



Islam and **Extremism**

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FAITH AND FRAGMENTATION

In the weekly Inkishaaf (Jhansi, 21 December 1983), an article was published that describes a person's experience, reflects the declining condition of present-day Muslims and its consequences. The writer of the article narrates:

This is a Sunni Mosque.

This is a Shia Mosque.

This is an Ahl-e-Hadith Mosque.

This is a Barelvi Mosque.

This is a Deobandi Mosque.

This mosque belongs to the Bastiyan group.

This mosque belongs to the Mansuriyan group.

Reciting salam is not allowed in this mosque.

The Tablighi Jamaat cannot stay in this mosque.

He then says: I practice Islam because I am inspired by the teachings of the Quran, not by observing Muslims. Now, someone tell me which mosque I am supposed to go to for prayer.

This brief account presents a small but telling picture of the condition of Muslims in the present age. Everywhere, Muslims are caught up in false slogans, and on the basis of self-made issues, they have divided the one religion of God into many sects.

If a man tears his clothes into 72 pieces, people will call him mad. But those who have divided the religion of God into 72 fragments are more than mad—they are guilty. Such people will not receive a reward for their religiosity; rather, there is a grave concern that they will be held to account in the Hereafter for distorting the faith.

The condition of Muslims in the present age is an exact illustration of the verse in the Quran about the People of the Book:

They divided themselves into factions, each rejoicing in what they had (23:53).

(Al-Risala, May 1984)

WHAT IS EXTREMISM (GHULU)

The literal meaning of ghulu is extremism, that is, going beyond the required limit in a religious command. How does this mindset of exceeding limits arise? In reality, it is the result of a shift of emphasis, meaning giving more emphasis to something than it actually deserves. For example, in Islam, politics has only a secondary or additional place. But to exaggerate it to the extent that the entire religion is interpreted and explained solely on the basis of politics is to exceed the limit, and this excess is called in Islam ghulu.

While discussing this topic, someone remarked, “You put so much stress on making people aware of God’s message and related matters. Doesn’t this also come under extremism?” I replied, “Not at all. Making people aware of God’s message is the most important practice of the Prophet. In fact, the mission of all prophets, including the Prophet of Islam, was precisely this. But in the present age, Muslims have begun to see the rest

of humanity as rivals or opponents. As a result, the motivation to carry out this prophetic mission has faded among them. That is why we place strong emphasis on reviving this Prophetic practice. This should be called emphasis, not a shift of emphasis.

Extremism never arises in the core of religion. Whenever it appears, it does so in the outward aspects of religion. At the core of religion, strong emphasis is always required. In fact, this intensity of expression is the Quranic style, and the same style is found in the Hadith as well.

The benefit of this intensity of expression at the core of religion is that it brings the spirit of religion to life within a person, and when the spirit of religion comes alive, all aspects of religion automatically come alive. In matters related to the spirit of religion, the method of intensity is the appropriate method. However, in the outward aspects of religion, rather than intensity, a method of gentleness should be adopted. Understanding this distinction is what is called the wisdom of religion. (*Al-Risala*, December 2014)

RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM

What is religious extremism? Religious extremism is, in fact, a sign of decline. When a community enters a later stage of degeneration, this tendency, known as religious extremism, begins to emerge among them. Decline operates according to a law of nature, and no community is exempt from this process.

In the present age, the Muslim community is going through a period of decline, and, like other signs of decline, religious extremism has appeared among them. The term used in the Quran and the Hadith for religious extremism is *ghulu*. When decline sets in among the later generations of a community, a natural law comes into effect: the spirit of religion fades away from its members, and only its outward form remains. Religious extremism is, in reality, another name for a religion that is reduced to form alone.

When a community enters a period of decline, religion often turns into what may be called a form-

based religion—that is, a religion concerned mainly with outward forms rather than inner spirit. As a result, outward appearances begin to be treated as important in every religious matter. At such a time, all importance is given to the correct pronunciation of the Quran’s words, while reflecting on their meaning is neglected. In matters of worship, the performance of rituals is taken as everything instead of inner humility and reverence before God. In matters of religious commandments, the entire discussion becomes focused on their technical aspects. The meaning of Islamic life comes to be reduced to adopting an external identity. ‘Islamic Outreach’ is reinterpreted as a struggle to dismantle and seize political power. The meaning of Islamic rule comes to be understood as forcibly imposing legal punishments on people. The meaning of Islamic interest comes to be understood as declaring all nations enemies of Islam and stirring up hatred and violence against them, and so on.

When a community enters a period of decline, its condition is like falling from a tall palm tree and getting stuck on a date palm below. At such a time, the community becomes like any ordinary nation, concerned mainly with material matters. However, because of its historical traditions, it is unable to completely break away from its religion. Religion

becomes for it a matter of inherited tradition. It becomes its national identity. The history of religion becomes a source of pride for it. Its institutions and activities—all of them—are established in the name of religion. Religion no longer remains religion alone; instead, it becomes the sole symbol of the community's worldly status.

When a community reaches this stage, a phenomenon known as religious extremism begins to spread within it. At such a time, this extremism does not appear in the spirit of religion but in its outward forms. Religion then comes to be expressed mainly in matters related to worldly or material concerns.

The question we must ask is: how can reform take place? In a declining community, reform must begin with individuals, not with collective action. If a collective institution, a government, or an organization is established in such a community, every such effort will ultimately fail. This is because the members of any collective institution formed in a declining community will themselves be in decline. For this reason, although, such a collective institution may look like a genuine institution because of its buildings and outward show, but in reality, it will be nothing more than a splendid graveyard—nothing beyond that. (*Al-Risala*, November 2014)

MISREADING DISBELIEF

There is a verse in the Quran that says: “Those who do not judge by what God has sent down are deniers of the truth.” (5:44)

Similarly, some hadiths contain warnings in which certain actions are described as “disbelief.” For example, a narration in *Sahih al-Bukhari* reports that the Prophet of Islam said: Abusing a Muslim is sinful conduct, and fighting him is an act of unbelief (*Sahih al-Bukhari*, Hadith No. 47).

At first glance, such texts may appear to suggest that any deviation from divine law immediately expels a person from the fold of Islam.

On the basis of these verses and hadiths, some individuals declare other Muslims to be disbelievers if, in their view, they are not acting in accordance with what God has revealed. Under this interpretation, they label many Muslim rulers as apostates and disbelievers, and even consider their killing to be permissible.

This line of thinking is a serious deviation. It has revived, in a more intense form, the phenomenon of Kharijism in the Muslim world. As a result, not only are Muslims

killing fellow Muslims, but the image of Islam itself is being distorted into that of a religion that promotes violence and bloodshed.

The correct interpretation of these verses and hadiths is the one given by Abdullah ibn Abbas, the great scholar of the Ummah and a leading authority in Quranic interpretation. He explained that this does not refer to the kind of *kufr* (disbelief, turning away from a recognized truth) that takes a person out of Islam. Rather, it refers to “*kufr duna kufr*” (a lesser form of disbelief) (*Sunan al-Tirmidhi*, Hadith No. 2635)—that is, a level of disbelief that does not take one out of Islam.

Such words as used in the Quran and Hadith in this context are intended for moral exhortation (spiritual warning) rather than as strict legal terms. They do not mean that a Muslim who commits such an act is automatically cast out of Islam. They reflect a particular style of expression. In fact, these expressions are meant as strong admonitions, not as legal rulings. This kind of forceful language is commonly used in exhortation—sometimes gently and sometimes sternly. It reflects the difference between legal language and advisory language, not a legal distinction between belief and disbelief, but a difference in the style of moral advice.

Advice is sometimes given in soft words and sometimes in strong words. The examples mentioned above belong to this second category, in which strong language is used for moral correction and awakening, not for issuing legal judgments. (*Al-Risala*, September 1996)

UNNECESSARY DEBATES

A hadith reports: “The Prophet of Islam forbade engaging in *ghalutat*” (*Musnad Ahmad*, Hadith No. 23687). *Ghalutat* refers to hypothetical or speculative issues that are formulated without any actual occurrence. In another hadith, the Prophet ﷺ said: “God dislikes for you three things: idle talk (*qil wa qal*), wasting wealth, and asking too many questions” (*Sahih al-Bukhari*, Hadith No. 1477).

This teaching is full of wisdom. If this attitude does not remain among people, they will turn everything into a subject of debate and measure everything by the yardstick of dry rationalism. The result is that the real spirit of religion is lost, leaving nothing but verbal arguments over meaningless issues. God’s simple religion, after human additions, becomes a difficult and complicated system. The true spirit of religion lies in meaningful living, not in endless debate.

Consider an example. Once, someone asked a man, “Are you a Muslim?” He replied, “I am a believer, if God

wills.” There was nothing to debate in this statement. But later, Muslim jurists (*fuqaha*) unnecessarily turned it into a subject of discussion. A debate began over whether such a reply was permissible or not. One group said it was permissible, because being a believer ultimately depends on God’s will. Another group said it was not permissible, because it suggests doubt about one’s faith.

Followers of the *Shafi‘i* school of *fiqh* held that saying “I am a believer, if God wills” is permissible. By contrast, followers of the *Hanafi* school of *fiqh* held that it is impermissible. As this debate intensified, a further question arose: would marriage between such people be valid or not? One group held that a Hanafi woman’s marriage to a Shafi‘i man would not be valid because he is considered to be in doubt about his faith. Others issued a ruling—by analogy with a protected non-Muslim woman—that the marriage would be valid (*Irshad al-Naqqad* by al-San‘ani, p. 21).

From this, one can see that once people fall into unnecessary debates, the path of the straight path is easily lost. (*Al-Risala*, January 1983)

THE COST OF EXTREMISM

A hadith reports that the Prophet of Islam ﷺ said: “Do not be hard upon yourselves, lest the matter be made severe upon you. Verily, if people are hard upon themselves, God will be hard upon them. Their remnants are in the monasteries and abbeys.” (*Sunan Abi Dawud*, Hadith No. 4904) That is, do not make religion unnecessarily hard for yourselves, or hardship will be imposed on you. When a community makes things hard for itself, by the law of nature, everything becomes hard for it.

In this hadith, harshness does not refer only to religious extremism or excessive monasticism in a limited sense. Rather, it applies to all matters of human life. Any matter in which the path of balance is abandoned, and the path of excess is adopted falls under the warning of this hadith.

Religious extremism means declaring others disbelievers or sinners over minor differences. Ritual extremism means building separate mosques on the

basis of secondary jurisprudential differences and taking this division to the level of disunity within the community. Practical extremism means treating concessions as inferior and turning every matter into a question of strict obligation.

An extremist lives only within himself. He recognizes only his own impulses. As a result, his condition becomes like that of a person who assumes the road is empty and drives his vehicle recklessly. Such a person can never reach the destination. In this world, the secret of success lies in moderation, not extremism. Extremism is, in reality, an attempt to live against God's creative plan, while moderation is to build one's life in harmony with God's creative plan. Extremism, in relation to oneself, is contrary to humility, as it makes a person intentionally arrogant; and in relation to others, it is contrary to kindness and respect for human dignity. Both of these are undoubtedly not desired in Islam.

