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*Far from being an armed struggle,
jihad is a peaceful struggle.*



Al-Risala

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God: The Light of the Universe

We have been told in the Quran that ‘God is the light of the heavens and the earth.’ (24:35) That is, all the light in the entire universe emanates from God’s Being. If the Almighty did not create light, it could not be derived from any other source.

If there were no sun, the earth would be surrounded in darkness. But our Lord has spread throughout His domain countless extremely bright moving bodies to shed light continuously on all parts of the universe. In the absence of this all-encompassing order, the universe would be reduced to a dreadful abyss.

Here we speak of material light. But the same is true of intellectual and spiritual light. All the inhabitants of this earth are in need of a guiding light to enable them to think rationally and to find the spiritual sustenance which will fill their hearts with divine wisdom and inspiration. The source of this intellectual and spiritual light is God and God alone. It cannot be obtained from any other source.

When man truly and sincerely believes in one God, he establishes a link with Him on a spiritual level. His whole being is subsequently illumined by this spiritual attachment. He begins to find God in His remembrances. He begins to find God reflected in the tears that well up in his eyes. God is so instilled in his thoughts and feelings, it is as if he has come very close to Him, as if he is leading his life in the shadow of the Almighty’s blessing.

Idolatry has been described in the Quran as “an abominable sin” or *zulm*, (31:13) *Zulm* means the placing of something in the wrong situation. That is, idolatry (associating something

with God) is totally alien to the universe. In this world, believing in idolatry and practising idolatry are completely out of place.

Only one God is the Creator of this world. He alone is its Lord and Sustainer. He is possessed with all power. That being so, believing in something other than God, or associating anything with the godhead, amounts to according the status of an actual reality to a self-concocted supposition. This presupposes the existence of something which has no existence at all.

The idolatrous way of thinking is the greatest of all evils. One whose mind thinks along idolatrous lines, in whose heart idolatrous thoughts are nurtured, has as it were, opted for something baseless and unreal. The universe with its whole existence refutes it.

Idolatrous beliefs and concepts can never provide intellectual nourishment to their adherents. They will not flood them with that spiritual light without which the whole of human existence is rendered meaningless.

Mission of the Prophets

All the messengers of God sent in ancient times came only to admonish man not to commit idolatry and to teach him to worship the one God alone, so that he might accordingly reform his life in this world and share in God's blessings in the next. But throughout the centuries of human history, almost all the prophets were rejected by the majority of their contemporaries, particularly those highly placed in society, who never showed any willingness to follow these divine messengers. This recurrent event in history is thus described in the Quran: 'Alas for the servants! They laugh to scorn every apostle that comes to them'. (36:30)

The practice of ignoring God's prophets went to the extent of depriving these ancient messengers of their rightful place in the annals of human history. That is why we can find detailed stories of kings and generals in the chronicles of the ages, but we do not find any mention of these prophets. The Prophet of Islam is the only exception. And that is because he received special divine succour. Therefore, for the first time in human history, the determination to repudiate *shirk* (polytheism) and affirm monotheism became a living movement and reached the stage of practical revolution, turning over a wonderful new page in human history. Now the question arises as to why this movement of rejection of polytheism and acceptance of monotheism could not in ancient times culminate in revolution. There were two main reasons for this. One was that it was the age of kingship and the other was that superstitious thinking dominated. These were the two basic factors which continued to be permanent stumbling blocks for the mission of the prophets.

The age prior to the advent of the Prophet of Islam was that of sacred kingship. Today is the age of democracy, in which political leaders gain the right to rule through the votes of the people. In ancient times, on the contrary, the king's interest lay in convincing people that they were God's representatives, even that they were God's offspring or that they were the children of the sun and moon. While today the basis of government is secular democracy, in the days of old government used to thrive on beliefs in many divine powers. This has been mentioned in the Quran with particular reference to Pharaoh. When Pharaoh confronted Moses he felt threatened by the spiritual powers of God's messenger. So he assembled his people and sought to reaffirm his position in these words. "I am your Lord, most High." (79:24)

Thus it was in the political interest of these kings that such superstitious beliefs should prevail throughout the world. Under their special patronage, right from the rituals of the birth of a baby to the funeral rites, the entire system of life was based on polytheism.

This idolatrous system remained predominant all over the world for several thousand years. Due to royal patronage, this system had become so powerful that it acted as an effective check against spreading the monotheistic message of the prophets. It was as a result of this that in ancient times the Prophet's mission remained limited solely to the communication of the message; it could not enter upon the vaster stage of practical revolution.

