under water.

God has created a world called Paradise — an ideal world, a perfect world. According to the Quran, it is a place where man will find fulfilment of all his desires:

Therein, you shall have all that your soul desires. (Quran 41:31)

[Paradise] is a place where people shall not fear, nor shall they grieve. (Quran 2:112)

Our life on earth is just a preparation for the eternal afterlife. In this world, there are different kinds of situations and challenges.

Man is here to face those challenges and prepare himself to be a deserving candidate for Paradise. In this sense, our life on earth is a world of opportunities. Those who avail of these opportunities and prepare themselves accordingly, will be chosen and will be settled in Paradise after death.

In this life, there are all kinds of problematic and unwanted situations. But they have a purpose. They constitute a training ground that gives us a chance to cope with adversity, thus preparing us for eternal entry into Paradise. The Quran introduces Paradise thus:

God calls man to the home of peace. (Quran 10:25)

According to Islam, the present world is a place of work, while the world Hereafter is a place of reward. When one dies, life does not come to an end. One simply enters the second phase of life, that is, the world Hereafter. It is only in the present world that one can prove that one is deserving of Paradise in the world Hereafter. This opportunity ends at the time of death; after death, there is no opportunity to prepare oneself. Success and failure are both determined by one's deeds in this world, in the pre-death period.

The basic theme of the Quran is to make the reader aware of the creation plan of God, according to which the present world has been created for a limited period of time. When this time is over and this world shall be brought to an end, the Day of Judgement shall take place. According to Islamic belief, it would be a Day of Justice where the deeds of every individual – good or bad – shall be laid bare and according to the deeds in the pre-death period, their final destination shall be decreed.

Entry into Paradise is not based on any kind of recommendation, and it is not anyone's birthright. It depends totally on one's deeds

and how one uses one's God-given freedom. The Quran is very clear on this point:

Man shall have only that for which he strives. (Quran 53:39)

If a person has true faith in God, then such a faith makes him modest. His speech and his conduct reflect his living faith in God. He thinks of God constantly watching over him. Some commentators on the Quran have defined a true believer as one who believes in the unseen in the manner in which he believes what is seen. A believer lives in this world in the same state that will overcome people when they will directly see God on the Day of Judgement. A believer surrenders to God in the present world itself.

Muslims break idols and cite what had happened during the days of the Prophet – is this justified?

No, this is not at all justified. The demolishing of Bamyian statues and the propaganda to demolish the Pyramids are all examples of extremism. According to Islam, there is no one except God that you should worship but if someone else worships others, you cannot go about killing them or harming their deities. Haram (the Kabah, and Makkah and Madinah in the extended sense) is an exception and is a preserved sanctuary where any encroachment is prohibited. Thus no idols are kept in this area. But what is applicable to this area is not a general rule that can be applied elsewhere – the idols in the rest of the world do not have to be broken down. Mahmud Ghazanvi broke down the idols of the Somnath Temple, which according to me was an un-Islamic act.

At the time of the caliph Umar, Muslim rule extended to Palestine and a written treaty was signed between Umar and the rulers of Palestine. One of the clauses of the treaty read:

Christian churches will not be broken down. (Tarikh al-Tabari, vol. 3, p. 609)

This injunction is permanent and applies to all religions.

Is it Satan or us who are responsible for our sins?

According to religious belief in Islam, Satan has a role to play. A person's mind has ego and desires. Each desire is an entry point for Satan wherefrom it enters. When Satan enters one's mind, the Quran says:

When any evil suggestion from Satan touches those who fear God, they are instantly alerted and become watchful. (Quran 7:201)

The final decision rests with man and man alone is accountable for his actions. Satan cannot make a person commit sins. He can only act as a catalyst.

CHAPTER 5

PEACE: THE SUMMUM BONUM

Which clauses of the Quran do you think are the most misinterpreted ones in today's world?