Extremism is not favoured by God. Those who adopt an extremist approach eventually turn that rigid method into part of their tradition and make it a component of their religion. As a result, later generations feel compelled to follow it because abandoning it makes them feel they are practicing a lower standard of religiosity.

This extremism is not limited to monasticism; rather, it applies to every religious sphere. For example, there

are two possible methods for struggling for national or political rights: peaceful struggle and violent struggle. The correct method is to pursue one's goals through peaceful, non-extreme means. If, instead, an extreme, violent approach is adopted, it leads to two harms at the same time. First, the community has to endure unnecessary suffering. Second, once an extremist method becomes established as a tradition, it begins to be seen as the highest standard of struggle. Even when it proves ineffective, people continue with it because abandoning it makes them feel they have given up the religiously required standard. They feel they have chosen concession over resolve and retreat over action.

One form of this extremism is what is called extremism itself. Extremism means planning one's actions while ignoring realities and possibilities. It means allowing emotions to guide one's path instead of reason, choosing haste over foresight, and preferring sudden leaps over gradual progress.

Such a person puts enthusiasm ahead of foresight and leaves wisdom behind. He forgets that everything has its limits, whether an individual or a group. Ignoring limits is like someone testing the heat of burning embers by holding them in his hand, or trying to break a stone by using his head as a hammer. Every such act is a crossing of limits, and those who cross limits can never succeed in this world. (*Al-Risala*, February 2003)

AN UNFORGIVABLE ERROR

A hadith reports that once, during a journey, a companion of the Prophet suffered a head injury. While he was still badly wounded, he needed to perform ghusl, a full ritual bath required in certain religious situations, the next morning. Pouring water over his head was extremely dangerous. He asked his fellow Muslims about the ruling, but they told him that since water was available, there was no allowance for him to avoid it. Seeing no other option, the wounded man performed the ritual bath in that condition. As a result, his condition worsened, and he died. When the Messenger of God ﷺ was informed of this incident, he was deeply distressed. He said very strongly, “They caused his death—may God deal with them accordingly.” (*Sunan Abi Dawud*, Hadith No. 336)

This issue was clearly a matter of ijtiḥād. Even so, the Prophet ﷺ used such severe words about them. This shows that there is a limit to excusing mistakes made in ijtiḥād. Under normal circumstances, an error in ijtiḥād is not held against a person. But when the matter is extremely serious—when it involves

a question of life and death—one should refrain from giving a personal juristic opinion. At such a time, offering a religious opinion (*fatwa*) lacking consideration for the individual and insisting upon it is a sign of insensitivity, and insensitivity indicates that the spirit of faith has weakened.

The above *hadith* relates to an *ijtihadi* error, the harm of which appeared at the individual level. The matter becomes even more serious when a community leader insists on an *ijtihadi* opinion that results in the collective destruction for the community.

For example, if a religious scholar gives an incorrect ruling on whether a person should face the *qiblah* (the direction of prayer) during ritual bathing, there is no risk to anyone's life or property. But if a severely injured person is wrongly told that he must perform a full ritual bath for purification, such a ruling can put his life in danger. Therefore, mistakes in these two kinds of matters cannot be treated in the same way.

The first type of issue is one in which even an error in independent judgment may earn a person a reward because of good intention. But in the second type of issue, making such an error is an unforgivable fault. In sensitive matters that affect the fate of individuals or entire communities, a religious scholar should remain silent until the very end. If he does speak, he should do so only when he is truly confident that, before God, he is free of responsibility—that is, that his guidance will cause no harm to anyone. (*Al-Risala*, September 1983)

USELESS TALK

A man once wrote a letter to Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi (1863–1943), a leading Sunni Muslim scholar of the Indian subcontinent whose influence continues to this day. He asked about the wisdom behind a particular religious commandment. Maulana Thanvi replied: What is the wisdom in asking about wisdom? You ask us about the wisdom behind God’s commands, while we ask you about the wisdom behind your own unproductive activism.

Many people have a habit of asking questions that are not really needed. They lack the ability to examine themselves and reflect on their own responsibilities. Instead, they take great interest in finding faults in external matters and probing the reasoning behind them. Such an approach is not encouraged in Islam because it moves away from purposeful living. Those who develop such a mental attitude can never succeed in finding the truth.

When it comes to earning a living or building a house,

every person thinks only of himself. Everyone is most concerned that his income be good and his house well built. But when it comes to religion and the Hereafter, people prefer to debate issues that have nothing to do with their own lives.

A senior scholar who spent thirty years issuing religious opinions (*fatwa*) at a major institution once said that during all those years, most of the questions brought to them were about others, and very few were about the questioner himself. People would ask: How much share do I have in so-and-so's property? Is it permissible to pray behind such-and-such a person? Many such questions came to them. But almost no one asked about his own religious responsibilities—how he should fulfill the rights of those under his care, how he should behave with his neighbours, how he should deal with people during times of disagreement or complaint, whether it was right for him to trouble someone he was harassing, whether he should withhold money that belonged to someone else, or whether it was right for him to insult a person he was humiliating.

A person remains occupied with others, whereas he should be occupied with himself. He lives in external issues, whereas he should be concerned with his inner issues. He judges the faith of others, whereas

he should seek a standard by which to judge his own faith. Everyone notices a wild animal running outside, but no one notices the wild animal of hatred and revenge that has settled in one's own mind. Everyone can see what happens outside the place of worship or observe the worship of others, but no one notices what happens within a person's own worship. (*Al-Risala*, March 1981)

FATWA ACTIVISM OR EDUCATIONAL ACTIVISM

In recent times, various forms of activism have come into prominence—for example, political activism, social activism, community activism, and media activism. One such form is known as judicial activism. By this is meant approaching the courts in matters of public interest and seeking judicial intervention in order to achieve objectives related to the common good through legal means. This method is commonly found among secular groups. Whether this approach is right or wrong is not the subject of discussion here.

Some religious circles among Muslims have, for some time now, adopted a method that may be described as fatwa-based activism. With the stated aim of reforming Muslims, they have begun to use the fatwa as a means of activism. For example, they issue fatwas declaring certain forms of dress to be un-Islamic; they declare certain beverages to be un-Islamic and pronounce them forbidden; they issue rulings prohibiting women

from visiting certain religious places; they declare individuals guilty of insulting the Prophet ﷺ and issue fatwas calling for their killing; they label certain authors as controversial and issue fatwas advising people not to read their books; they declare individuals as apostates and issue fatwas calling for their social boycott; they pronounce television and similar modern means to be forbidden and issue rulings urging people to avoid them; they declare banking and other new developments to be un-Islamic and issue *fatwa's* calling for their non-use; and so on.

Thousands of such fatwas have been issued in the modern era, yet all of them have proved ineffective. The outcome of every such fatwa has been the same: it failed to produce the desired result. Throughout the entire modern period, I know of only one instance in which a mufti, despite receiving a request for a ruling, refused to issue a fatwa.

In my view, this was the correct approach. During the British period, there was a scholar in Delhi named Maulana Abdul Haq Haqqani (d. 1831). He wrote a Quranic commentary that became known as *Tafsir Haqqani*. At that time, the British government introduced paper currency in place of gold and silver coins. From a traditional religious perspective, these paper notes, at first glance, appeared un-Islamic.

Maulana Abdul Haq Haqqani was asked for a fatwa on whether the use of paper currency was permissible or impermissible from an Islamic point of view. He did not issue any fatwa in response to this query. He simply said that his fatwa would not work, whereas the currency notes would. In such matters, this is the correct Islamic approach.

The literal meaning of the word fatwa is opinion. There are two forms of fatwa. One is when a person asks about his own situation, stating that he is facing a particular issue and asking what he should do. For example, a female athlete may ask about her dress and seek guidance on what kind of dress she should wear during sports from an Islamic perspective. In such a case, issuing a fatwa is appropriate. This is when the person seeking the fatwa intends to follow the ruling personally. In such circumstances, the mufti should respond. This is the proper use of a fatwa and its correct place.

The second form arises when a social evil exists in society, yet society itself raises no question about it. An individual, on his own initiative, raises a question about this social issue and asks a mufti for a *fatwa*. If the mufti issues a fatwa in such a case, he misuses the institution of *fatwa*. Such a *fatwa* will not bring about any positive reform; instead, it will become a cause of disrepute for Islam.

For example, there are many social evils against which muftis have issued *fatwas* in the present age. Yet, in the words of Maulana Abdul Haq Haqqani, the result has been that their fatwas did not work, while the evils continued as before. For instance, fatwas against innovations, polytheistic customs, dowry in marriages, television and cinema, loudspeakers, bank interest, not keeping a beard, Western dress, and English education. As is well known, all these fatwas remained without result and had no effect on society.

According to my study, the correct position is that only the person directly concerned has the right to seek a *fatwa* regarding his own case, and only in such matters should a mufti issue a fatwa. For example, if someone asks a mufti whether congregational prayer is valid behind an imam of a particular mosque whose beard is short, such a query is a source of discord rather than a genuine request for guidance. A mufti should not respond to such a query. Seeking a *fatwa* concerns the personal matter of the questioner, not matters concerning others beyond his own person.

Now the question arises: what is Islam's method for general or social reform? This method is the method of reminder and counsel, not the method of issuing *fatwas*. That is, explaining matters to people through writing and speech. This effort should be carried out

in the language of *qawl baligh*—that is, language and reasoning that penetrate the listener’s heart, to the point that he acknowledges its truth.

This method of counsel and reminder may, in today’s terminology, be called educational activism. That is, reforming people through education and training and striving to change their mindset. It would be correct to say that Islam’s principle regarding social reform is based on educational activism, not on *fatwa* activism.

In this regard, a guiding example is found in *Sahih al-Bukhari*. Aisha relates that in the early period of Islam, the Quranic verses that were revealed spoke mainly about Paradise and Hell. This was done so that a sense of receptivity could develop in people’s hearts toward Islam and so that psychological readiness might be created within them. When this readiness had taken shape, the Quran then revealed commands such as abandoning adultery and giving up intoxicants. Had such commands been revealed at the very beginning, people would not have accepted them. Instead, they would have resisted and refused to change their habitual ways. (*Sahih al-Bukhari*, Hadith No. 4993)

This shows that the work of general reform is not accomplished by issuing fatwas or commands. Rather, the first step is to cultivate within people the capacity for acceptance. Only after that are commands given.

Issuing commands without first cultivating this capacity does not solve the problem at any level.

Whenever corruption appears in a society, its cause is not that people are unaware of commands or laws and therefore fall into wrongdoing. The reality is that social corruption results from a lack of inner spirit among people, not from ignorance of commands and laws.