Another obstacle to missionary activity was what may be called the superstitious thinking of the age. In ancient times when scientific discoveries of the modern kind had not yet been made, man was not able to understand the true essence of natural manifestations. He found an astonishing diversity in the objects of nature—sun, moon, stars, mountains, sea, earth, heavens, trees, animals, etc. Thanks to this diversity, the misunderstanding developed in man that there must also be many creators, or that these phenomena must be incarnations of different gods. The many-sidedness of nature thus produced the concept of a multiplicity of deities. Even the sun and the moon, because of their extraordinary character, began to be regarded as gods. It was unthinkable for man to conceive of one God in the face of the burgeoning plurality of nature.

It was to this reality that Prophet Abraham alluded:

“Lord, they (the phenomena of nature) have led many men astray.” (Quran, 14:36)

That is, these outstanding manifestations of nature, the sun, the moon etc. led to man's deception. People began to worship their greatness and hold them in reverence, though they ought to have considered them all to be creatures of God. On the contrary, they deified these creatures and began to worship them. The scientific thinking of the present age has shattered the myth of these objects of creation being gods. A major role has been played too by democratic thought, which ushered in a powerful political revolution throughout the entire world, giving a death blow to such kingship as was based on the idolatrous thinking of ancient times. Now, in the world of today, such kings as ruled in former times do not exist. They have been swept away like straw in the flood of modern democracy. As a consequence of this modern political revolution, idolatrous beliefs and systems have been deprived of effective patronage. It was this system which was the most powerful obstacle to the rejection of polytheism and the establishment of monotheism in its place. Now, the possibilities of issuing the call of the prophets are unlimited. All obstacles in the path have been removed forever.

Progress in the Long Haul

In 1782, an Englishman arrived in Glasgow with a wooden printing press. With such paltry resources he began to publish a newspaper entitled the *Glasgow Advertiser*. The newspaper was later renamed the *Glasgow Herald*. Two centuries later its daily circulation had risen to 200,000 copies.

What saved John Mennons, the founder of this newspaper, from succumbing to unfavourable and adverse circumstances was

his limitless enthusiasm. It more than compensated for his lack of resources. The newspaper is still going strong after a period of two centuries, in spite of serious differences between partners which arose from time to time. It was fortunate that these could always be settled amicably without the work being disrupted.

The newspaper, which was started on a wooden press, is now being printed entirely on automatic machines. The letters are neither composed nor do they undergo the process of metal infusion: they are projected on the plates by a laser beam. The paper is printed and folded automatically. Then it is wrapped in polythene and taken to the despatch department. The whole process is computerised.

It was only because of its continued publication that it could benefit from all the new improved techniques which were developed at different stages. If it had ceased publication after a period of time, all the techniques would have existed, but it would have failed to utilize them.

It shows how the accomplishment of any great work requires two things in particular: limitless enthusiasm and perseverance. Obviously, great works can be brought to fruition only with the help of boundless energy, enthusiasm and perseverance. Without the long and arduous labour which is essential in any such enterprise, the survival of this paper would have been impossible. □

In the Age of Science

The emergence of modern science has meant the de-establishment of *shirk* in all its aspects. In modern times, scientific discoveries have forever destroyed the myth that there is any inherent diversity in the manifestations of nature or that they have any greatness of their own.

Modern science, through observation and experimentation, has proved in the last analysis that all the phenomena of nature, despite their seeming diversity, were composed of atoms. And the atom is a component of electric waves. This discovery has dealt a death blow to the myth of diversity in nature.

Oneness has been proved to be a reality in all things, notwithstanding apparent differences. That is, a more advanced stage of knowledge having rejected idolatrous concepts has provided an established basis for the concept of monotheism. Furthermore, an important point established by modern science is that all the things on the earth or in the vastness of space are equally helpless entities. All are bound together in an eternal, immutable law of nature. In no degree do they possess any power or will of their own.

Another scientific factor has been established which favours monotheism over idolatry. That is, the entire universe, with all its varied components, is functioning under one and the same law of nature, called by scientists the single string theory. In other words, according to the discoveries of human knowledge itself, there is only one God of the universe. There is no other deity or any other being worth worshipping save God.

The root of *shirk* lies in superstitious thinking. In present times, scientific research and investigations have held the superstition of former times to be baseless. In this way, the roots of *shirk* (polytheism) in modern times have been deprived of any purely academic foundation. No scientific mind is ready to believe in *shirk* as a reality. However *shirk* is still prevalent in certain parts of the world.

