

4. A New Class in Our Society

There are so many fabulous and wonderful phenomena found everywhere around the globe. In each chunk of earth we explore, we encounter a magnificent order that compels us to humbly submit to its grandeur. In our own time, man has discovered such a marvelous order in even the tiniest organ of the human body that has distracted his mind from the majesty of the cosmos.

Our world overflows with sensational phenomena, some of which have constantly puzzled but enthused man. One of these phenomena is life. For centuries man has engaged his mind in quest for the origin and essence of life. He has spared no effort to determine the answer to this question which has haunted him for ages. Voluminous works have been written on this matter and man's investigation of the phenomenon has led to the birth of various sciences that are devoted to finding the answer to the riddle of life.

When was the first time man took note of life itself? There have been times when man was not aware of facts which seem axiomatic to us today. It will not then be surprising to learn that at a juncture in human history man was not aware of life at all. It is certain, however, that it took man centuries to heed what seems self-evident to us in modern times. It would then not be illogical to investigate about the time when man first took notice of life. What event led to his discovery of this mysterious and wonderful phenomenon called life?

Looking at religious literature, one can easily say that the divine prophets were the first who brought the issue of life and spirit to man. They were the ones who first posed the question of life, its origin and end, death and the Hereafter.

An attempt to find the answer to this question in sources other than the prophetic teachings would avail us of no substantial conclusion. We may only be confronted with a series of vague hypotheses almost impossible to prove. With this in mind, we may then opine that eras passed without man recognizing any of his privileges over other animals in his surroundings. It was probably because a particular .cause or motivation was needed to awaken his- senses to many issues and such a motivation had then not yet occurred in him.

Knowledge through comparison of opposites is a proven scientific method of thinking. In acquiring knowledge of his environment, man needed to note the contradiction existing in nature. A typical example is light and darkness, without knowing the latter, no clear understanding of the former would be gained. So, it is likely that men, unaware of life, came across the lifeless corpse of an animal or man. Examining it, he found no signs of life such as breathing, movement, speech and sound. He might have thought what had caused the immobility of the creature which was moving about until the day before. He probably examined the limbs and parts of the body and found to his surprise that every organ was still in its place.

Why then such immobility? The more he reflected on the issue, the more he sank into confusion. In the next few days he probably forgot about the whole thing. But he kept on observing the same phenomena of death repeatedly. He, thus, gradually developed the idea that there must be another factor which, though invisible, caused movement in those bodies before. It must then be, he thought that an unseen and indescribably intangible factor had caused all the motion, motives and activities of the now immobile creature.

Man called this invisible mysterious thing "spirit" or in philosophical term, "the soul". Through experience and observation man realized that some beings are imbued with an invisible element the soul which is the nucleus of all their activities. Our Islamic scholars also support it.

In his book *Al-Asfar*, Sadrul Mutaallihin (Mulla Sadra) defines soul as "a source of power with which a human body is infused, enabling it to act and employ its various parts to perform activities necessary for sustaining life"

Judging from the aforementioned philosophical and scientific definition, the soul is the fountain of power that drives man to perform his daily activities. In other words, the main characteristic of life is activity, endeavor and struggle. A being which ceases to function and struggle cannot then be considered a living being. Furthermore, scientists have also discovered that evidences of life are not limited to mere movement and struggle.

A grain of wheat (if kept in a vacuum) will never evolve into a seedling. But once it is sown and watered, it grows. Evidences of life are soon manifested when its roots reach out to get nutrition necessary for growth. Such movements result in the sprouting of the grain which later develops leaves and finally bears dense spikes of wheat grains. The various stages of development and reproduction are manifestations of plant life. When a wheat grain reproduces, it completes its evolutionary cycle. This type of evolution which is mainly characterized by an increase in number through reproduction can be called quantitative evolution.

A higher form of life is animal life. Although very similar to plant life in many ways, the range of animal activities and struggle for survival is more extensive. A wheat grain cannot travel or move in space and it withers when it fails to acquire nutrition or the farmer neglects to irrigate the wheat field.

In other words, lack of food and water is enough to block its development. An animal, on the contrary, is capable of employing various techniques on a wider scale for ingestion and survival. It can look for and choose the environment that suits itself. It utilizes multifarious means of defense or offence against its enemies and can develop a more complete method of reproduction. This wide range of activity and struggle is due to the animal's employment of a different means necessary for a more complete life, and i.e., feeling and understanding.

Although animal life, like plant life, pursues the same objective (reproduction and survival), it is still different in the sense that its range of activity is much wider. The highest form of life is that of a human being who leads a much more complicated life with a broader range of activity. Moreover, man pursues a lofty and sublime objective in the process of human evolution to attain perfection.