In such a situation, the starting point of social reform is not to issue fatwas based on legal rulings. Rather, the starting point is to awaken people's inner spirit, revive awareness within them, and cultivate in them the capacity for acceptance. When this has been achieved to a significant extent, the time comes to inform people about issues in the language of commands and laws. Announcing external commands before creating internal capacity is a wrong order. It is like putting the cart before the horse, which is clearly unworkable.

Whether it is fatwa activism or any other form of activism, there is only one way to assess it, and that is by examining the results it produces in practice. The only measure of the correctness of an action is its outcome. It is an established principle that action should always be result-oriented, and *fatwa* activism is certainly not an exception to this general principle. (*Al-Risala*, September 2006)

THE ISSUE OF FATWA APPLICATION

In the state of Jammu and Kashmir, clashes frequently occur between the army and militant groups. In such situations, militants have been known to seek shelter in religious buildings and operate from within them. As a result, firing takes place from both sides, and the religious buildings naturally suffer damage. This situation has been ongoing for a long time in the Valley, affecting madrasas, mosques, shrines, and similar places.

In view of this situation, the Indian Army has long been running a campaign in Kashmir known as the “*Sadbhavana Operation*.” They receive funding from the Government of India. With this funding, they repair damage to *mosques*, *madrasas*, and *khanqahs* and try to restore them. This work has been ongoing in Kashmir for many years.

In June 2007, a conference of religious scholars was held in the Rajouri Kadal area of Srinagar. About 350

religious leaders of Kashmiri Muslims participated in the conference. There, in the form of a fatwa or statement, they unanimously passed a resolution. It stated that getting a mosque repaired by non-Muslims is forbidden in Islam. Therefore, this work under the “*Sadbhavana Operation*” amounts to interference in religion, and the Government of India should immediately stop it.

This *fatwa* or statement is completely baseless. It is an attempt to use Islam for political purposes and has no connection to Islamic teachings. In Islamic history, and in India itself, mosques have repeatedly been built or repaired with the cooperation of non-Muslims, yet scholars have never described this as wrong.

The greatest example in this matter is the *Kabah* itself, which may be regarded as the representative of all mosques. As is well known, the *Kabah*, or the House of God, was built in Makkah four thousand years ago by Prophet Abraham. The Prophet of Islam ﷺ was born in 570 CE. At that time, the structure of the *Kabah* there was according to the Abrahamic construction.

History shows that before the mission of the Prophet of Islam ﷺ, the Abrahamic structure of the *Kabah* collapsed due to rain. At that time, the people of Makkah rebuilt the *Kabah*. These people were not believers; they were idol worshippers. Thus, at the

time of the Prophet's mission, the *Kabah* in Makkah had been built by polytheists. Yet the Prophet of Islam ﷺ never objected to it. Even in the eighth year after the Hijrah, when Makkah was conquered and full authority came into his hands, the Prophet did not demolish the *Kabah* built by the polytheists and rebuild it through the believers.

History further tells us that at the time of the conquest of Makkah, the covering placed over the *Kabah* had also been made by the polytheists, using the wealth of idol worshippers. Yet despite the conquest of Makkah, the Prophet of Islam ﷺ did not replace this old covering. Later, due to a woman's mistake, the covering caught fire. Only then did he have a new covering prepared and placed over it. Thus, the covering was changed only when this change became an unavoidable necessity.

There are many such incidents in history that clearly show that seeking the cooperation of non-Muslims in a *mosque* or *madrassa* is entirely permissible. There is nothing objectionable about it. Calling such an act interference in religion is completely wrong; rather, it is mischief, because it can unnecessarily damage relations between Muslims and non-Muslims.

The building of a mosque or a *madrassa* is not the worship performed in the mosque or the religious

education obtained in the madrasa; it is only their outward structure. A mosque is essentially a place of worship, and a madrasa is essentially a place of religious education. Fatwas or statements of this kind about outward structures seriously harm the spirit of Islam. They shift the emphasis unnecessarily to the structure, whereas the correct approach is to emphasize worship and education. The real focus should be on better worship and better education. Speaking in this way about structures distorts people's thinking, and distorting the mind is regarded as a serious wrongdoing in Islam.

Why has such a negative mindset developed among Muslims? There is one primary reason: Muslims have lost the temperament required to convey God's message in the present age. Other communities are no longer seen as people to be informed of this message; instead, they are seen as rivals and competitors. This change in outlook has led to the undesirable outcomes mentioned above.

For a Muslim, the correct religious temperament is what may be called a *dawah*-oriented temperament. In contrast, the prevailing temperament among Muslims today is a communal or national temperament, not a *dawah*-oriented one. *Dawah* means conveying to other human beings the eternal message of mercy from

their Creator. Such a mission naturally makes the caller sympathetic and well-wishing toward others. It generates feelings of love for fellow human beings and makes a person gentle and compassionate in dealing with them. A communal or national temperament, on the other hand, produces the opposite kind of attitude. A communal or national temperament creates a sense of rivalry toward others. Such a temperament is always shaped by material interests. In this mindset, there is room for complaints against others, not for sympathy or goodwill toward them. Today, this communal temperament has generally come to dominate among Muslims. This is why they have developed a negative psychological attitude toward others. This negative mindset is the real root cause of all their problems. (*Al-Risala*, October 2007)

PRESERVATION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE

Cultural heritage is another name for what is commonly called a historical monument. From a local perspective, it is cultural heritage, and from a universal perspective, it is a historical monument. The importance of cultural heritage or historical monuments in the Islamic tradition is the same as that recognized in other traditions or disciplines.

The preservation of cultural heritage is one of those general human concerns in which there is no difference between the secular and Islamic points of view. According to Islam as well, it is undoubtedly something worthy of preservation. If the record of the past is not preserved, a reliable source of knowledge for future generations will be lost. This would be a historical loss that cannot be compensated for by any other means.

Islam is a religion of nature. Everything that is worthy of consideration according to nature and reason will

also be worthy of consideration in Islam. The natural requirement of something is itself proof that it is also a requirement of Islam.

An important and well-established principle in Islamic law is this: “The basic rule regarding things is permissibility” (*al-Mabsut* by al-Sarakhsi, Vol. 24, p. 77). In light of this legal principle, preserving cultural heritage is certainly a permissible act in Islam. The fact is that nowhere in the Quran or the Sunnah is there any command prohibiting the preservation of cultural heritage. When no such prohibition exists in the *Quran* and *Sunnah*, preserving cultural heritage is, by itself, deemed permissible. No further proof is required to establish its legitimacy.

Moreover, a study of the Quran shows that there are references which directly point to the importance of cultural heritage and serve as positive evidence in support of its significance. Here are a few relevant references from Islamic sources in this connection.

1. One Quranic verse related to this matter is as follows. God says: “Bring me a Book revealed before this or some other vestige of knowledge” (46:4). In this verse, the phrase *atharatin min ‘ilm* (some remnant of knowledge) means a remnant of knowledge. I understand this to refer to what is today called the archaeological record or historical record.

Such records are an extremely important source of knowledge for understanding events of the past. In this situation, preserving this record of the past becomes essential—both from an academic point of view and from an Islamic point of view.

2. A practical example of preserving cultural or historical records is found in the Quran in connection with Pharaoh. The Quran states that when Pharaoh, who was a contemporary of Moses, drowned and died, God said to him: “We shall save your body this day, so that you may serve as a sign for those who come after you: for many people are indeed heedless of Our signs.” (10:92)

This verse clearly shows the significance of preserving historical remains so that later generations may learn from them.

As is known, the body of this Pharaoh was mummified after death according to Egyptian custom and placed in a pyramid. This mummified heritage of Egyptian culture was preserved under God’s plan until it was taken out from an Egyptian pyramid in the late nineteenth century. Using the modern method of carbon dating, it was established that this was the same Pharaoh who drowned during the time of Moses. This preserved body of Pharaoh is still kept in the Cairo

Museum today as evidence of the Quranic verse mentioned above.

As is known, Pharaoh was a polytheist king. Despite this, God willed that his body be preserved. This shows that not only ordinary elements of cultural history, but even the body of a polytheist king, can be preserved. On this basis, it would be correct to say that preserving the two-thousand-year-old Buddha statues in Bamiyan is as desirable in Islam as it is in other traditions or disciplines.

3. In the context of the history of the Children of Israel, the Quran states that they possessed a hereditary Ark (a chest) that was preserved from generation to generation as a source of reassurance for them. In this Ark, relics belonging to the families of Moses and Aaron were preserved. In other words, this was exactly what is called cultural heritage in modern times. The Quran shows that this hereditary Ark was considered so important that, on one occasion, angels carried it from one place to another (2:248).

I believe this is a clear example in the Quran of preserving cultural heritage. It underscores both the importance of cultural heritage and the fact that preserving it across generations is not against divine law.

4. The Quran describes one quality of the believer as *al-sai'h* (9:112), meaning travelling across the earth and, by seeing the remains and dwellings left behind by earlier nations, taking lessons from them (28:58). Repeatedly, the Quran states: Say, "Travel about the land and see what was the end of the deniers." (6:11)

Accordingly, Islam requires that historical remains be preserved in their original form so that those who see them may learn lessons from them. If historical remains are not preserved, the educational objective of Islamic travel will be lost.

5. Culture is always the heritage of a group or a community. Every community has the absolute right to protect its culture. In matters of culture, it will not be judged whether it is in accordance with Islam or against it. Whenever a community regards something as its culture and wishes to preserve it, this right will be granted to it. Just as this right is recognized in secularism, it is equally recognized in Islam.

An example of this can be seen during the caliphate of the second caliph, 'Umar al-Faruq. When Jerusalem (*Aelia*) was conquered, 'Umar himself traveled from Madinah to Jerusalem. At that time, the agreement concluded between the Islamic Caliphate and the Christian

community included, among other provisions, a clause stipulating that the items present in Christian churches would be preserved—such as the statues of Mary and Christ and the sacred wood on which, according to Christian belief, Jesus was crucified:

“This is the assurance of safety granted by the servant of God, Umar son of al-Khattab, the leader of the believers, to the people of Aelia. He grants them security for their lives and their property, for their churches and their crosses, for the sick among them and the healthy, and for all those who follow their faith. Their churches shall not be inhabited by others, nor shall they be destroyed. Nothing shall be diminished from them, from their premises, from their crosses, or from any of their possessions. They shall not be compelled in matters of their religion, nor shall any one of them be harmed.” (*Tarikh al-Tabari*, Vol. 3, p. 609)

These things were part of Christian culture, yet the agreement stated that the Christian community would have the right to ensure that their churches would not be demolished and that no harm would be done to their cultural heritage. They were free to protect their culture in whatever way they wished.

From this precedent set by the second caliph, it

becomes clear that every community has the right to preserve whatever it considers to be part of its culture, whether it lives under a Muslim government or outside it. No government has the right to interfere in the cultural affairs of any group. The preservation of culture is a matter that should remain free from governmental intervention.

An important point in this regard is that in matters of international significance, Islam's norm will be the same as the norm agreed upon by other nations. This principle in Islam, concerning international norms, is derived from certain established precedents found in the practice of the Prophet of Islam ﷺ.