In ancient times, man held that so and so gods and goddesses were responsible for air, rains, crops and different human affairs. They thought of different gods and goddesses as

being at work behind the diverse events in the world of nature and of human beings. But scientific investigation has proved that all these events, taking place in accordance with the laws of nature, are not the miracles of an array of gods and goddesses. In the face of these findings, the old type of *shirk* has, to a large extent lost ground.

Once there was an illiterate person who, for the first time in his life, saw a car traveling along a road. In his ignorance, he thought it was a magician who was causing a room to move by the sheer power of his magic. But any educated person would consider such a supposition ludicrous, because it does not take a scientist or an engineer to know for sure that such magic does not in reality exist.

In this way, idolatrous beliefs and concepts or the system of supposed deities have become utterly ridiculous to the educated mind. For now, everyone knows that the coming of rains, the yield of crops and all other such seasonal events are based on the principles of nature.

In the old superstitious age, the creed of *shirk* might have been acceptable, but today, in the age of knowledge, the whole structure of *shirk*, from belief to practice, has been thoroughly discredited. In the age of modern science, the fate *shirk* has met can be compared to that of a darkened room, which was supposed to harbour a dangerous, long-horned demon, but which, when opened up and flooded with light, was seen to contain nothing of the sort.

Before the emergence of science, the world was dominated by superstitious beliefs. Due to an inadequate fund of knowledge, people were deceived into believing in *shirk*. But now with the spread of the light of science, it has become impossible for *shirk* to find a place once again in the minds of the people.

However, the superstitions themselves have not been entirely laid to rest. In their personal lives people all over the world still hold beliefs of mysterious kinds. Although the majority of the educated class do not believe in deities, they have not yet arrived at belief in one God. The only difference is that if the past generations were irrevocably devoted to gods and goddesses, nowadays people have set up another “deity,” called the law of nature, to which they accord the same importance as was formerly shown to pagan deities

The course of human history has followed many pathways, but now a stage has come when all obstructions have been cleared away, so that a movement, based on the teachings of the Prophets, could well be revived. Today, such a movement to reject shirk and affirm monotheism could freely and effectively be launched. In this modern age the political and international atmosphere is also entirely favourable, and all academic arguments are in support of it. It would not be an exaggeration to say that today any movement based on monotheism would be in a position of unopposed victory. No obstacle is now in its way. The need of the hour is for the monotheists to rise with all their will and determination and communicate with unstinted zeal and vigour the divine message—the life-giving reality of *tawhid*.

In ancient times a number of evils had crept into human society, with the result that man had been divested of his natural greatness. It was the movement of *tawhid*, launched by the Prophet of Islam and his companions, which led the world out of a pitiable age and caused humanity to enter upon an age of progress in the real sense. For the first time in human history, man received the blessings which had been destined for him, and of which he had deprived himself on account of his self-styled superstitious beliefs. Humanity emerged from a

prolonged age of darkness and entered the age of light. Now, despite all material progress, man is beset by insuperable problems. Trapped in the glitter of civilization, he is deprived of real peace and happiness. The greatness bestowed upon man by nature has again fallen into a new abyss of degradation.

Now the need of the hour is to revive the call of *tawhid* with renewed force and vigour. The task is two-fold: *tawhid* has to be made more acceptable by means of new and forceful arguments and, by using modern means of communication; it has to be spread all over the world. As recorded in the historic prediction made by the Prophet, the time will come when God's religion will spread all over the world, and not a 'home or a tent' will be saved from entering God's word of monotheism. (*Musnad Ahmad*, Hadith No. 23814) □

The Greatest Asset

Lord William Wintock, British governor-general in India from 1828 to 1835, has the dubious distinction of being remembered as the man who ordered the destruction of the Taj Mahal in Agra—an order which, happily, he was never able to have carried out. This was revealed at the turn of the century by the then viceroy, Lord Curzon. The East India Company had been going through hard times, Lord Curzon explained, and it was suggested to Lord Wintock that a sale of the Taj would fetch Rs. 100,000—enough to extricate the company from its financial crisis. News of the Company's intentions circulated, and there was stiff opposition to such a move. This infuriated Lord Wintock, who now went one step further and gave orders for the total destruction of

the Taj. Opposition to the imperial command stepped up, with both Hindus and Muslims joining in one massive voice of protest. The danger that ‘full-scale’ rebellion would ensue if the Taj was destroyed prompted the governor-general’s advisers to persuade Lord Wintock to withdraw the order.