The most misinterpreted aspect of the Quran is jihad. Jihad, in reality, is peaceful activism but it has been misinterpreted as violent activism. Jihad is a fact of life. What is called 'effort' or 'struggle' in English is called 'jihad' in Arabic. Jihad is not something mysterious nor is it synonymous with violence. It simply means making great efforts or striving for a particular purpose.

What do Muslims have to do to remove Islamophobia from people of other faiths?

I do not believe that 'Islamophobia' exists. The irony is that this term has not been coined by other communities – it has been so named by the Muslim community themselves. Thus, Islamophobia is simply an allegation, and not a real phenomenon.

In Islamic terms, this is a case of 'calling others by offensive nicknames', and is forbidden by the faith. Thus, first of all, Muslims must abandon using this term for others for the Quran reads:

Believers, let not some men among you ridicule others: it may be that the latter are better than the former: nor should some women laugh at others: it may be that the latter are better than the former: do not defame or be

sarcastic to each other, or call each other by [offensive] nicknames. How bad it is to earn an evil reputation after accepting the faith! Those who do not repent are evil-doers. (Quran 49:11)

The fact is contrary to what Muslims think. Why do Muslims say that the West has Islamophobia? The reason is that Muslims give a negative interpretation to an event involving Islam and the West. However, the West does not actually mean anything negative. In this case, the responsibility goes to the Muslims, and not the West. So, in reality, if there is something, it is Muslim-o-phobia. The resentment is not towards Islam but against the un-Islamic practices of Muslims. We must contemplate and become more introspective about our actions and their effect on others. If Muslims introspect and rectify their course of action, they would no longer remain a problem-community for anyone.

What should be the approach of a Muslim towards verbal attack over social and other media?

These kind of talks on social and other media are based on vested interests and political motivations. Muslims should not retaliate on any negative remarks and should instead focus on positive dissemination of ideas. They must remain peaceful and polite and take guidance from the following verse of the Quran:

Good and evil deeds are not equal. Repel evil with what is better; then you will see that one who was once your enemy has become your dearest friend. (Quran 41:34)

The true servants of the Gracious One are those who walk upon the earth with humility and when they are addressed by the ignorant ones, their response is, 'Peace'. (Quran 25:63)

Was Islam spread by the sword?

Human history has witnessed several events of expansion – political, industrial, social and religious. However, political expansion has most often been misconstrued as religious expansion. In the case of Islam, there is no proof that sword or force was used to spread the religion. There were dynasties which in order to fulfil their political ambitions conquered many lands. For instance, the Battle of Chausa was fought between the Mughal emperor Humayun and the Afghan Sher Shah Suri (1539). Both the kings were of the same faith. If the purpose of conquering lands and expanding empires was to spread Islam then there should have been no reason for these two Muslim rulers to engage in military combat. This example shows that conquests by Muslim rulers and emperors in history have been for serving political ends and to expand their dynasties. These were not religiously motivated wars and battles.

Swami Vivekananda, in the book Letters of Swami Vivekananda, wrote;

It is nonsense to say that Hindus were converted to Islam by force.

Similarly, Egypt was a large country to enter within the fold of Islam. Sir Arthur Keith, while studying the phenomenon remarked:

Egyptians were conquered not by sword but by the Quran. ('A New Theory of Human Evolution', p. 303. ed. 1948)

Let me quote an example of how deep this misconception of forceful spread of Islam has been. I happened to correspond with a person from a different faith who hailed from Hyderabad. He was quite adamant in his belief that Islam spread through violence in India and he shared the reference of a book in this regard. It was

titled, *The Indian Musalmans* by William Wilson Hunter. I read this book myself and found out that it actually talked about the peaceful penetration of Islam in India. I wrote back to him with the clipping and thereafter he did not revert.

History does not prove that sword was used for the religious expansion of Islam. Political expansion was a different case, specific to individuals and dynasties. Owing to this mistaken notion, political expansion is seen as an act of forced religious expansion. In reality, Islam spread on the basis of the ideology of tawhid (the oneness of God) and it were the Sufis who played a major role in the spread of Islam. The Sufis, as is well known, did not make any use of force; they were simply spiritual guides.