For example, in the later period of the Prophet of Islam ﷺ, a man from Yemen named Musaylimah claimed prophethood. He sent a delegation of two men to the Prophet of Islam ﷺ in Madinah, conveying the message that the Prophet should acknowledge his claim. During their stay in Madinah, they committed a punishable offense. The Prophet ﷺ stated that had it not been the established practice that envoys are not punished, he would have punished both of them (*Sunan Abi Dawud*, Hadith No. 2761).

This statement of the Prophet of Islam ﷺ clearly shows that if something is internationally accepted, it will also be accepted in Islam. In light of this principle,

preserving cultural heritage is as important in Islam as it is in the view of other nations. In the modern world, cultural heritage and historical monuments are preserved with great importance, and the same will undoubtedly be the case in Islam. In this matter, Islam has no separate method that differs from others.

The Prophet of Islam ﷺ was born in Makkah, where date palm trees did not grow. Later, he migrated to Madinah, where there were date orchards. One day, he passed by an orchard outside the town where people were climbing on date palm trees and carrying out hand pollination. He advised them not to do so.

The following year, the date crop yield was poor. When the Prophet asked about the reason, the people said that he had advised them against pollination, whereas good yields depend on it. On hearing this, the Prophet of Islam ﷺ said: Continue doing what you used to do, for you know better about the affairs of your worldly life (*Sahih Muslim*, Hadith No. 2362).

From this statement of the Prophet ﷺ, an important principle becomes clear—namely, the distinction between matters of belief and those of worldly affairs. In Islam, matters of life that by their nature belong to worldly affairs are not made part of belief; rather, they are governed by knowledge and scholarly inquiry. In such matters, whatever is established as correct

through research is accepted as correct. This applies to fields ranging from agriculture and horticulture to engineering, history, and similar disciplines. The preservation of cultural heritage or historical monuments also falls within this category of matters that are subject to research, not to faith.

In summary, both in principle and in practical precedent, it is established that Islam's position regarding the preservation of cultural heritage or historical monuments is the same as that adopted in other traditions and academic disciplines. If, for any reason, a monument located in a Muslim country is considered unsuitable to be retained there, it should not be destroyed. Rather, it should be transferred to interested countries or institutions so that it may be preserved in museums.

The destruction of the Buddha statues in Bamiyan, Afghanistan, in 2001 had no basis in Islam. It was an act of extremism, and according to the Quran and the teachings of the Prophet ﷺ, extremism has no place in Islam. (*Al-Risala*, April 2007)

THE ISSUE OF *KUFR AND KAFIR*

In the twentieth century, communist ideology spread across the world on a large scale. Under this ideology, human society was divided into two classes: the working class and the bourgeois class.

The word bourgeois is a French term. In its original sense, it referred to the middle class. However, under the influence of Marxist philosophy, it became a derogatory term. According to this ideology, society was divided into two classes: the working class, regarded in every respect as an innocent class, and the bourgeois class, which, in Marxist thought, was synonymous with the capitalist class and, according to Marx, was the root of all social and economic evils.

Something similar happened with the word kafir. Initially, the word kafir had a simple meaning. In lexical terms, kafir means one who denies. Over time, however, the word kafir became a derogatory term. In the present age, from an ideological perspective,

this has probably become the most contentious issue between Muslims and non-Muslims that Muslims face today. An example will clarify this matter.

Famous Urdu poet Mohammad Iqbal's family was originally a Brahmin family. Later, they converted to Islam. Referring to this fact, Iqbal said in one of his verses:

Mara ba-negar keh dar Hindustan digar nami bini

Brahmanzada ramz-ashna-e-Room o Tabriz ast

Do not see India only through old stereotypes.

Even a Brahmin's son can be deeply familiar with the intellectual traditions of Rome and Tabriz.

In this couplet, the word brahman-zada does not sound offensive to the listener. In terms of its original, literal meaning, *brahman-zada* and *kafir-zada* are similar expressions. However, if Iqbal's verse were changed and the word *brahman-zada* were replaced with *kafir-zada*, readers would strongly object.

This reaction would not be because the meaning of the verse had changed, but because the emotional and social value of the word has changed. The word *brahman* is generally heard as a neutral or descriptive term, whereas the word *kafir*, through historical and social usage, has come to be understood as insulting

and demeaning. Therefore, even though the two words may appear similar in a literal sense, they do not carry the same tone or impact in real usage.

The communist-bourgeois division in the twentieth century alienated the non-communist world from communists. The same situation has now arisen with Muslims. From the Muslim side, the division between believer and *kafir* has made the non-Muslim world resentful of Muslims. As a result, people like Ashok Singhal and Pravin Togadia have begun demanding that Islam be reviewed and that the word *kafir* be removed from the Islamic vocabulary. They argue that unless Islam is reformed, Muslims and non-Muslims cannot live together in a balanced way.

However, experience shows that this issue is not confined to extreme figures of other faiths. It has now become a challenge for Muslims themselves. In today's modern society, Muslims and non-Muslims live together. In such conditions, educated Muslims generally feel that they cannot live in a balanced way in a shared society while holding on to the conventional concept of *kafir*. Consciously or unconsciously, they begin to feel that Islam has lost its relevance in the present age. They do not understand how, with such an Islam, they can live with dignity in today's society.

I frequently meet a highly educated Muslim in Delhi. He says that although he was born into a Muslim

family, he no longer has faith in Islam. He says that his religion is democracy. According to him, Islam divides humanity into two unequal classes—believers and *kafirs*—whereas democracy gives equal status to all human beings. He once told me that when a child is born in his home, he will not have the adhan recited into the child's ear; instead, he will invite a professor who will say into the child's ear: democracy, democracy, democracy.

The reality is that the issue of kafir is not only a problem for non-Muslims. In modern society, it has become, on a large scale, a problem for Muslims themselves. There is a need to understand this issue in depth and to clarify its correct meaning, so that Islam may appear to people as a religion relevant to the times, and so that both Muslims and non-Muslims can live in a balanced way with others in modern society. A thorough study shows that this entire matter is based on misunderstanding. In the conventional view, it is assumed that *kafir* and non-Muslim are synonymous terms. All those who are not Muslims are considered kafirs. This is undoubtedly a wrong notion. The truth is that the word *kafir* is not synonymous with non-Muslim.

Muslims and the Wider Society

From the perspective of the *Shariah*, a Muslim holds the position of a *Da'i*, while a non-Muslim holds the

position of a *Mad'u*. This relationship requires that the *Da'i* always maintain a balanced relationship with the *Mad'u*. It is said that a trader should always be customer-friendly. In the same way, the formula for a *Da'i* should be that he is always *Mad'u*-friendly.

Within the *Da'i*, there should be goodwill and well-wishing for the *Mad'u*. If these feelings exist in the *Da'i*, he will never use words that create hatred in the heart of the *Mad'u* against him. If he is a true *Da'i*, he will not even think such things in his heart. The spirit of dawah is the killer of hatred. The heart of a *Da'i* is a compassionate heart. In such a heart, nothing other than love and goodwill can grow.

In ancient times, when the Aryan people came to India, they called the local people *mlechchha*. Similarly, Christian scholars referred to Muslims in their books as infidels. Both *mlechchha* and infidel are derogatory terms. The person who uses these terms may feel pleased to say them, but the one about whom they are used strongly dislikes them. In this matter, the correct approach is to use words that carry no derogatory sense, but simply convey a factual description. Unfortunately, Muslim scholars failed to exercise caution in this matter. In their books and in translations of the Quran, they began to use the word infidel casually for *kafir*. For example, Maulana

Abdul Majid Daryabadi (1892-1977), in his English translation of the Quran, translated *Qul ya ayyuhal-kafirun* as follows:

Say thou: O ye infidels! (109:1)

In reality, it is this type of carelessness on the part of Muslim scholars and leaders that has led to severe tension between Hindus and Muslims in India, and the effects continue to appear in various unpleasant forms. The same mistake was also made by Urdu and Persian translators of the Quran. Many translations of the Quran have been published, but with the exception of one translator (*Shah Abdul Qadir*), all translators adopted a careless approach in this matter. Some translations of *Qul ya ayyuhal-kafirun* are reproduced here:

Shah Waliullah: *Bago ae kafiraan*
(Say, O infidels).

Shah Rafi'uddin: *Keh ae kafiro*
(Say, O infidels).

Ashraf Ali Thanvi: *Aap in kafiron se keh dijiye*
(Tell them, O infidels).

Abul A'la Maududi: *Keh do ke ae kafiro*
(Say, O infidels).

Amin Ahsan Islahi: *Keh do, ae kafiro*
(Say, O infidels).

Shah Abdul Qadir: *Tu keh, ae munkiro*
(So say, O deniers).

Most translators have rendered this Quranic verse in this way. Translating *kafir* in this verse in this manner is not correct. Even if, purely from a lexical point of view, it may not be incorrect, it is still an objectionable word for other communities. Therefore, it is necessary to avoid such a translation. Moreover, this is not merely a matter of translation. On the basis of such a translation, a mindset is formed, and this mindset finds expression in speech and writing. In this way, such a translation becomes a cause of negative mental conditioning for the entire community. This translation creates a “we and they” mindset, and such a divisive mindset is not correct from the dawah perspective.

As mentioned above, only one scholar translated these Quranic words correctly, and that was Shah Abdul Qadir Dehlavi. Shah Abdul Qadir’s Urdu translation is regarded by all scholars as highly authentic. He translated the relevant verses using the word *munkar* (denier).

In Chapter 109 of the Quran, the phrase *Qul ya ayyuhal-kafirun* (say, O deniers) appears. This style of address occurs only once in the entire Quran, in this single

Chapter. The words *kafir*, *kuffar*, or *kafirun* appear many times in the Quran, but their use in the form of a specific address, such as *ayyuhal-kafirun*, does not occur anywhere else in the Quran.

According to the commentators, the *al* in *al-kafirun* is *‘ahd*. That is, it refers specifically to a particular group, not to every person outside the Muslim group. Some of the commentators’ statements are given below:

“*Al-mukhatabuna kuffarun makhsusun qad ‘alima Allah annahum la yu’minun*” (*Tafsir al-Nasafi*, Vol. 3, p. 687). That is, those addressed are specific deniers whom God knows will not believe.

“*Wa ‘ana bil-kafirina qawman mu‘ayyanina la jami‘al-kafirin*” (*Tafsir al-Qurtubi*, Vol. 20, p. 226). That is, the reference here is to a specific group of deniers, not to all deniers.

“*Khitaabun li-jama‘atin makhsusah*” (*Tafsir al-Mazhari*, Vol. 10, p. 354). That is, this address is directed to a specific group.