Contemporary comment had it that “the people did not save the Taj Mahal, it was saved by its own beauty. If the Taj Mahal had not been beautiful, it would not have won such overwhelming support; Hindus and Muslims would not have united behind it to foil the British government’s designs.”

Had the constructors of the Taj Mahal been able to reproduce in themselves the beauty which they produced so perfectly in their work of construction, they too would have been protected by their own quality. Just as virtue in a thing wins support for its cause, so virtue in humans has the same effect. It wins one friend from the enemy camp, appreciation even from strangers. A virtuous nature is the greatest asset a person can have, for with it comes support from all quarters.

The Taj Mahal’s virtue lies in its beauty, while man’s beauty lies in a virtuous nature. But man’s beauty should not be like that of a snake—a beautiful appearance marred by a venomous sting. How do men ‘sting’? By presenting a challenge to people’s political and economic interests; by repeatedly resorting to violence in their dealings with others; by constantly alienating people with senseless, impulsive actions. Any virtue that one might have is cancelled out by such a ‘sting,’ and prevents one from winning people’s affection.

It is the Taj Mahal’s silent beauty that has won people’s hearts. Who would have time for it if, in all its beauty, it tormented those who looked upon it? □

The Difference between Monotheism and Idolatry

Monotheism enables man to discover God in his passage through His creation, whereas idolatry causes him to become enslaved by the mere things of God's creation. Monotheism permits him to lead his life on the plane of reality, whereas idolatry shackles him at every step in his life with superstition. Where monotheism is the result of the discovery of one's own human nature, idolatry is the result of ignorance of that very nature. Monotheists are the truly desirable inhabitants of this world, as it is they who fulfill the word of God.

According to the plan of the Creator of this world, monotheists fulfill the divine scheme of God for man on earth. They unflinchingly follow His plan. It is the monotheists therefore who are held to be desirable by God, for they are carrying out God's will on earth.

Idolatry and idolatrous people are totally different matters. Idolatry is an alien concept in this world of God. It is the monotheists who are the wanted people; the idolaters are, on the contrary, the unwanted people, for the Creator and Sustainer of this world has given no endorsement to idolatry either as a creed or as a way of life.

If we try to place a square object in a round compartment, it will not fit into it. The same is the case with monotheism and idolatry. By his very nature man has been created to be a monotheist. That is why the concept of monotheism and the monotheistic way of life are exactly in accordance with nature, while the very reverse is true of the concept of idolatry.

With the idolater, objects other than God become the centre of his attention. Hence his responses to various situations in life are also determined in relation to the objects of his worship. He looks up to them in his successes as well as seeking refuge in them in his failures.

His heart and mind are absorbed in these non-godly things and beings at all times. Where the monotheist continues to draw the nourishment of monotheism from his day-to-day experiences, an idolator's day-to-day experiences provide him only with further food for idolatry (that is, he becomes more and more confirmed in his way of life).

More often than not, man's general condition is affected by different sets of circumstances, some favourable and some unfavourable. But whatever his state—that of happiness, grief, difficulty, success, failure, power, powerlessness, domination, subjugation—the essence of his response to those circumstances must be either monotheistic or idolatrous.

For a monotheist, who lives constantly in God's glory and majesty, every happening in his life continues to remind him of God. His response in all situations is in accordance with his monotheistic belief. In all circumstances, he proves to be a true monotheist, never losing his balance in the ups and downs of life. In whatever condition he is, he never breaks his association with God. With God as the centre of his attention, he never goes off the course.

A feeling of attachment of one human being for another is generally a source of deep satisfaction to one if not both of the individuals involved. But there is no greater source of satisfaction and no greater elevation of the spirit than in man's strong attachment to God. This, in essence, is what monotheism is, both in principle and in practice. As such, it is of the highest value in the eyes of God. Any other kind of attachment that involves worship is *shirk*, and as such, is valueless.

This deep attachment for God takes two forms—love and fear. The Quran tells us that it is in the monotheist (2:165) that the love of God is at its most profound, and that it is God alone that he fears (9:18).

Such extreme dread and extreme love should be inspired solely by that Being who has created man, who is his Lord and Sustainer. One who associates these special feelings with someone other than God is guilty of committing *shirk*. It is to bestow on others the adoration that is due to God (2:165).