Often quoted in arguments are the wars and fights with the Byzantine and Persian Empire during the reign of the rightly guided caliphs. I have addressed this in great detail in my book, *The Prophet of Peace* (Penguin publication). Once the tribal communities started accepting Islam and pledging their allegiance to the caliphs, the then superpowers (Byzantine and Persia) felt a sense of threat and declared war on the Muslim community. In their defence, Muslims had to fight back.

In those days, the territory of the vanquished was merged with the territory of the victors. But the inhabitants of the newly merged territories were never forcefully converted to Islam. An example of this can be seen when Umar ibn al-Khattab (the second Muslim caliph) entered the city of Jerusalem. The Patriarch of the city, Sophronius, offered Umar to say his prayers in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, but Umar declined the offer. Upon being enquired, Umar said that he had declined so that later on Muslims do not claim their right on the land saying that their caliph had prayed there, and thus take away from the Christians what was rightfully theirs. In

doing so, the caliph Umar demonstrated the Islamic teachings of well-wishing, co-existence and peace for all mankind.

What is Islam's view on revenge?

Islam teaches forgiveness over revenge. According to Quranic teachings, revenge is not a solution. Revenge only increases the problem. A chapter in the Quran entitled Al-Nahl (Bees) gives practical advice on this point. It says:

If you want to retaliate, retaliate to the same degree as the injury done to you. But if you are patient, it is better to be so. (Quran 16:126)

In other words, if one has been wronged and responds with patience and forgiveness, this behaviour holds more value in the eyes of God and may even serve as atonement for one's sins. Revenge is the action of inflicting hurt or harm on someone for an injury or wrong suffered at their hands. According to Quranic teachings, there are two levels of revenge — one may be called exacting proportional revenge and the second may be described as you forget the bad experience you have received from the other.

Although revenge or retaliation is allowed as a concession to the aggrieved, there is a strict condition with this allowance — it must be equal revenge, not exceeding the others' bad action. If we reflect on this prerequisite of exacting revenge, we will realize that revenge is not an option at all. It is so difficult that no sincere person will take this option. There is no available measurement that may tell you that your retaliation was completely equal to the action you have received from the other.

So, this option is only a hypothetical option. Any sincere person will decide not to take this option, because if during retaliation he

exceeds the limit he will become an offender. The Prophet and his Companions never avenged anything. It is narrated on the authority of Hazrat Ayesha:

The Prophet never avenged for his own self. (Sahih al-Bukhari, hadith no. 6853)

Practically, there is only one option, which is forgiveness. While revenge may open a new chapter that is revenge after revenge, but forgiveness ends this chain. Forgiveness means that you have put a full stop, while revenge in this case means that you have put commas. Forgiveness in such cases is a rewardable action. Forgiveness is a highly valuable deed.

The Quran enjoins a believer to return every bad action with a good one. It says:

Good and evil deeds are not equal. Repel evil with what is better; then you will see that one who was once your enemy has become your dearest friend. (Quran 41:34)

This is the true spirit of Islam.

Why is there Islamophobia but no Hinduphobia or Buddhistphobia?

There is no such thing as 'Islamophobia' as well. This is a concept which only some Muslims have themselves innovated. There would have been Islamophobia if this term had been coined by the West describing their own attitude towards Islam. On the other hand, this term has been attributed to the West by the Muslim community. Thus, Islamophobia is an allegation, and not a real phenomenon.

It is a common observation that Muslims become emotional easily when it comes to controversial issues. This is why people have come to fear Muslims, while Hindu and Buddhist communities are

more tolerant in comparison. It is because of people's perception of Muslims as being intolerant that there is fear of Muslims, but not of people of other faiths.

If the Muslim community embraces peace, cultivates tolerance among themselves and avoids being over-sensitive on trivial issues then the so-called 'Islamophobic' perception shall also disappear.

What is wrong with Islam in the 21st century?