Qul ya ayyuhal-kafirun is a specific form of address and cannot be used in a general sense. That is, *Qul ya ayyuhal-kafirun* refers permanently only to the early deniers of *Quraysh* who were contemporaries of the Prophet of Islam ﷺ and who, despite the prophetic completion of proof, refused to accept the Prophet’s

message. People after the period of prophethood will be addressed with the words ayyuhal-insan (O human beings), not with the words ayyuhal-kafirun (O deniers). This mode of address will continue permanently until the Day of Judgment.

The Meaning of Kafir

In Arabic, kufr means denial, and kafir means one who denies. According to Islam, kafir denotes a character; it is not a collective label for any nation or community. Kafir is an individual character rather than a group title for a specific race or community.

A kafir is one who denies (one who refuses to accept). Among the Urdu translations of the Quran, the most accurate is considered to be that of Shah Abdul Qadir Dehlavi. In his translation of the Quran, he rendered kafir as munkir (denier). This is the correct translation of the term. English translators of the Quran often translate kafir as unbeliever. This translation is not correct. Unbeliever means one who does not believe or does not hold a belief, whereas kafir does not merely mean a non-believer. Rather, it refers to a person who refuses to accept even after the truth has been fully conveyed.

In the earliest phase, when the initial verses of the Quran were revealed, the Prophet's addressees were

not described as disbelievers. Instead, neutral, human terms were used for them. For example, the Quran addresses the Prophet in these words:

“O Messenger, deliver whatever has been sent down to you by your Lord. If you do not do so, you will not have conveyed His message. God will defend you from mankind.” (5:67)

Look at this verse carefully. Here, the words used are “God will protect you from the people” (*ya ‘simuka mina’ n-nas*). The wording is not “God will protect you from the disbelievers” (*min al-kafirin*). This choice of words is significant.

Throughout the Quran, many verses indicate that, as a general principle, people are addressed using neutral, inclusive human terms. The word *kafir* is reserved for individuals whom God Himself has explicitly designated. The term *kafir* is therefore a divine declaration; it is not a label to be applied by human beings at their own discretion. This distinction makes it clear that assigning such terms is not a human prerogative but a matter determined solely by God.

The Difference Between an Act and the Doer

The first verse of Chapter 109 of the Quran states: “Say: O disbelievers” (109:1). In this verse, *al-kafirun* refers specifically to the rejecting Quraysh of ancient Makkah. Through these words, after the completion

of the proof (*itmam al-hujjah*), a declaration was made regarding the Quraysh rejecters that, in God's sight, they had become disbelievers.

In other places in the Quran, the words *kufr* and *kafir* are also used. For example, it is said: "Among you are those who disbelieve and among you are those who believe" (64:2). Likewise, it is said: "Among them were those who believed, and among them were those who disbelieved" (2:253).

In this second type of verse, what is mentioned is the act (*kufr*), not the actor in a fixed and identified sense. That is, it is stated that a certain action constitutes disbelief, or that one who commits such an act becomes a disbeliever in God's sight. However, in these verses, no specific group is identified or named, nor is a definitive declaration made that a particular group, as such, is disbelieving.

From this distinction in the Quranic mode of expression, an important principle becomes clear. A caller may state that committing a particular act amounts to disbelief. However, no caller or scholar has the right to issue a specific verdict declaring that a particular group or a particular nation is disbelieving.

A parallel example helps to clarify this point. A hadith states: "Whoever deliberately abandons prayer

has committed disbelief” (*Al-Mu‘jam al-Awsat* by al-Tabarani, Hadith No. 3348). Another hadith says: “Between a person and shirk and disbelief stands the abandonment of prayer” (*Sahih Muslim*, Hadith No. 82).

From these reports, it is understood that if a Muslim deliberately and persistently abandons prayer, then, in the sight of the Shariah, he enters the category of disbelief. On the basis of these hadiths, it is entirely valid for a reformer to encourage Muslims in general toward prayer, using the language of exhortation and warning, and to mention the serious consequences associated with abandoning prayer.

However, it would be completely wrong for a reformer to compile a name-by-name list of Muslims who do not pray and then publicly declare that such-and-such individuals have become disbelievers because of abandoning prayer. This kind of specific declaration goes beyond what the *Shariah* permits.

In the same way, a caller or reformer may, on the basis of Quranic verses, explain which actions are such that committing them causes a person to fall into disbelief in the sight of God. However, it is beyond one’s legitimate limits to take the names of non-Muslim individuals or groups and announce that such-and-such non-Muslims are disbelievers.

In this matter, it is essential to maintain the distinction between the action and the actor. The right to make a specific declaration about the actor belongs to God alone. God exercised this right only once in history—regarding the ancient deniers of Quraysh—after the Prophet had completed the conclusive proof upon them directly. As for the rest of humanity, the final declaration will be made by God in the Hereafter. Our responsibility is only to convey the message. Declaring people to be disbelievers (*kuffar*) is not part of our mandate.

The Problem of Credit

The term *kafir*, or denier, involves two simultaneous roles: the person who presents a message and the person who rejects it. One of these roles may be called the inviter, and the other the invitee.

Being a *kafir* (denier) is an individual role; it is not a national or communal title for a group. For an entire group to be declared *kafir* is an extraordinary and extreme occurrence. It implies discrediting one party for their rejection while giving credit to the other for their outreach efforts. This matter of credit and discredit is not something that can be decided through a mere fatwa or public statement; it requires a process of highly serious and committed dawah work.

The standard model for such an invitational effort is the thirteen-year Makkan period of the Prophet of Islam ﷺ. When the Prophet of Islam ﷺ began his invitational work among the people of Makkah, his address began with the words *Ya ayyuha al-insan*. After addressing people as human beings for thirteen years, when they knowingly persisted in rejection, only then was this verse of the Quran revealed: *Qul ya ayyuha al-kafirun*. Even then, it was a direct divine proclamation, not a form of address initiated by the Prophet himself.

All disputes between Muslims and non-Muslims, and all the complaints that Muslims have against non-Muslims, are essentially national and material in nature. They are purely worldly conflicts of the same kind that also occur among non-Muslim groups themselves. Such disputes cannot be described as religious conflicts between kafir and Muslim. Rather, they should be understood as worldly disputes between two groups. If the aim is to establish conclusive proof against other nations, the first necessary condition is that Muslims should, on their own initiative, bring these worldly disputes to an end.

When Denial Is Established

When does it become definitively established that a person has become a denier—that his rejection of the

truth has reached the level of certainty? The answer to this question is provided by the Quran itself.

It is well known that the revelation of the Quran began in Makkah in 610 CE. Through the Quran, the Prophet of Islam ﷺ conveyed the call to monotheism to the people of Makkah. Throughout this entire period of dawah, he never addressed his addressees by calling them disbelievers. In all the verses revealed during this phase, general human terms were used. He addressed them as members of his own people and conveyed God's message to them on that basis.

The Prophet carried out this dawah in a manner that ensured the completion of proof in the fullest sense. He remained deeply sincere in his goodwill towards them. He bore their persecution with unilateral patience. He made no demands upon them. He never said or did anything that could create a material or worldly dispute between himself and them. At every stage, he acted as their well-wisher. Despite repeated harm and hardship, he continued to pray for them.

This demanding and patient process of dawah continued for thirteen years. Even after these thirteen years, the Prophet of Islam ﷺ did not, on his own, declare them disbelievers. Only then did a verse descend from God: "Say: O you who deny" (Quran 109:1).

This shows that only after thirteen years of dawah conducted at the prophetic level did the denial of the addressees become established as a fact in the sight of God. Only at that point was it declared with certainty that their rejection had reached the level of confirmed denial.

Before the completion of such a dawah process, it is not permissible to declare any individual or group to be deniers or disbelievers.

And if, even after a prophetic effort lasting thirteen years, this certainty could be declared only by God Himself, then for ordinary people, even a hundred and thirteen years would be insufficient to make such a definitive judgment.

The Term “Kufr”

During the Meccan period, certain verses were revealed regarding non-Muslims outside of Arabia. For instance, the beginning of the Quranic chapter 30 mentions the Romans (Christians), who had been temporarily defeated by the Persians. However, the verse does not say, “The *kafirs* (infidels) of Rome have been defeated.” Instead, it states: “The Romans have been defeated, in a nearby land.” (30:2-3). Similarly, chapter 105 mentions Abraha, the non-Muslim ruler of Yemen. Yet, the Quran does not refer to him as “the

kafir ruler of Yemen”; rather, he is identified by the term *Ashab al-Fil* (The People of the Elephant).

While the terms *kufur* and *kafir* were used for those in ancient Makkah who actively rejected the message, this did not lead the early Muslims to label all non-Muslims as “*kafirs*” thereafter. For example, after the Migration (*Hijrah*), when the Prophet ﷺ and his companions arrived in Madinah, both Muslims and non-Muslims were living there. However, they did not address the local people with the title of *kafir*. In the first address the Prophet ﷺ delivered upon reaching Yathrib, he addressed the people as:

“O people (*Ayyuhan-nas*), protect yourselves from the Fire, even if it be by giving a piece of a date in charity.” (*Seerah Ibn Hisham*, Vol. 1, p. 501)

In the same way, there were many non-Muslim tribes in the areas around Madinah and in the surrounding regions. Yet they, too, were not called Arab disbelievers or disbelieving tribes. Instead, they were addressed by their well-known names, such as the people of Thaqif, the people of Najran, and the people of Bahrain.

History shows that in the early period, when Muslims left Arabia and entered the lands of Asia and Africa, people belonging to different religions lived there. They did not resort to calling these non-Muslims

“*kafirs*.” Instead, they addressed each group by their own chosen identity. Thus, the Christians of Syria were called Christians, the Jews of Palestine were called Jews, the Magians of Iran were called Magians (*Majusi*), and the Buddhists of Afghanistan were called Buddhists (*Budhi*), and so on.

This practice continued when early Muslims arrived in India. They referred to the local population as Hindus—which is the Arabic pronunciation of “*Sindhu*.” The famous scholar *Al-Biruni* (d. 1048 AD) traveled to India, learned Sanskrit, and wrote his renowned Arabic work *Kitab al-Hind* (The Book on India). Throughout the book, he refers to the non-Muslims of the region as Hindus, never as “the kafirs of India.”

For more than a thousand years, this practice remained in force. Even today, this custom largely continues in India, Pakistan, and the rest of the world. Muslims live in the United States and in various European countries, where they interact with non-Muslim communities. Yet they address everyone by the names those people have chosen for themselves; they do not call them kafirs or kuffar.

A Few Historical Examples

As stated above, the style of address found in Chapter al-Kafirun appears in the Quran only for the deniers

of Makkah, and even then, only after thirteen years of the Prophet's "completion of proof" (*itmam al-hujjah*). With the exception of the deniers of Makkah, no one else was addressed in such a specific manner.

When the Prophet of Islam ﷺ began his mission in Makkah, he did not address people in the early phase by saying, "Ya ayyuhal-kuffar" (O deniers). Instead, the Quran revealed this verse: "O man! What is it that lures you away from your bountiful Sustainer."(82:6)

After the migration, a sentence in the Charter of Madinah stated: "For the Jews their religion, and for the Muslims their religion." (*Sirat Ibn Hisham*, Vol. 1, p. 503) It did not say: "For the deniers (*kuffar*) their religion."