Human beings may feel strong attachments for many kinds of things,—for other people, for animals, for ideas and so on. When an individual is strongly attracted to something, it is normal for his thoughts to centre on the object of admiration. He can become so engrossed in it that his entire happiness seems to depend on his finding it and keeping it. When he succeeds in doing so, his enthusiasm knows no bounds, yet he is always beset by the fear that he may be deprived of this highly valued object. This fear makes him really sad, for he has high hopes that so long as he possesses it, it will yield untold blessings. Just thinking about what he has and what he may lose can fill his eyes with tears. But all such emotions pale into insignificance beside the feelings which the true devotee has for the Supreme Being. What he feels for Him is an unbreakable bond of affection and a deep, unalterable veneration. It is to Him and Him alone that all his thoughts are directed, and it is to the Almighty alone that he surrenders himself.

God looks with extreme disfavour upon this feeling of profound reverence being focused upon anyone or any thing besides Himself, for it is the special prerogative of God to have human beings remain in awe of Him. No other being deserves this ultimate degree of reverence.

Hard Working: The Only Option

Certain Muslim intellectuals insist that Muslims have become a backward community in this country, and that the only way to promote their uplift is to demand reservation in government services.

What is strange indeed is that these same intellectuals uphold the Muslims as 'the best community' and with great fervour they call upon them to come forward and take charge of world leadership. Given that the Muslims are backward, such euphoric statements as 'The task of leading the world will be entrusted to you,' (*Liya jaye ga tujhse kaam duniya ki imamat ka*) are nothing but empty rhetoric. If the stage of world leadership has been waiting for them to set foot on it, then asking for concessions from the very people who are to be led by them sounds utterly ridiculous.

There is a saying in English which goes, 'Politics is the art of the possible.' In this world truly effective effort is that which is directed towards the possible. Straining after an impossible goal amounts to plunging towards destruction rather than heading towards success.

In the present circumstances, I find the securing of reservations almost impossible. The cause of reservation for Muslims was first taken up by Muhammad Ali Jinnah. His well-known 14-point formula presented in 1929 was entirely based on the securing of concessions. He wanted the Congress to give its assurance that the Constitution which would be framed after independence would guarantee the fourteen concessions drawn

up by him. The eleventh of these fourteen points was that in the government services in India the proportion of Muslims would always be maintained in direct ratio to their population.

This proposal was made sixty five years ago. By conceding this demand the Indian leadership could have averted the division of the country. Yet it tolerated the division rather than accept the principle of reservation for the Muslims. Now what further power do the present Muslims possess to put pressure upon the Indian rulers to accede to a principle already rejected on the basis of the Constitution. History shows that, in reality, this demand is not going to be met in this country. Basing the construction of one's life on something which is beyond reach is like constructing castles in the air, such as can never come into existence in this world of cause and effect.

Even supposing that the impossible were to become the possible, that is, Muslims were provided reservations according to the ratio of the population, the actual goal of removing the Muslims' backwardness would still not be attained.

The circulation of wealth in India through government services is only about five per cent of the national wealth. And now, when the public sector is on the way out, being gradually reduced in terms of a more liberal economy, the actual number of Muslims employed in government service would further decrease. In such a situation, if the Muslims' progress were to be bound by the supposed reservation, then even after having secured it, the problem of their backwardness would not be solved: out of 12 crore (120 million) Muslims hardly one per cent would earn their livelihood through government service. Then what would happen to the rest of the Muslim population? And if 99 per cent of the Muslims have to seek an alternative

arrangement, why cannot that same arrangement suffice for the one per cent as well?

Certain Muslim intellectuals are constantly telling us that although Muslims comprise twelve per cent of the country's population, in government services their proportion has not increased beyond two per cent over a long period of time. They are at pains to point out that even after the education and training of Muslim youths has been arranged in educational institutions, and coaching centres have been established to enable many Muslim youths to pass in competitive examinations with flying colours, the proportion of two per cent in the services shows no signs of increasing.

This is only half the truth. Muslim intellectuals stress the fact that the proportion of two per cent in government services is unchanged despite their best efforts, but they do not tell us anything about the qualified Muslim youths. Where are they standing in the unemployment queue? At which recruitment windows have they been lining up unsuccessfully? Not unless this figure is presented will the story be complete.

If our friends would take the time to ascertain this figure, they would learn that the simple reason for Muslims' continuing to occupy two per cent of the available government posts is that they themselves, of their own choice, did not enter government service. They either left for the Middle East, Europe or America, as they knew only too well that in foreign countries they could command far better salaries on the basis of their qualifications. This exodus is common among both Hindu and Muslim youths on a large scale. To me, Muslims can find better guidance in the successful experience of the Sikh community instead of in the fanciful ideas of their misguided leaders and intellectuals.