Life is generally categorized as follows: plant life, animal life and human life. But today, I wish to discuss another kind of life, namely the life of a society. Just like plants, animals and men, the human society, too, is a living thing. According to sociologists, the society goes through evolution, childhood, puberty, adolescence, perfection, old age, decline and death. The society they observe, possesses a certain understanding of its individual members. Its life, they hold, is superior to that of a human being as evidenced by the struggle a society launches in the course of its evolution. The society, however, may resemble a living being or a lifeless thing.

With this sublime concept in mind, let us now study verse 24 of Surah Al-Anfal of the Holy Quran:

"Oh You who believe, reply to the call of Allah and His messenger who call you to that which enlivens you and know that Allah intervenes between man and his heart and it is He; Him you shall return." The holy Quran (8:24)

Now what do you, gentlemen, understand by the "thing which enlivens you." Let us first scrutinize the views held by Quranic exegetists who believe the verse to bear four different meanings. Some have interpreted it as the "life and its revival" as eternal life in the Hereafter. Another group says "life" in this verse refers to science and knowledge of the Quran. A third party of interpreters hold the belief that the verse is calling people to faith as the heart of the faithful is filled with hope and alacrity while the unbeliever's heart is smitten with grief and sorrow. A fourth interpretation is that the verse invites people to jihad in the way of God. This latter group of exegetists so contend because the Holy Quran says in another verse that those who are killed defending the cause of God should not be reckoned as dead. "They are but alive in the presence of God and are given nourishment."

These interpreters argue that "God had His messenger call people to jihad in His path so that they dedicate their lives to His cause and thus join the rank of martyrs who are eternally alive. A subgroup of this latter category hold the view that "revivification" in the verse refers to the life of the society.

The society can survive they say, only through jihad (against corruption) for the preservation of the sanctuaries and rights of the society. Islam is then inviting the people toward the most essential aspect

of human life for their own sake (and salvation) and society; it is jihad which grants them eternal life.

Now, which one of these various interpretations do you consider most appropriate for this holy verse? I would like to remind you of the fact that the verses preceding and following this verse mostly concern jihad. There are also evidences that the verse was revealed after the Battle of *Badr*. In that battle, the Muslims emerged victorious and were jubilant. It was then time for them to further solidify their ranks and take measures to promote the Islamic cause through concerted efforts. The aforementioned factual account indicate that these verses had been sent to encourage the Muslims and prepare them for greater battles and struggles ahead.

I personally believe that this verse has a truly comprehensive meaning. The reference, I think, is made to revivification of the people by Islam which brings up aware and dynamic followers, thus forming a living society.

By living society, I mean a thriving society which is progressive and marked with struggle, mobility and dynamism, one that never ceases to endeavor to establish ideal social conditions and encourage a community that fosters and boosts virtue, piety and decency as it repels corruption and profanity. This is the kind of society Islam aims to establish.

Did Islam practically succeed in setting up such a society? Yes. Islamic history shows that the divine teachings of Islam could establish a dynamic nation 'Ummah' out of a moribund society of the Arab people in only 23 years (after the initial prophetic revelation). A glance at Islamic history reveals accounts full of life, struggle, endeavor and progress in the early Muslim society.

The Islamic community did attract people of alien cultures just as it repelled elements of corruption. It did absorb and make use of the knowledge of other nations while encompassing them with rich Islamic culture and science. Islam has had a glorious past indeed. But regrettably, today's Muslim community is characterized by regression and extreme sluggishness. It is now centuries that Muslims are enwrapped in neglectful slumber, a state totally contrary to that of the early centuries of Islam.

Recently, I have read the book, 'Murujul Dhahab' by Mas'udi, who elucidated on points that struck my interest. As you know, one of the characteristics of modern European thought, i.e. of the post-Renaissance era which swept the Western society was the urge to replace the inductive and analogical approach to natural phenomenon with a deductive and empirical method. I was quite surprised to see Mas'udi endorse such a need (replacing the inductive with the deductive) in many instances in his book.

On one occasion, he has quoted Ja'hidh to have written in his book, 'Ajaibul Buldan' that the Sind River of India was connected to the Nile of Egypt. Mas'udi marveled at such an impudent statement by Ja'hidh who, he said, sat in a corner of his library and thought about geographical phenomena that required empirical observation, not pure imagination and induction. "Ja'hidh," wrote Mas'udi, "reasoned out that since the two rivers were inhabited by crocodiles, they must then be convergent.