In my opinion there is only one problem facing present-day Muslims – that is, their self-styled concept of jihad. All other issues of intolerance and extremism have branched out from their misconceptions of jihad. The most important point for Muslims today is to know the importance of peace and to know that jihad is not needed in today's age. The command for jihad, in terms of qital (war), is suspended. If in present times, we can achieve everything we want by peaceful methods, then why engage in qital or fighting? This is the basic problem that needs to be addressed. Trying to establish Islamic Shariah by force or through coercion is also an offshoot of this wrong concept of jihad. Muslims must abandon the violent method and work peacefully for constructive goals.

What is a peaceful life?

A peaceful life can be had if one understands that ideal peace cannot be achieved in this world. You have to adhere to practical wisdom in life and not ideal wisdom. If you take the option of following practical wisdom in every situation, you will become peaceful. Peace cannot be had if you wish to deal with situations by applying the yardstick of ideal wisdom.

Furthermore, an individual's life can be peaceful only if he accepts

the principle of unilateral peace and not bilateral peace. Peace can be achieved only on a unilateral basis. If you try to demand peace on a bilateral basis, then it would become impossible.

A man was sentenced to death for ‘insulting the Prophet Muhammad’ on Facebook. What are your views on this?

It is generally held that Islam prescribes capital punishment for those who commit blasphemy, that is, using abusive language against the Prophet of Islam. But this is quite untrue. According to Islam, blasphemy is simply a misuse of freedom and not at all a cognisable offence; the blasphemer is not liable to incur any legal punishment. This kind of law has no basis in Islamic scriptures.

If someone uses abusive language against the Prophet, Muslims must take it as a case of misunderstanding, and then try to remove this misunderstanding in peaceful ways. They are required to do so by engaging in discussion or by providing the ‘blasphemer’ with Islamic literature that gives the true image of the Prophet of Islam. This notion of killing in the name of blasphemy is itself haram or forbidden.

The basis of such rulings in countries like Pakistan is religious extremism, which is the biggest hurdle Islam faces today. In fact, the reverse of prescribing death punishments has been enjoined on the believers.

As a part of His creation plan, God has granted freedom to people and no one can take away this freedom. While exercising one's freedom of expression, the only condition should be that one does not resort to violence of any kind.

We find many instances in the life of the Prophet of Islam where he did not punish people for acts which insulted or humiliated

him. Once a person approached the Prophet and addressed him as Mudhammam, which means the condemned one, while the Prophet's real name was Muhammad (the praiseworthy one). According to a tradition narrated by Abu Huraira, at this incident the Prophet said:

Does not it astonish you how God protects me from the Quraysh's abusing and cursing? They abuse Mudhammam (the condemned one) and curse Mudhammam, while I am Muhammad. (Sahih al-Bukhari, hadith no. 3533)

The Prophet took no action against the person who called him by the derogatory name of Mudhammam, similarly there are verses in the Quran about gatherings where the Makkkan people used to abuse the Prophet of Islam. For example:

They say, 'He is certainly mad.' (Quran 68:51)

They say, 'You to whom the Reminder [the Quran] has been sent down, you are surely possessed.' (Quran 15:6)

The Prophet did not react to such comments and also refrained others also from reacting. Islam provides for complete freedom of expression. This is the spirit that Islam instils in its adherents – to not react in the face of misuse of freedom of expression but to handle it gently and with prudence. As per another tradition, the caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab was once walking on the street one night and accidentally stepped over the leg of a homeless man. The man in the dark yelled out, "Are you blind?" Umar simply replied: "I am not blind, I am Umar ibn al-Khattab", and walked away.

It is important to understand that an insult (or blasphemy) is an imposed allegation; it is not claimed to be an insult by the doer of the action. A person who is accused of blasphemy simply voices his opinion, while it is Muslims who begin to address him as

'blasphemer'. This is similar to referring someone with nicknames, which is discouraged in Islam:

Do not call each other by [offensive] nicknames. (Quran 49:11)

A person never says he is committing blasphemy (called shatm in Arabic). It is Muslims who impose the allegation of blasphemy on the person, and in doing so they go against the above teaching of the Quran. The correct way should be to attempt to address the mind of the other person by healthy discussion and providing him with books on Islam. The option to kill does not exist.