Once I was present at a special meeting held in New Delhi at which many Hindus and Sikhs were present. One comparatively

less educated Sikh complained that the government had been perpetrating great injustice upon the Sikhs; that at the time of India's independence the proportion of Sikhs in the Indian army was 30 per cent, while today their ratio has been reduced in these services to only two per cent. Interrupting this lecture, another Sikh came up to say that his brother had no knowledge of the real situation. Then he explained that it was true that there were certain reasons for the central government not being interested in keeping them in the military, and as a result their numbers had come down to a mere two per cent. But this had proved to be a blessing in disguise. When the Sikhs found that demands and agitations were not going to yield any fruit, as the government had been acting upon a well-considered plan, and that no amount of our protest was going to have any effect upon its policy, they did some hard thinking and finally came to the conclusion that they must be willing to accept the government's policy in the changed scenario.

Then he said, "Look at me, I was an officer in the Indian army, having retired recently from the service. After my retirement I received only seven lakh rupees as provident fund, etc. and with this sum I cannot even purchase a flat in Delhi. Whereas many of my friends who had opted to leave the services to take up business, now own palatial houses in Delhi, and drive luxury cars."

The number of Sikhs in military service has no doubt dwindled but their economic condition is now better than it ever was. They form only two per cent of the population of the country, but they control about 20 per cent of the country's economic resources. How did this come about? The reason was that they gave up the limited scope offered by the services in favour of the unlimited scope offered by business and industry. Many of them left for Europe and America, and are now earning

far more than they could ever have done here. When such a course may be taken, why weep and wail over the paucity of posts available in government service?

If Muslims earnestly want to remove their economic backwardness, there is only one solution, and that is hard work. They should work hard in the fields of education, business and industry, and with greater preparation, must come to grips with the industrial age, which they have yet to enter.

They must fully appreciate that if a nation is left behind in life's journey, there is only one way to compensate for this, and that is to put in extra hard work. For any such nation the choice is not between hard work and gaining concessions but between hard work and destruction. That is the law of nature, and the nature's laws are immutable.

The demand for reservations and concessions is like asking the other group to keep their next generations from heading towards progress until such times as we (the Muslims) pull abreast of them and become their equals. You could not expect such a sacrifice even from your own real brother. Then how could you expect it from the members of any other community?

Muslims ought, therefore, to abandon the path of complaint and confrontation. They must exclude these words from their vocabulary, and should enter wholeheartedly, and with courage and conviction, into the modern fields of life. As soon as they are willing to do so, they will find a hundred doors opening up to them, and each of these doors will be far bigger and wider than the door of the government services. □

Thoughts of an American Muslim

Three years ago David Miller embraced Islam and became Yousaf Omar. This transition had a great deal to do with his disillusionment from his society. Here he reflects on the nature of American culture through the world view that has transformed him.

Whenever I think about myself living in the United States these days, two stories come to mind. The first is from Maulana Rumi and the other, although a joke, is very revealing of the viewpoint that prevails here.

In the first book of the Mathnawi, Rumi tells a story of a man who lived in a desert and who, urged on by his wife, agreed to take an offering to the King in the city. The offering was a pitcher of rain water, which the man and his wife had laboriously collected. They considered this water precious because it was sweet compared to the brackish water of their well, their only major source.

Meagre though the offering was, the King received it in the spirit in which it was offered and, emptying the pitcher, filled it with gold. The King also arranged for the man to return to his home on a boat. Seeing the vastness of the river on which he traveled, the man marveled at all the water the King had at his command and at the way he took the poor man's meagre offering and rewarded him.

It is one of Rumi's renditions of the Islamic ethos. In fact, it is so rich in implications that Rumi himself narrated it with more than the usual splendid digressions which enrich his work. The King, Maulana makes clear, is God and His bounty is as boundless as all the water on earth.

What enchanted the story was the understanding that prevailed throughout, an understanding of an Islamic Ummah, of compassion, of knowledge of the world, of tolerance and of the recognition of the different kinds of people which constitute the Muslim world.

I must admit, however, to one question which continued to bother me until most recently. Was Rumi's society an ideal or did it really exist?