After the conquest of Makkah, when delegations of polytheist Arab tribes came to the Messenger of God ﷺ in Madinah for discussion, the manner of address remained the same. For example, when the people of Yemen arrived, he said: "The people of Yemen have come to you." (*Maghazi al-Waqidi*, Vol. 2, p. 586), not "The kuffar of Yemen have come to you." Similarly, the letters of invitation sent to rulers followed this pattern. The letter to the Roman Emperor began: "From Muhammad ibn 'Abdullah to Heraclius, the Great of Rome" (*Al-Bidayah wa al-Nihayah* by Ibn Kathir, Vol. 6, p. 473). He did not write: "To Heraclius, the *kafir* of Rome."

After the Treaty of Hudaybiyyah, the Prophet ﷺ

addressed his companions, saying: “God has sent me as a mercy for the whole world, so convey it on my behalf; may God show mercy to you.” (*Sirat Ibn Hisham*, Vol. 2, p. 607) Here, too, he did not say he was sent for all the “deniers.”

During the caliphate of ‘Umar Faruq, when the companions entered Iran, reports indicate that one companion explained their purpose to the non-Muslim ruler by saying: “So that we may bring those human beings who so choose from the worship of human beings to the worship of God.” (*Tarikh al-Tabari*, Vol. 3, p. 520) They did not say: “So that we may bring the deniers (*kuffar*) from the worship of deniers to the worship of God.”

Consequently, when early Muslims spread into foreign lands, they never addressed people as kafir or kuffar. Instead, they addressed every community by its chosen name—Christians as Christians, Jews as Jews, Magians as Magians, Buddhists as Buddhists, and so on.

The designation of someone as a kafir becomes valid only when the “completion of proof” (itmam al-hujjah) has been established. There is only one model for itmam al-hujjah: the thirteen-year period of the Prophet Muhammad’s ﷺ missionary struggle in Makkah. This thirteen-year process of conveying God’s message stands permanently as the definitive model for

dawah and *itmam al-hujjah*. Moreover, even after *itmam al-hujjah* has occurred, the definitive declaration that someone is a disbeliever comes from God, not from the one who conveys God's message.

The Example of Quraysh

In the year 570, the year of the birth of the Prophet of Islam, a major event took place. Abraha, the Christian ruler of Yemen, advanced toward Makkah with a large army. His intention was to demolish the Kabah. However, due to God's special help, he did not succeed. The Quran refers to this historical event in Chapter number 105.

When the Quran began to be revealed to the Prophet of Islam in 610 CE, Chapter 106 was revealed during this early Makkan period. The translation of this chapter reads: For the security of the Quraysh: their security in their winter and summer journeys. So let them worship the Lord of this House, who provided them with food lest they go hungry and saved them from fear. (106:1-4). In this chapter, the people of Makkah are referred to only as *Quraysh*, not as *kafir* or "the *kafir* of *Quraysh*."

The Prophet of Islam was a messenger of monotheism. When he began his mission in Makkah, he addressed people in the same manner for a continuous period of

thirteen years, saying: O people of Quraysh! O human beings! O my people! Throughout this entire period of peaceful missionary activity, he never used the term “kafir.” Although all kinds of excesses were committed by the opposing side, his sense of goodwill toward them never diminished. Enduring their persecution with one-sided patience, he continued his peaceful missionary struggle. Finally, after thirteen years, Chapter 109 was revealed in the Quran. In it, for the first time, a declaration was made by God in these words: *Qul ya ayyuha al-kafirun* (109:1)—that is, “Say: O deniers.”

From this, it becomes clear that the word *kafir* (disbeliever) denotes a quality, not a community. Had disbeliever referred to a community, the Quran would have used the expression *li-ilafi al-kuffar* (for making the disbelievers familiar) instead of *li-ilafi Quraysh* (for making Quraysh familiar) in Chapter 106, verse 1. This distinction shows that the term *kafir* signifies the quality of denial rather than a communal or tribal identity.

Furthermore, determining whether this quality of denial exists in a person cannot be based on assumption; it must be grounded in actual experience. That experience is defined at the prophetic level: a missionary effort of the highest standard must continue for a sustained period—at least thirteen

years. Without such a process, even during the time of the Prophet himself, it was not correct to describe anyone as a disbeliever.

Debate

During the period of British rule in the Indian subcontinent, a new and undesirable practice emerged among Muslims that came to be known as *munazarah* (debate). In place of religious outreach, a culture of polemical disputation developed between Hindus and Muslims. This shift created an imbalanced and adversarial atmosphere between the two communities. Muslim debaters began writing books against Hindus and publishing them under titles such as *Kufr Tor* (Break Disbelief). In response, Hindu debaters wrote books against Muslims, publishing them under titles such as *Kufr Tor Ka Bhandha Phor* (Expose the Conspiracy of Disbelief).

The method of Islam is outreach, grounded in well-wishing, compassion, and one-sided patience. Debate, by contrast, seeks to defeat the opposing party. The debater's objective is to overpower the other side, and this leads to the use of aggressive language such as, "Run a bulldozer over them all." Such rhetoric creates hatred and tension between groups, which in turn gives rise to various kinds of problems.

Dar al-Dawah

The terms *Dar al-Kufr* and *Bilad al-Kuffar* came into use during the Abbasid period. Prior to that, these expressions were not commonly used among Muslims. In my view, the introduction of these terms was incorrect. The sound position is that an Islamic country should be referred to as *Dar al-Salam*, while all other countries should be described as *Dar al-Dawah*. Every country other than *Dar al-Salam* falls under *Dar al-Dawah*, even if it may appear hostile to Muslims.

The Quran states, with reference to the Prophet of Islam ﷺ:

“And this is a Book which We have sent down, blessed and confirming what came before it, so that you may warn the Mother of Cities and those around it” (6:93).

In this verse, Umm al-Qura refers to Makkah. At the time of revelation, Makkah was under the control of non-Muslims, and even the *Kabah* had been turned into a center of idol worship. Yet the Quran does not describe Makkah as *Dar al-Kufr* or *Madinat al-Kufr*. Instead, it calls it Umm al-Qura and assigns the task of warning—that is, invitation (*dawah*).

From this, it can be inferred that regions under non-Muslim dominance are, in Islamic terminology, to be regarded as *Dar al-Dawah* or *Dar al-Indhar*. Therefore,

using terms such as *Dar al-Kufr* or *Bilad al-Kuffar* for such places is not appropriate.

When a country is referred to in a geographical sense, it should be called by its commonly recognized name—for example, *Sri Lanka* as *Sri Lanka* and *South Korea* as *South Korea*. However, when a country is discussed in terms of the responsibility of Muslims, it should be described as *Dar al-Dawah*. The term *Dar al-Dawah* does not signify a geographical classification; rather, it expresses the responsibility of Muslims to convey God's message. (*Al-Risala*, December 2003)

THE USE OF TELEVISION

In the August 2004 issue of the New Delhi-based Urdu daily Rashtriya Sahara, a report was published presenting two different legal opinions regarding television. One opinion holds that the use of television for preaching and religious outreach is permissible. The other opinion takes the opposite view: it argues that television is primarily a means of entertainment on which obscene programs are shown, and therefore its use for religious programs is not permissible (p. 1). Conveying the message of Islam to people and removing misunderstandings about it is a duty obligatory upon Muslims. This responsibility must be discharged in every age and under all circumstances. It is evident that this work can only be done where people are present, or through a medium that reaches people. It cannot be carried out in isolation or in seclusion.

If, under such circumstances, it is made a condition that this task will be performed only in places or through media where no evil exists at all, then the task

will never be accomplished. This is because people will never meet us on conditions of our own choosing.

For example, the Prophet of Islam received prophethood in Makkah in the year 610. At that time, 360 idols were placed inside the *Kabah*. In practical terms, the *Kabah* had been turned into a house of idols. At the same time, the *Kabah* was the central gathering place of the people of Makkah. They assembled daily in its courtyard. Therefore, the only accessible place for conveying the message of monotheism to the people of Makkah was this very *Kabah*, where people gathered in connection with their idols. It was not possible to reach them anywhere else.

In this matter, the Prophet of Islam ﷺ adopted a wise approach. He kept the issue of idols separate from the issue of preaching. He did not concern himself with the fact that people gathered there because of idols. Setting this aspect aside, he treated the *Kabah* purely as a place of public gathering. He went there to recite the Quran to those present and to convey the message of monotheism. This prophetic wisdom can be summarized in one sentence: ignore the problems and make use of the opportunities.

The same wisdom should be applied in the case of television. That is, instead of focusing on the undesirable programs shown on television, one should

use it to present religious programs. Due to the widespread reach of television, the largest audience can be accessed only through this medium. No other medium offers a comparable reach.

However, there is another aspect of this issue. It concerns the programs that are currently broadcast on television in the name of Islamic programs. In practice, these programs are not very beneficial. Like other television content, many of these so-called Islamic programs have also been moulded into entertainment. As a result, they become entertainment programs under the label of Islam. It would therefore be correct to say that, in most cases, they are Islamic entertainment rather than genuine Islamic programs.

Those who watch television are aware that followers of other religions also use it to introduce their faith. According to my information, Christian programs provide the best example in this regard. In Urdu and several other languages, Christian programs are broadcast daily, and from a technical point of view, they are far superior.

It is also well known that Islamic programs are broadcast in every Muslim country. However, according to my observation, very few people watch them. The reason appears to be the poor quality of these programs. I have personally observed this on more than one occasion

during visits to Muslim countries. I inquired about the viewership of Islamic television programs and found that only a small number of people watched them. In many homes, when an Islamic program appears on the screen, family members switch off the television, saying, “Turn it off; this is a government program.”

Almost all Muslims of the Indian subcontinent hold deep affection for Iqbal. Yet, strangely, Iqbal’s poetry has remained for them largely a song to recite, rather than a source of practical guidance for life. For example, Urdu poet Mohammad Iqbal said:

Aaeen-e-nau se darna, tarz-e-kuhan par arna

Manzil yahi kathin hai qaumon ki zindagi mein

Fear the new order, cling to the old way—this difficult path alone defines the life of nations.

Yet the condition of Muslims—especially of the religious class—is that they react emotionally to every new development. They show a negative response to almost every new thing. Television is one such example. Among the religious class, television is often regarded as being as evil as Satan.

The correct approach in this matter is to distinguish between television itself and its misuse. Television is a manifestation of divine power. It operates through natural laws created by God. The principle on which

television functions was already embedded in the world created by God. The role of human beings was only to discover this principle and put it to use. In its reality, television technology is a gift from God, not from any enemy of Islam.

It is true that many immoral programs are shown on television. But this represents the misuse of television. It is a known fact that everything can be misused, even things that are regarded as sacred. Because of misuse, a thing is not abandoned; rather, its use is corrected.