How can we eliminate all terrorists from the world? Can there be an everlasting peace?

Terrorism is a phenomenon that results from the misuse of freedom by human beings. God bestowed freedom upon mankind in order to put us to the test in this world. It is the misuse of this God-given freedom which creates all kinds of problems in society. Since we cannot abolish this freedom, we cannot establish an ideal system. It is this fact due to which establishing a perfect society or system is simply not possible.

How do we cultivate tolerance when a group interprets the same Quran as peace and another as violence? Which interpretation should we then follow?

The issue of myriad interpretations is not unique to the Quran; it is a fact of life. No book, law or constitution has ever had a uniform or a single interpretation, simply because difference is an inherent part of life. For instance, the Gita, the holy book of the Hindus, pertains to wisdom and moral values. Yet along with this is the exhortation

of Krishna to Arjun, encouraging him to fight (3:30). While some derived a violent interpretation from its text, Gandhiji, on the other hand, derived his philosophy of non-violence from the same Gita.

The law of nature in the human world does not allow uniformity to prevail. It is this disparity which ensures that there is constant brainstorming leading to development. In truth, absence of difference would lead to intellectual stagnation.

The question that arises is which interpretation should a common Muslim choose to follow? A common Muslim may choose to follow any learned scholar (alim). After listening to the advice of the scholar, he is free to take a decision. A person shall be fully accountable before God for the decision he chooses to take. In other words, before God, the result of one's actions shall be based on one's intent. This is alluded to in the following hadith:

The reward of deeds depends upon the intentions. (Sahih al-Bukhari, hadith no. 1)

The above tradition means that the reward for an action is based on the intention behind the action.

Why is Islamophobia spreading outrageously in the whole world?

The term 'Islamophobia' has come to denote prejudice against, hatred towards, or fear of the religion of Islam or Muslims. In my opinion, this term is a self-styled creation of Muslims and the real fact is contrary to what Muslims think. For example, if the bereaved family members of the victims of the killings in Manchester (22 May 2017) hold complaints about Muslims or Islam, it is but natural. It is not due to Islamophobia; their complaint is in fact a reason-based complaint whereas phobia is an irrational aversion

and it develops without a reason. Therefore, it is correct to say that there is no such thing as 'Islamophobia'; it exists neither in the West nor anywhere else in the world. So, what is needed is for Muslims to reform themselves—then everything, including other peoples' negative perceptions about Muslims and Islam, will be settled. It is a two-point formula: first, Muslims must admit that this phenomenon is 'Muslim-phobia' and not 'Islamophobia' as such. Second, they must correct themselves. It is the duty of right-thinking Muslims to educate other Muslims in this regard.

Is the concept of 'religion' to be blamed for the chaos in the world?

The source of chaos in the world is not religion. Its source is misuse of freedom by human beings. God bestowed freedom upon mankind in order to put us to the test in this world. It is the misuse of this God-given freedom which creates all kinds of problems in society. Evil is not a part of creation. It is a result of misuse of freedom by man.

Would the world be more peaceful, without religion, borders, common culture and one language?

It is a mistake to believe that the world would be a more peaceful place if there were just one culture or one language, without religions and without borders. This will never happen because difference is part of nature; it has no existence in the external world.

There are two key aspects of human knowledge: humanities and physical sciences. Physical science does not have any differences, for instance, water shall always be H₂O, and every scientist will always end up with the same conclusion through different experiments. In the subject of humanities, however, there will always be differences,

as we learn from 312-page book by Dr. Alexis Carrel, wherein he has failed to find the reality of human life. That is why he titled the book, *Man, The Unknown*.