Then, a couple of weeks back, I read in a special travel supplement to *The New York Times* of an American author, Annie Dillard, giving a short description of her 'sojourn' in North Yemen. She was there during an earthquake and she described how people shared their possessions with the victims and gasoline station owners' opened their tanks' so that the gasoline would be free and how wage earners contributed one month's wages.

A Yemeni told her of some of his people's responsibilities: 'If someone is sick, or old, or poor, well, we give our food; we get that person clothes; we build for a widow a new house if the old one is falling down.'

The remarkable thing about Dillard's description is how full of appreciation it is. Most American travelers, returning from Islamic countries, do not give positive reports of Muslims, even of those who have been hospitable to them. They were unable to see any women, these travelers complain, except those who were heavily veiled. They mention how exasperated they became because of the constant references to God and the frequent addition of *Insha' Allah* to statements about the future. Even writers sympathetic to Islam often reveal a bias. They describe the *tasbeih* as 'worry beads,' without any regard to what *dhikr* is and how serenity is achieved through the remembrance of Allah.

Rumi's story pre-supposes a vital aspect of the Islamic ethos, the presence of a moral understanding among all the people. The trust the wife places in the King, the treatment of her husband at the palace gates, the ready acceptance of his meagre offering, the fact that those with the King also took this acceptance in stride, the way the husband was treated in the King's city.

A world, in short, so conspicuous by its absence in this narcissistic country called the United States. There is a moral aridity here which parches the throat and lips and which also parches the soul. It is best summed up in a joke.

There was a rich girl in a class who was assigned to write on a poor family. 'Once upon a time' she wrote, 'there was a poor family. The father was poor, the mother was poor, the children were poor, cook was poor, the maid was poor, the butler was poor and the chauffeur was poor.'

The United States is that girl, unable to see beyond a very limited set of assumptions it holds dear. After all, its people insist that their country is the epitome of civilization by virtue of its abundance of wealth and weapons (their only criteria for judging whether a country is civilized).

There is something drastically lacking and that is a commonly understood sense of either morals or ethics.

The United States today is, in short an amoral world. Not immoral, which presupposes the existence of morals, which in turn means that the people are fully aware that they are doing wrong when they do, but amoral A 'people' as the Quran puts it, 'without any awareness (of right or wrong)' (11:29).

People are killed here for the little money they possess and they are killed without the least compunction. The murderers

bring to mind Lieutenant Cally who dismissed the My Lai massacre he was responsible for as 'no big deal.'

One might argue that there is a resurgence of religion here in the United States and point to the rising number of churchgoers. But figures are deceptive. Religion has become a ritual confined to the Sabbath. What people do the rest of the week appears to have no connection with what is expressed in church. And yet national leaders insist on calling America a Christian country.

What people say and what people do are two completely different things. Reagan was, some months back, described as a great Christian, despite the fact that he doesn't attend church. Ironically, while this statement was being made, a former president, Jimmy Carter did not concern himself with labels. With his Christian service group, he came to New York, renovated an apartment complex to be used by the poor, and left without seeking any publicity.

Religion here is at best lopsided. One watches with fascination a fundamentalist Christian church service in a huge auditorium filled with impeccably dressed people listening to a group of teenagers singing a song relegating everyone else to hell—Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Marxists, Atheists. The people are all white. There is not a single black or brown face there. Equally difficult to accept is that church priests and ministers describe as 'bums' those without homes or food or clothes, those who sleep in the park even in sub-zero temperatures.

The lopsidedness is also illustrated by another story they tell here. A boy went up to his father after school one day and said that he did not understand what the teacher was talking about when she mentioned a 'moral problem.' The father thought for a while and decided to illustrate what she meant.

“You know,” he explained, “that your uncle and me own a stationary store. Well, one day a customer comes in to buy some pencils. He hands me a twenty-dollar bill and I mistake it to be a one-dollar bill and I give him the change accordingly. But the customer doesn’t notice. He’s heading for the door and I look at him and at the twenty-dollar bill and then I realize I am faced with a moral question: ‘Do I share the twenty-dollar bill with your uncle or not?’”

More often than not the Americans appear to be a people who are, as the Quran puts it, lost in darkness (*zulmat*) after their ephemeral light has disappeared. They neither listen to those who talk sense, nor do they know what to do.

‘Whatever became of sin?’ asks William F. Buckley, Jr., who shares with the fundamentalists much of the conservative ideology, in a recent issue of *The New York Times Magazine*. It is, not surprising, precisely the question Karl Menninger of the Menninger Clinic asked in his book published in 1973, *Whatever Became of Sin?*, a volume aimed at solving all kinds of social problems through ‘an ethical system for today’s world.’ The book sold more than 125,000 copies in hardcover alone and about twice as many in paperback.