In this matter, the responsibility of the religious class is not merely to react negatively and withdraw. There is also a positive responsibility upon them. They should understand the technical aspects of television. They should learn the details of its operation. They should discover how television can be employed for reformative work.

The further responsibility of the religious class is that, after adequate preparation, they should produce high-quality Islamic programs for television—programs that attract people, that viewers willingly watch, and that address the minds of the modern human beings.

The method of Islam is not one of negative reaction, but of discovering positive possibilities within adverse conditions. One example of this is the ancient Kabah

mentioned earlier. The reality is that the present world is a world of trial, in which every man and woman has been granted freedom. Therefore, it is impossible for everything in this world to be right, or for unpleasant situations not to arise. Unfavourable conditions will always exist. Our task is to identify favourable aspects within unfavorable conditions and make use of them.

This principle has been expressed in the Quran in these words: *Inna ma 'a al- 'usr yusra* (94:6). That is, where there are difficulties, there are also opportunities. Ignore the problems and make use of the opportunities. This is a universal principle, and it applies to television as well as to all other matters. (*Al-Risala*, December 2004)

THE REALITY OF EXTREMISM

A narration has been reported in various books of Hadith. Its translation is: “Beware of extremism in religion (*iyyakum wal-ghulu*), for the people before you were destroyed because of extremism in religion” (*Musnad Ahmad*, Hadith No. 3248). The literal meaning of the word *ghulu* is extremism. Extremism invariably becomes a cause of destruction.

The fact is that religion has two aspects. One is the basic aspect, and the other is the secondary aspect. If emphasis is placed on the basic aspect of religion, no harm is caused. But when excessive emphasis is placed on the secondary aspect, this gives rise to extremism and becomes a cause of destruction.

For example, in religion, the real importance lies in the spirit, while the form has a secondary status in comparison. In prayer, humility (*khushu`*) holds a fundamental position, whereas the outward form of prayer occupies a secondary position. If excessive emphasis is placed on the form of prayer, and the

validity or invalidity of prayer is made dependent on form alone, this constitutes extremism. The result is that people give great attention to form, while the spirit of prayer becomes practically irrelevant to them. It is this kind of rigidity that has been described in the Hadith as destruction.

The spirit of religion is always one, while differences exist in its form. If emphasis is placed on the spirit of religion, no problem arises. But if excessive emphasis is placed on form, sects come into existence. This is because unity is possible in matters of spirit, whereas uniformity is not possible in matters of form.

Therefore, the correct approach is to accept diversity in matters of form—that is, to recognize that this is also correct and that is also correct. For example, in prayer, saying Ameen silently is correct, and saying *Ameen* aloud is also correct. In shaking hands, shaking with one hand is correct, and shaking with both hands is also correct. If this principle of diversity in form is accepted, sectarianism will never arise in religion. (*Al-Risala*, April 2017)

NO EXTREMISM

In the Quran, while referring to the People of the Book, this instruction has been given: “Do not go to extremes in your religion” (4:171). The same point appears in a hadith in these words: “Avoid excess in religion, for the earlier communities were destroyed because of excess in religion” (*Musnad Ahmad*, Hadith No. 1851).

Ghulu means excess, that is, going beyond limits. According to the hadith, the correct path in all matters is the path of balance and moderation. Moderation, or the middle course, leads to success, whereas the path of excess leads to loss and failure. This is a law of nature. That is why it has been acknowledged even at the global level. There is an English saying:

An excess of everything is bad.

Ghulu is related to every sphere of life. For example, firmness in belief is a good quality. But if openly expressing one’s belief involves a risk to life,

concealment has been permitted in order to protect life. Prayer and fasting, remembrance and recitation of the Quran, are all desirable acts. However, excess in these acts is not desirable. Enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong are undoubtedly necessary duties, but when this is taken to the level of violence, it ceases to be correct.

The same principle applies to moral values. Self-confidence is a high moral quality. But if it leads a person to unwise actions, it no longer remains commendable. Self-respect and self-reliance are also desirable qualities. But if self-respect reaches the point where it prevents a person from admitting his mistake, it turns from a virtue into a vice.

Similarly, it is a good quality that a person does not seek help from others, does not like to accept favours, and wishes to support himself. But if this attitude generates feelings of pride and superiority, it becomes a bad habit rather than a good one.

A human weakness is that when a person notices a distinctive aspect in something, he forms an exaggerated notion about it and goes beyond limits in determining its status. This is what is called *ghulu*. All forms of *shirk* and personality-worship are, in reality, products of this very *ghulu*.

Excess in religion means that the actual status of a thing is not maintained. Instead, an attempt is made to elevate it far beyond its rightful position. God creates one of His servants without a father, and it is said that he is the son of God. God grants someone a high status, and he is assumed to be a superhuman being, free from human error. People are advised to avoid worldly glitter, and this is exaggerated into total renunciation of the world. Certain instructions are given regarding one aspect of life, and by exaggerating them, an entire religious philosophy is constructed upon that basis.

All such cases in which a religious teaching is raised beyond its true position and given an exaggerated status fall within what is known in religious terms as *ghulu*. (*Al-Risala*, January 1999).

UNDERSTANDING EXCESS IN RELIGION

Among the things forbidden in Islam is what is called excess (*ghulu*), that is, going beyond proper limits. This excess always occurs in religious matters. Accordingly, the Quran has warned the Christians against excess, saying: “Do not commit excess in your religion” (5:77). It does not say: Do not commit excess in your disbelief.

Among my countrymen there was a person named Qamaruddin. He was a very sincere man. He was extremely regular in prayer and fasting. Yet it often happened that he found it difficult to reach the mosque on time for the Friday prayer. The reason was his extremist understanding of ritual bathing. On Fridays, when he began bathing, he would repeatedly doubt that his bath was incomplete. He would feel that water had not reached some part of his hair, or that some part of his body had been left unwashed. As a result, he would continue bathing for hours in the bathroom. At times,

this process became so prolonged and distressing that, along with the water of the bath, tears would also flow from his eyes.

This was an unnecessary form of doubt. In the view of the Shariah, this is excess, not Islamic caution. This evil of excess always arises under the influence of religious zeal, but in its outcome, it turns into the opposite of religion. In its initial intention it appears innocent, but when put into practice it becomes non-innocent.

Worship of God is among the obligations of Islam. But if a worshipper performs the dawn prayer with the ablution of sunset, or undertakes to complete the entire Quran every night, such actions turn into excess in worship.

In Islam, a sense of honour is appreciated. But if a person's sense of honour grows to such an extent that he feels offended even at admitting the truth against himself, then such honour falls into the category of excess. Islam teaches respect for people of knowledge. But if respect for people of knowledge is taken to mean that they should not be criticized, this too becomes excess. The reality is that religious zeal by itself does not make an action religious. It is also necessary that the action be in accordance with the command of God and the model of the Messenger. (*Al-Risala*, April 1987)

GENUINE AND REACTIVE RELIGIOSITY

The incident dates back to May 1922. Outside Shah Alami Gate in Lahore, Hindus constructed a temple. On seeing this, Muslims felt that a mosque should also be built alongside the temple. In an atmosphere where the temple spires were gleaming, it was considered necessary that the grandeur of a mosque's minaret should also be visible. Accordingly, funds were immediately collected, and a piece of land near the temple was acquired for a mosque. After the night prayer, construction of the mosque began. Work continued throughout the night. By morning, people saw that a mosque stood fully built opposite the temple. It was this very incident that inspired Dr. Muhammad Iqbal to compose his famous couplet:

*Masjid to bana di shab bhar mein, imaan ki hararat
walon ne*

*Man apna purana paapi hai, barson mein namazi
ban na saka*

They built a mosque overnight, driven by outward religious zeal;

but the old, sinful self could not become prayerful even after years.

This is a symbolic incident that applies to most Muslim activities in the present age. In our time, many religious activities are, in fact, reactive. Their real driving force is some action by another community, not the genuine command of God and His Messenger.

Such religiosity is reactive religiosity. It is born of a national impulse, not a divine impulse. As a result, Muslims, influenced by material, geographical, and political factors, have come to regard other nations as rivals. By seeking to outdo them, they attempt to gain a sense of national satisfaction. All such actions are, in reality, national actions, even if outwardly presented in religious dress.

A believer is one who fears God, whose every activity is carried out under God's guidance. To stop is for God, and to move forward is for God. Work done with such awareness carries God's support and produces beneficial results. But work done in rivalry with other nations increases hatred and conflict. Its outcome is limited: the situation becomes more complicated and never reaches a good conclusion. (*Al-Risala*, January 1983)

MISPLACED RELIGIOSITY

In 1330 AH, Rashid Rida (1865–1935) of Egypt, a leading scholar and jurist of his generation, visited India. He went to *Dar al-'Uloom Deoband*, where a reception was held in his honour. On this occasion, he asked one of the teachers about the method of teaching Hadith there. He was told that when a Hadith is taught, the muhaddith first explains its scholarly points. If, at first glance, the Hadith appears contrary to the school of Imam Abu Hanifah, the Hanafi muhaddith then establishes its conformity with the Hanafi school. When Rashid Rida asked whether this was done with all Hadiths, he was told that it was done consistently. He found this very strange. According to the narration of Maulana Muhammad Yusuf Binnori (1908–1977), he said: *Halil-hadithu Hanafiyyun, wa kayfa yumkinu dhalik, wa hal hadha illa 'asabiyyatun ma laha min sultan*—“Is the Hadith also Hanafi? How can that be? Is this not merely partisanship, for which there is no authority?”

At that time, Maulana Anwar Shah Kashmiri (1875–

1934) was a teacher of Hadith at *Dar al-'Uloom*. When this reached him, he made it the subject of his reception speech and “proved” that all *Hadiths* are in accordance with *Hanafi* jurisprudence (*Nafhat al-'Anbar*, pp. 70–71).

However, towards the end of his life, Anwar Shah Kashmiri realized the weakness of this method of teaching. His student, Maulana Mufti Muhammad Shafi' (1897–1976), narrates that Maulana Kashmiri said to him:

“The summary of all our efforts and struggles has been that we tried to establish the superiority of Hanafism over other schools... but what has been gained from this? Nothing, except that, at best, we prove our own school to be *sawab muhtamil al-khata* (a correct view with the possibility of error), and we describe the other school as *khata muhtamil al-sawab* (an incorrect view with the possibility of being correct). After all our research and effort, we can only say that this is correct, yet there remains the possibility it is wrong; and that is wrong, yet with the possibility that it is correct. In the grave, Munkar and Nakir will not ask whether raising the hands was right or not, whether saying *Amin* aloud was right or saying

it quietly was right... Those things which will neither be refined in this world nor matter in the Hereafter—by pursuing them we have wasted our lives. And the true call of Islam, the call with which the prophets came... that call is not being given today... we are engaged in these subsidiary debates.”