Such ambiguities came to be expressed because Ja'hidh and people like him would rely on fictitious analogies unsupported by factual observations and investigation of issues they wanted to discuss." Mas'udi wrote his book in the year 332 of the Hijra calendar in the fourth century after the advent of Islam.

Yet, one cannot but wonder at his sharp insight and scientific understanding. A scholar devoted to Islam, Mas'udi loved and respected the Household of the Holy Prophet, Imam Ali and his descendants. He was a typical example of men who gave shape to a dynamic society based on Islam, a society which was by far ahead of the West in establishing a scientific outlook of the world.

But it is a pity that Muslim communities, especially that of Iran have actually been dormant and asleep for centuries. Sleeping in one sense, connotes death. A sleeping man may be alive with blood circulating in his body, but he is bereft of all movements that reflect the virility and activity of a living man. Today our Muslim societies are petrified in a rigid state of negligence and ignorance. Can our communities still recover from such stagnating inactivity? You, gentlemen, should note that this phlegmatic temperament has dominated over Muslim societies since ten centuries ago.

In describing Constantinople and the Black Sea of Turkey in the same book (*Muruj al Dhahab*) that dealt with history and geography, Mas'udi wrote: "*Not far from Constantinople, there lies the Gulf of Constantinople. At one end where the Gulf tapers the Romans (Byzantine Empire) have built a fortification to repel Muslim warships which would frequent the region to conquer the empire and its remnants in the Mediterranean Sea. But unfortunately, such a glory has ended; those expectations have come to a halt and the Muslims have retreated to their own borders. The Romans do not fight them in Constantinople; they now fight the Muslims in the Muslim territories instead.*"

From Mas'udi's words, we may draw the conclusion that the decline of the Muslims has actually began around the fourth century after the Hijra that is, it has been ten centuries that Muslim societies have become stagnant. Is it still possible to revivify such a society and cure its ailments? During this long period there came forth certain opportunities to awaken the society but Muslims ignored the chance.

There was a good opportunity for Muslims to quell this sluggish attitude during the last 50–60 years when the Western culture and so-called civilization plagued Islamic lands. Had they taken advantage of it, they could have led an honorable life that they deserved. In my view, it was a very great opportunity to awaken and enliven our vigilance, but we lost it. Even then, there were clear sighted intellectuals who called Muslims to action and struggle but which, unfortunately proved of no avail.

Last summer, I was reading the book of late Ayatollah Naini called "*Tanbih al-Ummah wa tanzib al-Millah.*" I observed vividly how this great contemporary religious leader expressed his views on social matters in a bid to awaken his society. For obvious reasons, the late Ayatollah endangered his own position by publishing this book.

However, the book, although written by a prominent religious leader, did not prove as effective in

awakening the people as expected. It failed due to the fact that there were not many such reformist thinkers in those days. A glance at the pages of history proves there were very few elements who were both clear sighted and at the same time religious at that time. This was why our society derived but little benefit from such an auspicious occasion. But in spite of the poor response, the assiduity of the Muslim thinkers in a way motivated Muslims in general to think of improvement.

Today, the more we advance in time the more the number of Muslim intellectuals increases. I think we can confidently claim that in our own time, the reformist, intellectual Muslims have now formed a special new class in our society. They are not few anymore and one can find them in many parts of the country. I myself have come to know a considerable number of these people in Tehran, Mashhad, Shiraz, Qum, Isfahan and other cities.

Efforts must be taken to establish close ties and understanding among the members of this group so that they join hands in waking up the nation from this 10 century long slumber.

The Holy Prophet of Islam (S) said: *"There are different kinds of God-sent breezes that blow at certain times; expose yourself to such."*

The "breezes" of course refer to Divine occasions. There have been several valuable opportunities for a nationwide vigilance but we regretfully let them slip from our hands. Presently, however, we still have a chance and should not let it go wasted. The faithful intellectuals who want to improve their society are now forming a big group and can easily, certainly, render great services in both spiritual (religious) and material (worldly affairs) spheres. But they can serve only upon certain conditions which form the gist of my speech tonight.

One should take lessons from bitter experience of the past and avoid committing the same mistakes. The Constitutional Movement that provided the Muslim nation great chance to rise and eradicate their afflictions and misfortunes and restore their Islamic dignity, was not void of certain pitfalls, the consideration of which will be beneficial to our cause today. A group of intellectual reformists chose to concentrate on the then existing differences in views rather than unite with other faithful people. How can one justify antagonism adopted by a group of believers towards another merely because of their divergent opinions.