The question these authors should be asking is, ‘Is anyone listening? Is anyone listening to those who remind the people of vital necessity of values to keep society together?’

The majority of Americans simply do not know that they are committing some wrong. And when the very few do, they do not know what to do about it.

A fine, recent example is a school’s attempt to cut down and eventually eliminate promiscuity. It forbade the holding of hands within the school buildings. Evidently, educators still have to learn about the youngsters they have to deal with. The students reacted with the way they usually do, by overdoing

what has been forbidden. Worse, they took to the city streets in a demonstration. Many were arrested and thrown into jail.

A sorry state of affairs, in a country which considers itself the greatest in the world.

How did all this come about? The reasons should be of special interest to Muslims all over the world, especially to those attracted to the glamour of things American.

One of the chief reasons is not far to seek—Hollywood. It is difficult to believe nowadays that at one time amorality was largely confined to cinema screen. People then had a moral ethical sense. One has only to compare crime figures to those of today. Nowadays, movies and television shows are so highly emulated that at times it is difficult to distinguish between what is happening on the screen and what is happening in real life. Show business dominates this country. Movie and television stars are worshipped. The stars consider themselves sacrosanct. When the Reagans moved into the White House, they behaved like royalty and talked of the Carters as common people.

Another important reason is one that created an enormous chasm between what happened before and what happened afterward World War II. It was a war then, to quote Nietzsche ‘everything was permissible.’ It was, as everyone knows, the most brutal war ever fought.

It was during that period that compassion disappeared. Other countries might have recovered it, but not the United States. In addition, that brutality and that freedom to do anything one wanted without any restraint whatsoever did not disappear in this country with the end of the war. Both persisted and, worse, increased.

The Americans were basking in what then appeared to be a perpetual and luxurious sun. The United States had gone into

the war a debtor nation and it emerged a creditor nation, with all the allies owing it millions upon millions of dollars. The war effort had also helped to enrich the country.

With affluence came an increase in the two other factors that helped sunder human relationships, the automobile and the telephone.

The automobile gave individuals a power they did not otherwise possess, a power that enabled them to do a number of things unabated. It enabled them to disappear from the scene where they had done wrong. If a person didn't like a neighbour, he or she moved, to another part of town, to another town, to another part of the country almost a continent away.

The ensuing mobility became a habit, most often in its worst aspect. More and more Americans moved away from their parents and, equally significant, away from their roots. This has become so much of an accepted part of American life that no one nowadays asks whether 'street people,' those so poverty-stricken that they have to live in the streets, have any relatives.

The telephone further exacerbated what was rapidly becoming an American way of life, fragmentation. Personal visits became a thing of the past. People talked with even the closest relatives only over the phone. This, too, became widely accepted. As a result, practically everyone overlooks the irony of a telephone company's television commercial, which asks people to use their long distance service to 'reach out and touch someone.'

If there is one person who typifies the direction the United States was heading for as far back as World War One, it is Hemingway. His life and his books parallel the road to amorality. In the beginning of his career he profited from those days

when the dollar was king and Europe was the ‘playground’ for Americans.

In Hemingway’s early stories and novels, the absence of morality was clear, depicted as a consequence of the brutality of war and concomitantly expressed in brutal terms. His heroes suffered from ‘moral wound,’ one of them in fact having been injured in the war so as to render him incapable of having any sex.

But soon, Hemingway’s name became synonymous with the playground and later with hedonism and eventually with amorality. His heroes indulged in sheer pleasure—bullfighting, big game hunting, big game fishing—all of them filled with violence of one kind or another.

Hemingway eventually became the most famous writer in the history of the United States and one of a very few who made the front pages of newspapers. He was therefore widely read, thus becoming an exceptional writer in one other respect. He, too, joined the very few authors whose books were avidly read both in the public world and academia.

One of the major reasons for his popularity in the university world was that his amorality—characteristic of almost all his later works—appealed to professors and students alike. Here was a world they aspired to, one without any restrictions whatsoever. As a result, without intending to, there was a tacit support for what was already taking place in society.

So that when American society achieved its peculiar kind of freedom—an amoral ethos—it did so because the upholders of the most vital part of culture sanctioned it. Without that underpinning, there might have been some hope for this country. Right now there isn’t any hope and the most tragic thing about all of it is that the American people are not aware of it. □

