

## 5. Islam and Social Relations

If you can still remember, some five months ago, I discussed the dynamic aspects of Islam in this place. That night, we arrived at the conclusion that Islamic faith revives and mobilizes man and society, severely opposes immobility, stagnation, apathy and indifference. Wherever such sluggish attitudes prevail, either Islam is non-existent in those societies or it has been divested of its noble and lofty spirit.

Early Islam succeeded in molding men and women among its followers who will eternally be revered in the annals of human history. Islam could give birth to such illustrious figures from the then withering moribund and disunited society of Arabia. One can never find their peers among the great personalities of the world.

On that occasion, I also discussed in detail the evidences of life which include growth, struggle, mobility and activity. As living things and animals proceed through various stages of the process of evolution, they employ various modes of movement which are manifested in different ways.

However, empirical observation has proved that certain beings; in spite of their diverse characteristics and multifarious stages in their lives, retain a certain organization and a well-regulated mental faculty which enable them to achieve their ultimate objective. Such a variety of action and movement once observed will lead us to the conclusion that these particular beings differ from other creatures in nature and that they are invested with a special faculty, i.e., the soul or spirit. It is this spirit that inspires movement and life in these beings.

The number of parts of a living being or animal plays a significant role in its activity; and the more orderly and regulated its morphological organization is, the more subtle and wider its range of movement will be. The more extensive and complicated the interrelationship between parts and functions is, the higher its possibility for survival will be. A simple plant or unicellular animal has a very simple structure as the number of parts is very limited. Thus, its structural organization is very weak and the objective it can attain during its life span is insignificant. In more complex (multicellular) plants and animals, the number of parts is more. Hence, their anatomic organization and relationship are much more complicated.

This complexity assigns the being to a higher objective enabling it to play a greater role in life. The honeybee, for instance, in spite of its puny body, enjoys a wide range of activity due to diversity of its parts. As for the human being, one is simply awed at the wonders embedded in such a small frame by God, the Best of Creators. Each year brings us fresh scientific discoveries of more and more parts and of the human body and thus their corresponding functions. The number of nerves which form the nervous tissue in the spinal cord exceeds millions. Numerous nerves connect each organ of the human body to the nervous system. This complicated and wonderful organization and order makes man superior to all other living animals.

Regarding human society, one cannot help but appreciate the extent to which the same (morphological) principle applies. In a society too, the more complicated the organizational factors and their functions are the more organized that society will be. This organization results in more extensive and enduring relations between people and social institutions. And the loftier the objective of a society is, the more exalted and dynamic life its members will lead. This is the reason why Islam considers social relations immensely significant and places great importance on all the factors contributing to the organization of the members of the community the factors that unite individuals who form a society to achieve one and the same goal.

I pointed out in my previous speech that according to sociologists, the human society is in itself an independent entity. An individual, in spite of his various components possesses an identity independent of the parts. An external being, having unity within himself, functions and moves as dictated by his wisdom, will and power. The society, too, being a real entity, has wisdom, will and power of its own, independent of and superior to the wisdom, will and power of its individual members. It is a body whose parts are made up of individuals. This body has intellect, knowledge, movement, life and death.

Sociologists say that what exists externally is the society, not the individual, who, in spite of his social identity and status, is in fact unreal and corporeally non-existent. This is, however, their view, and at present I will not endorse or refute its plausibility. What should be noted is that a society too, like an individual, is born, goes through a life of childhood, puberty, adolescence, youth and old age and is finally transformed after its death. It also experiences and is subject to physical changes; it is sometime, powerful and at time weak. When a society is weak, the bonds that join its members become brittle, resulting in general weakness. In such a state, remedy should be effected to destroy the cause of affliction. Otherwise, the society will perish.

In philosophical language, social affairs are nominal issues not objective. However, their practical effects are real and objective issues subject to the law of cause- and- effect as formulated by contemporary natural scientists.