(*Wahdat-e-Ummat* by Mufti Muhammad Shafi‘, Lahore, 1997, pp. 13–15; quoted from *Tajdid-e-Din*)

QUESTION AND ANSWER

Question

Today, among Muslims, there are groups and organizations that claim Islam places special emphasis on monotheism (*tawhid*). Therefore, they argue that a party or organization should be formed around this consensual issue of *tawhid*. According to their understanding, these groups are working to uphold this principle. They present all the Quranic verses related to *tawhid* to the general public and declare: O people, adopt monotheism and abandon polytheism (*shirk*). In this universe, there is no giver, helper, fulfiller of needs, remover of difficulties, or ghaws al-a‘zam, etc., except the Lord of the universe.

In this way, they emphasize all Quranic verses condemning *shirk* and claim that since those who recite the declaration of faith but commit *shirk* have their deeds rejected, they—the monotheists—will neither pray behind these grave-worshippers (*Barelvis*, *Shi‘as*, etc.) nor perform their funeral prayers.

In view of such claims, a few questions are presented below. It is hoped that you will provide satisfactory answers:

1. If shirk continues after reciting the declaration of faith, should such a person be called a polytheist?
2. What is the definition of a Muslim and a polytheist? Can a Muslim be a polytheist?
3. Among Muslims, those who commit clear *shirk*—what is the evidence for offering prayer behind them, when it is also a fact that the deeds of a polytheist are not accepted?
4. If the prayer of a polytheist imam is not valid, how can the prayer of a monotheist follower be valid?
5. Many scholars of the Muslim *ummah* believe that, in the light of verse 106 of Chapter Yusuf, even those who recite the declaration of faith can be polytheists. Therefore, prayer should not be offered behind them.
6. If a person who drinks alcohol is called a drunkard, why should a person who commits *shirk* not be called a polytheist?
7. If, after reciting the declaration of faith, a Hindu continues to go to a temple, this act prevents him from being regarded as a Muslim, and he is still considered a Hindu. But if another person,

after affirming the declaration of faith, continues to circumambulate graves, why does this act not prevent his Islam, and why is such a person not considered a polytheist?

8. In your literature and books, I have not seen as much emphasis on grave-worship and other aspects of shirk as is placed by those who describe themselves as “*tawhid-oriented*.” What is the reason for this difference, when you too oppose shirk—indeed, strongly oppose it? (Mr Abdul Latif, Karachi, Pakistan)

Answer

The evil of disagreement found among present-day Muslims is not due to the fact that Muslim groups are working on something other than monotheism. The real cause of disagreement is one, and that is extremism. Contemporary Muslim groups have adopted, in one form or another, an extremist approach. Some are caught in extremism in matters of belief, some in political extremism, some in legalistic extremism, some in sectarian extremism, and others in different forms of extremism. It is this extremism that is the root cause of present conflicts. In the *Quran* and *Hadith*, extremism is described as *ghulu*. The Prophet ﷺ said: “Beware of excess in religion, for those before you were destroyed

only because of excess in religion” (*Musnad Ahmad*, Hadith 1851; *Sunan Ibn Majah*, Hadith No. 3029).

What is excess or extremism? It is to take a matter to its final logical extreme and then issue extreme rulings on that basis. An example of this can be seen in your own question. Emphasizing monotheism is praiseworthy. But it is equally wrong to say that since Muslims who recite the declaration of faith commit shirk, and that because of shirk (polytheism) their good deeds are not accepted, therefore we—the monotheists—will neither pray behind these grave-worshippers (Barelvis, Shi‘as, etc.) nor participate in their funeral prayers.

This final claim is precisely what is called excess in the Hadith, and excess itself is destructive. If a person has acquired religious knowledge and, in its light, understands that monotheism holds the position of a foundational belief in Islam, then such a person has the right to convey the message of monotheism with sincere goodwill. But if, along with this reformative call, he begins issuing rulings declaring certain people to be polytheists, and thereby boycotts them—even to the extent of refusing their funeral prayers—then he himself is in the wrong in the sight of Islam, because he is committing excess, and there is no room for excess in Islam.

The reality is that the work of reform is an extremely delicate task. One of its essential conditions is that the

reformer must know the difference between one thing and another. He must understand that his responsibility is to only peacefully convey the message; it is not his responsibility to issue definitive judgments about people or declare someone a polytheist. A reformer should leave the matter of who is a polytheist to God and confine himself to sincere advice. Those who lack this ability should not enter the field of reform at all, for doing so is itself a serious wrong.

The numbered answers to your questions are as follows:

1. The responsibility of a reformer is only to explain the issue of shirk with seriousness and goodwill. It is not the task of a reformer to declare a specific person a polytheist and attempt to enforce the rulings of shirk upon him. The first task is permissible; the second is not. Those who do the latter are corrupters, not reformers.
2. A polytheist is not the name of a community or a race. Any person may commit a polytheistic act. But the right to definitively declare someone a polytheist belongs only to God, not to human beings.
3. No follower prays the prayer of the imam. Every follower prays his own prayer. The imam does not make the prayer of any follower acceptable

or unacceptable. Acceptance depends entirely on each individual's intention. The purpose of congregational prayer is only collectivity. Any imam behind whom this objective is achieved is valid. This is stated in the Hadith: "The obligatory prayer is required behind every Muslim, whether righteous or sinful, even if he has committed major sins" (*Sunan Abi Dawud*, Hadith 594).

4. If someone raises the point that the Hadith mentions a sinful person or one who commits major sins, and does not mention a polytheist, then this too is another form of excess. Those who engage in such excess should remain silent rather than use provocative words that create discord within the *ummah*.
5. The authority to decide whose prayer is accepted and whose is not rests entirely with God. Those who issue judgments about acceptance exceed their limits, and exceeding limits is undoubtedly a grave sin.
6. Reciting the declaration of faith is only an announcement of entry into Islam. It does not mean that a person has become permanently immune from committing shirk. In this world of trial, anyone may fall into shirk. The task of a reformer is not to identify polytheists and pass judgment, but

to explain the issue of shirk in general. The method of the Messenger of God ﷺ was that whenever he delivered a reformative address, he would ask: What is the matter with people that they do such and such things? (*Rasa'il Ibn Hazm*, Vol. 1, p. 383)

7. If a person drinks alcohol, the reformer's task is not to declare him a drunkard and issue a ruling for punishment. The reformer's task is only to advise with complete goodwill and continue advising. Similarly, if a person appears involved in shirk, the reformer should explain matters in a well-wishing manner. The reformer has no right to publicly and definitively declare someone a polytheist or issue rulings against him. All such acts fall under excess, and Islam strictly forbids excess.
8. In this matter, those who are Muslims by birth and those who became Muslims by choice have the same ruling: both are to be approached with a sincere focus on purifying their souls. However, no one will be declared an unbeliever or sinful with certainty.

The method of the Prophet was to concentrate entirely on reviving the spirit of religion. External actions are always the result of the inner spirit. It never happens that the inner spirit is automatically produced by external actions.

The practice of declaring people unbelievers (*takfir*) or sinners (*tafsiq*), which has been prevalent among Muslims for centuries, is completely false and has no connection with the *Shariah*. This practice emerged during the Abbasid period and continued under the label of “deviant sects,” until such verdicts threatened to declare no one in the Muslim ummah a believer. Eventually, scholars collectively decided to end this practice. With consensus, they declared: We do not declare anyone from among the people of the *qiblah* to be an unbeliever—that is, those who face the *qiblah* in prayer will not be called unbelievers by human decree. This is the correct position. In the generations acknowledged for their goodness, such takfiri pursuits are absent. The practice was introduced by theologians in ancient Iraq during the Abbasid era, but later scholars rejected it unanimously. No sect will ever pray facing a temple or a church instead of the *Kabah*; over the past thousand years, no sect has done so. Therefore, the statement effectively means that anyone who calls himself a Muslim is regarded as such.

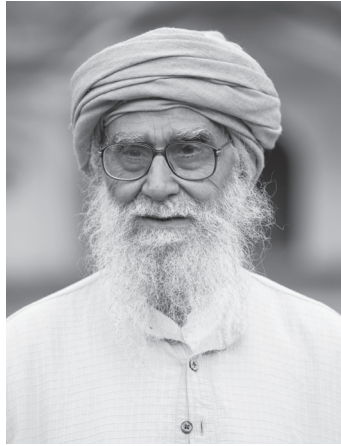
The prohibition of takfir (declaring a Muslim to be a disbeliever or *kafir*) and *tafsiq* (declaring a Muslim to be sinful or morally corrupt) does not mean people should become inactive or neutral in the face of wrongdoing. Rather, it means showing the correct direction of

action: sincere advice. The rest is left to God.

The Messenger of God ﷺ prayed that his ummah should not be destroyed by famine, and God accepted this prayer. He also prayed that an external enemy should not be imposed upon his ummah, and God accepted this prayer. But when he prayed that they should not be divided into groups such that one group would dominate the other, God did not accept this prayer (*Sahih Muslim*, Hadith No. 2890).

This Hadith clarifies how to recognize an undesirable movement. The sign is whether the movement divides Muslims into groups that fight one another. Whenever a movement causes Muslims to split and clash, it is certainly undesirable and does not enjoy God's support. Its spread will be with the support of Satan, not God.

Such division may occur under political, religious, or other labels. The real criterion for a Muslim movement being desirable is not its name or its claim of following the Quran and Hadith. The real criterion is whether it promotes unity among Muslims or discord. A movement that promotes unity is desirable in God's sight; a movement that promotes division and discord is undesirable. (*Al-Risala*, May 2003)



Maulana Wahiduddin Khan (1925–2021), an Islamic scholar, spiritual leader, and ambassador of peace, was internationally recognized for his seminal contributions to world peace. The Government of India posthumously honored him with the Padma Vibhushan in 2021 for his contributions to spirituality. Maulana authored over 200 books exploring Islam’s spiritual wisdom, the Prophet’s nonviolent approach, Islam’s relationship with modernity, and other contemporary issues. His English translation of the Quran and his commentary on the Quran are widely appreciated for their simplicity, clarity, and ease of understanding. In 2001, he founded the Centre for Peace and Spirituality International in New Delhi to promote a culture of peace and to share the spiritual message of Islam worldwide. Today, the CPS International network continues to carry this legacy forward.

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Islam and Extremism

Back Cover

In the present age, the movements that have arisen among Muslims, unfortunately, contain, in almost every case, the same undesirable element of excess that the Quran and Hadith describe as *ghuluw*, such as political extremism, excessive emphasis on rules, and extremism in the name of religious identity. A deeper study of the Quran shows that the true importance of religion lies in the spirit, not in outward forms. Extremism arises from overemphasis on outward forms. If effort is spent only on the form, it may appear alive, yet the spirit will not come alive. About those who follow religion in this way, the Quran (49:14) says that the outward form of faith has entered your lives, but faith has not yet entered your hearts. The correct method is to emphasize the spirit of religion and devote effort to reviving the spirit rather than the form. The spirit means a God-oriented life, good character, goodwill toward others, and so on.

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