Psychological studies show that every man and women is different from one another. It can be seen that even in a family living together in the same house, following the same culture and speaking the same language, there can still be differences. Such differences are not a problem. Any difference causes discussion and it further leads to brainstorming.

What method of condemnation should be adopted by the Muslims to condemn violence?

Real condemnation is condemnation from the heart and not the condemnation done from stage as rhetoric. We must condemn violence in unequivocal terms and tell the perpetrators of such acts that their actions go against both Islam and reason, and we should not be afraid to do so. Mere stage activism is futile and would not yield any positive outcome. If Muslims disown and condemn from the bottom of their heart, then the outcome of every condemnation would be in the right direction. This is the only way Muslims around the world can condemn violence – by first condemning it in their hearts.

There can be no double standards in this regard. The conversation and discussions we engage in on public platforms should be the same as the view we express privately in our homes and believe in from our hearts.

There are groups that use the Prophet's seal and name on their flags and perpetrate violence. Can this be called as an Islamic war since it has the Prophet's seal?

Not at all. This is completely un-Islamic. Islam does not teach war, it only speaks of peace. Sometimes, an established government takes up arms in a limited sense, as a mark of defence. Full-fledged war is not allowed in Islam. The mission of Islam is to purify an individual – how is that connected to war? Islam is only peace, from the beginning to the end.

Some Muslims say, if we do not protest on small issues, even praying will become endangered. Is this right?

This is a false and baseless doubt. We need to understand the spirit of the age. There is never an obstruction to praying – if there is an obstruction, it is only to violence. As long as we understand the spirit of the age and remain peaceful, no one is going to restrict us from praying.

What was the Prophet Muhammad's policy on confrontation?

The Prophet Muhammad's policy was to avoid confrontation till the last possible extent. Confrontation takes place because people know only one aspect of the matter – that whenever there is difference, it should be eliminated. The focus of the Prophet was to accept the status quo and to discover and avail of opportunities of co-existence, instead of focusing on differences. This approach proved to be very successful.

Our world is a world of conflict and differences. And the biggest question facing us is – where to make a start so as to resolve these

differences? The answer, in the light of the above example, is to accept the status quo in controversial matters and divert your activities to the non-confrontation field. For example, the mission of the Prophet was to convey the message of tawhid (monotheism). The Kabah built by the Prophet Abraham as a centre of tawhid. But by the seventh century AD, Makkah had been converted into a centre of idol worship, with over three hundred idols being placed in the Kabah. It would apparently have been necessary for the Prophet first of all to remove these idols from the Kabah, but this kind of beginning would inevitably have resulted in confrontation between the Prophet and the idol worshippers.

So, the Prophet resorted to a practical method. He decided to ignore to presence of the idols in the Kabah and only addressed the audience gathered to worship the idols, conveying to them the message of the Quran. Because at that time there was only one meeting place in the town of Makkah where the Prophet could find an audience – the courtyard of the Kabah. Instead of confronting with the idol worshippers, the Prophet worked towards availing the opportunity of their coming together to the fullest by preaching to them the message of Islam.

Another instance from the life of the Prophet is the case of the Hudaibiyah Treaty. This agreement was signed between the Prophet and his Makkans opponents. The treaty unilaterally favoured the Makkans. But the Prophet Muhammad still signed on the agreement only to secure a ten-year no war pact. At that time, the Makkans opponents were determined to engage Muslims in fighting and to further the provocation, when the Hudaibiyah Agreement was being written, the Prophet dictated a final sign off as follows: “This is from Muhammad, the Messenger of God.” The Makkans delegate raised objections over these words. The Prophet promptly changed

the wording and ordered his scribe to write simply “Muhammad, son of Abdullah”. He did this in order to avoid any form of confrontation. The Prophet was an extremely peace-loving person and the term ‘confrontation’ was not in his dictionary. He wanted to establish peace at any cost.

A third example, is when the Prophet marched into Makkah with his followers.

A Companion of the Prophet said: “Today is a day of revenge”. At this, the Prophet replied: “No, today is a day of mercy”. (Kanz al-Ummal, hadith no. 30173)

Historians acknowledge that Makkah was conquered without any bloodshed.