Islam lays great emphasis on social affairs. To lend strength to social relations, it has devised excellent means that will ward off elements detrimental to the unity of the society. Foremost' would be the strengthening of factors instrumental ill social organization for creation of a better and more effective

order and relations in the society. Secondly, prophylactic measures to eliminate social ills that harm social relations; organization and order, must be taken.

Islam came down, to a people who were bereft of any progressive social order and organization, a belligerent people who would spare nothing to find excuses to fight even over the least significant and at times ridiculous controversies. Islam ended such hostilities, cleansed the hearts of those people, brought them together and formed a powerful body made up of those people, brought them together and formed a powerful body made up of the same belligerent people. The Quran says:

***"And (as for the believers) God hath attuned their hearts. If thou had spent all that is in the earth thou could not have attuned their hearts, but Allah hath attuned them." (8:63)***

It was Islam that dissolved the enmity between members of the Aws and Khazraj tribes, staunch enemies for decades in pre-Islamic Arabia, who fraternized after embracing the faith. It was Islam that brought together the unlettered Bedouins and the urban people (of Arabia) each of whom had been entirely lost in their own vanities.

These two types of people brushed aside selfishness and vain glorious feuds, emancipated themselves from the rancor and hatred that gripped their hearts and joined in Islamic fraternity, thus forming a divine brotherly union. For embracing Islam was an assurance of a lasting cooperation and fraternity between Muslim co-believers. Verse 103 of Surah Alay-Imran of the Holy Quran testifies to this brotherhood:

***"And hold fast, all of you together to the cable of Allah, and do not separate and remember the favor of Allah upon you. You were enemies but He united your hearts: so by His grace you became brethren..."(3: 103)***

In the early days of the *Hijra*, the Holy Prophet publicly declared the fraternal relation of the emigrants (*Muhajirun*) and the helpers (*Ansar*). Since then, Muslims became brethren. Verse 10 of Surah Al-Hujurat confirms this fraternity:

***"The believers are unto one another like brothers. Therefore make peace between your brethren and observe your duty to Allah that haply ye may obtain mercy. (49: 10)***

Islam urged Muslims to associate with each other and establish close social ties. Furthermore, it considered seclusion, aloofness and isolation indecorous, and enjoined upon the Muslims to regularly visit each other and be informed of the welfare and affairs of their brothers-in-faith. In Al-Kafi, the Book of "Belief and Unbelief," the chapter on "Visiting Brothers", Imam Baqir (peace be on him) has been narrated to have said:

***"God Almighty has a special garden reserved for three types of people in the other world, namely a man who rules in favor of the Truth despite the cost of his own interest; a man who calls on his Muslim brothers for the sake of God: and a man who placed the interests of his Muslim brothers above his own***

*(Self-sacrifice)."*

Islam forbids Muslims from keeping themselves aloof from public affairs. It urges them to think of the welfare of the Muslim people. In the same book, the chapter on "Efforts to improve Muslims affairs," the first narration quotes Imam Sadiq who quoted the Holy Prophet (God's peace be upon him and his family) as having said: *"The one who gets up in the morning without striving to improve the affairs of Muslims, is not a Muslim."*

That is, he who leaves his bed in the mornings just thinking of his own personal interests without giving the slightest thought to social affairs and expediencies of the Islamic Ummah and he who believes that God created man to think merely of his selfish ends, is not a member of the Muslim community. Such a person is like a parasite who feeds on and benefits from the resources of the Islamic society, but who does not contribute to the improvement of its affairs. He might be a Muslim and his property, life and honor are protected by the Muslim law, but one whose existence is useless to the Islamic anything.

Islam not only considers it a duty of a Muslim to attend to social and public affairs but also to the needs of his brothers- in faith, which tantamount to a great act of worship that deserves a divine reward.