Why should Muslims ever use their pens against one another and defame each other for the sake of difference in views? Thus, we can say the efforts for the constitutional movement were more destructive than constructive in nature. One group aimed at denigrating the other and vice versa. Endeavors were then more diffusive rather than harmonious. While a group would negate modern education in a bid to have the support of the newly freed Muslim people, the other would mock at religion thinking it retarded the advent of modern culture and civilization. God forbids that we commit the same mistake and let it strike us again. Such a mistake may only be avoided if the faithful from different walks of life and social state establish more contact, and thus develop a strong mutual understanding.

Recently a group of university students have come to Qum to attend the commemoration ceremony at the 40th day of the demise of the late religious leader, Ayatollah Burujerdi. Numbering about 200, they joined another group of religious intellectuals from the Qum Theological Center in a certain gathering.

In my address to them. I recommended the establishment of such ties between the Theological Center, which is the Muslims' great scientific institution and the university which is a great educational center of the young generation. Such relations, I said, would certainly lead to a further and better understanding between the two. However this is not enough. All of us must strive to promote such relations to a still higher level. We, as I mentioned earlier, should take all possible efforts to know one another fully. The more extensive and diverse such gatherings are, the more they will contribute to our cause.

We, as Muslims, can fully bridge many gaps and settle our differences through peaceful discourses in a friendly and unbiased atmosphere. In this process, as the first step towards a wide scale unity, we should also be careful not to discuss issues of which we do not possess thorough knowledge. No educated person who is specialized in a certain scientific field should permit himself to reject or support any Islamic concept without having sufficient knowledge of the matter. Nor should a theologian versed in Islamic jurisprudence allow himself to express improper views on non- jurisprudential issues. Each should confine his judgment to his area of specialization in which he is most qualified.

Regarding fields of expertise in which we still lack, we should take measures to train people and refrain from making uncalculated and pointless statements in the absence of qualified persons; statements made without thorough understanding of the subject may only serve to widen the gap and create grounds for discord.

In addition to aspects aimed at the negation of the ruling order we also deem it necessary to take positive reformistic measures. Indubitably certain reforms (changes) will require an all-out and multi-dimensional struggle through the negation of the existing order. Just as we disinfect our hands when contaminated, some social reforms simulate the action of a disinfectant; and no improvement can be expected without such disinfecting- moves, i.e., the negation of the whole system. But still we must not neglect positive modes of struggle in the course of an all- persuasive jihad.

We must, by launching positive activities, augment our force and meet the demands of our Islamic community. How can one ever oppose those who take beneficial steps to improve social affairs in various realms by establishing sound and decent educational centers, for instance, or other socio-political institutions in accordance with Islamic teachings.

A society cannot be regarded as living unless it turns into a correct, orderly and active organization. I call your attention to the fact that should we not embark on extensive, constructive activities, all our pleas for improvements will go unanswered. Such pleas may serve to spread the message of Truth and imbibe it in the minds of the people, but they will never be enough to transform the society into a progressive Muslim society.

It is most proper that all Muslim brothers, from any social stratum they may be, allocate a part of their physical, mental, financial and social potentials to the improvement of the constructive reforms that can serve the society both at present and in the future.

Haste should be avoided. We must not expect to derive immense benefits from small effort made in a short time. Haste is a sort of popular ailment among us. We hasten even in our daily chores. This same social illness applies to us when personal growth and perfection is concerned. We delude ourselves expecting great benefits from minor efforts we make in this realm, too. It is like wishing to rear crops before their harvest season.

We, as Muslims, endeavoring to improve our social conditions, should get over this defect, and achieve our goal through implementation of long-term plans. We should also make reservations for the future generations if we can. Even if we know that the succeeding generation will reap the fruit of our present efforts, we should not stagger in performing our duties. We as Muslims, believe that efforts taken in promoting Islam are all registered in a clear record with God. We ourselves, are today, enjoying the fruits of the efforts taken by early Muslims about 1400 years ago.

Let us all live again the epic of Karbala where our third holy Imam, Hadhrat Hussein (Peace be upon him) and his companions, family members and relatives dedicated everything they had, including their lives in order to defend Islam. Could they achieve their Divine objective at the time they took stand against the then corrupt ruler, Yazid, of the Ummayyad Dynasty? Certainly not. They endured all sorts of hardships and ultimately chose martyrdom in order to guard Islam against evil. But their holy goal was achieved by the Shi'ite community several centuries later.

Brothers, gentlemen, let us not forget that we are followers of noble leaders such as Imam Hussein. We must undergo all kinds of hardships for the sake of Islam and the welfare of our Muslim brethren. May God Almighty grant us success in our efforts to follow at the heels of the faithful fighter of the Dawn of Islam.

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