Did the Prophet make any allowance to go to war?

Islam does give permission to do battle. But such permission is given only in the case of an attack by opponents in spite of the policy of avoidance being followed by the Muslims, thus creating a situation where self-defence becomes necessary. According to the teachings of Islam, war is to be waged not against the enemy but against the aggressor. If Muslims hold someone to be their enemy, that does not give them the right to attack him. The only right given to them is to convey the peaceful message of Islam to others. Islam permits defensive fighting against violent aggression, but only when all efforts at avoidance and reconciliation have failed. The Quran states:

Permission to fight is granted to those who are attacked because they have been wronged. (Quran 22:39)

At another place the Quran enjoins the believers thus:

Fight in the cause of God against those who wage war

against you but do not commit aggression. God does not love aggressors. (Quran 2:190)

A tradition narrates:

God grants to gentleness what He does not grant to harshness. (Sahih Muslim, hadith no. 2593)

In the Quran God is referred to as:

‘the Source of Peace’. (Quran 59:23)

The practical example of the Prophet Muhammad provides an incontrovertible proof of the value of this policy of avoidance and non-confrontation. He never lifted the sword in aggression or for territorial conquests. Only under extreme circumstances of defence did he allow defensive battles. Additionally, all the battles fought at that time were actually skirmishes and not wars as none of them lasted even for a day.

Is the media to be blamed for social disharmony?

The media is not on a mission to create social disharmony, it is a profit-based institution of news reporting. What we often refer to as ‘negative articles’, is nothing but an outcome of the evaluation done by the media industry to offer the news that their readers ask for. The readers seek sensational news and the media supplies it. If the media industry does not sensationalize news, their newsworthiness would decrease among the followers. Hence in order to survive in the competitive environment, they resort to this modus operandi. So, the media cannot be blamed.

In such a situation, the audience should realize that the media

should not become an influencer for them. If people develop the wisdom to not take the news appearing in the media on face value, rather they evaluate the sanctity and veracity of the report, this issue shall be resolved.

What is patriotism?

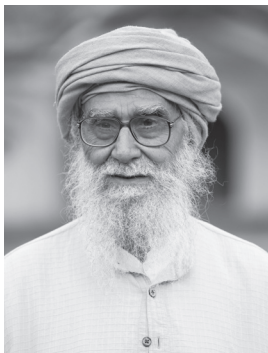
There is an example of this in the 'Oath of Allegiance' that one takes while immigrating to the United States of America or is directly applied if they are born there. The oath reads:

I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty, of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen; that I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I will bear arms on behalf of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform non-combatant service in the Armed Forces of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform work of national importance under civilian direction when required by the law; and that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; so help me God.

This oath primarily implies that the nation requires from its citizens to support the constitution, renounce allegiance to any foreign

power, defend the country and its laws from all domestic and foreign enemies and participate in the armed forces when needed by the nation.

This, according to me, aptly summarizes what allegiance and patriotism towards a nation should be. For instance, if your country recognizes Israel as a country, then out of allegiance towards your nation you also have to recognize Israel as a country. Otherwise, your allegiance will be with those nations who do not recognize Israel, which will constitute a breach of trust between you and your nation. No nation will ever tolerate this breach of trust.



Maulana Wahiduddin Khan (1925-2021), an Islamic scholar, spiritual leader, and peace activist, was internationally recognized for his seminal contributions to world peace. The Government of India posthumously honored him with the Padma Vibhushan Award in 2021 for his contributions to spirituality. Maulana authored over 200 books that delve into Islam's spiritual wisdom, the Prophet's non-violent approach, its relationship with modernity, and other contemporary issues. His English translation of the Quran and Quran Commentary are widely appreciated for their simplicity, clarity, and ease of understanding. In 2001, he founded the Centre for Peace and Spirituality International to promote a culture of peace and convey the spiritual message of Islam at a global level.

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