In the same book, (Al-Kafi), in the chapter entitled, "Attending to the needs of the faithful", the second narration quotes Imam Abul-Hassan (peace be upon him) as saying: *"God has certain servants on the earth who are divinely inspired to attend to the affairs of others and strive to improve their conditions and meet their needs. Such persons will be saved from fear and punishment on the Day of Judgment"*.

Regrettably, today, the Muslims situation has taken on hues almost repulsive to what the divine teachings of Islam preach. Muslims today are heedless of social issues. Very few people are aware of their society's interests and needs. A great majority of Muslims of our time know no expediency but their own and think only of their interests, instead of the Ummah's.

There are many people who actually consider social interests unworthy of their time. Even those who are aware are so shortsighted that they give preference to their own superficial interests over the most sublime expediencies of the Ummah. There is another type of narrow minded people branching from the last group whose concern does not go beyond the borders of a certain region or country. Such people easily prefer national interests over those of the Islamic nation (Ummah).

Unfortunately those whose lives are dedicated to the achievement of the Islamic Ummah's sublime interests are very few. The shortage of such elements should be considered a critical case. The dangers it forebode have been greatly stressed. The Muslims have been repeatedly warned against the evil consequences should such a state prevail over their community.

By letting such a distressing state afflict their societies today, the Muslims have not only neglected a great divine order but also have impaired the social order, thus aggravating the already grave problems.

It should be noted by all that if Muslims fail to allocate a portion of their time, wealth and property to the improvement of social affairs, they will eventually be deprived of enjoying the outcome of their own pursuits. A father who makes use of all possible means to procure wealth for himself and his family by making more money may in the end find the same wealth detrimental to both him and his children in a corrupt environment and society.

His attention should be called to the moral degeneration he and his family may be exposed to. In a corrupt environment, one's provisions and property will be employed in a corrupt way; human talents and efforts and energies will be vitiated by retrogressive and indecorous practices. If the members of a society fail to be, as the Holy Prophet of Islam (Peace be upon him and his family), put it, "a subject as well as a leader thus feeling responsible for other subjects," no one can be certain of a lasting and bright future. In a corrupt society, there is always the fear that a social storm may suddenly break out and utterly destroy all the people's possessions as well as their hope for a better future. Should such a typhoon rage, no one, whether good or bad, will be saved. The content of verse 25 of Surah Al-Anfal should be noted in this connection:

***"And guard yourselves against a chastisement which cannot fall exclusively on those of you who are wrong doers, and hark, God shall severely punish those who refrain from launching Jihad (In His path)." (8:25)***

In an environment where social responsibilities are neglected and people are heedless of their commitments in preserving the interests of the community, opportunity of reformistic pursuits will be very limited resulting in a failure to effect any reforms.

In today's environment, one's energy is spent partly on the eradication of elements that obstruct reforms. A great part of one's endeavors is also wasted on unproductive activities. The remaining small fraction of about 5 to 10 percent of the entire manpower is consumed in the application of reforms and development projects. Obstacles may prove discouraging to one intending to conduct a reform.

This frustrating situation can be observed in developmental, cultural, social and even commercial fields, Muslims have, time and again, been warned against such a danger in narrations concerning the principle of guidance regarding the values of good and bad i.e *Amr-i Bil- Ma'aruf wa Nahi-an al-Munkar*.

In volume 5 of Forou'a Al-Kafi, the chapter on *Amr-i bil Ma'aruf wa Nahi-an al-Munkar*, the third narration says that Imam Abu Hassan (Peace be upon him) has been quoted as having said: "*O Muslims, fulfill your duty in propagating the good and decent and preventing evil and indecent lest the government be placed at the hands of wrong-doers, and if it so happens, the good among you will not be able to improve your affairs. God will not heed their supplications nor will their cries be heard by the people. They will then face countless problems in taking steps to reform and improve social affairs.*"

Islamic ethics also enjoin upon the faithful to pay close attention to outward appearance in a manner that will improve his personality. A Muslim should be clean and keep all his belongings tidy as well. In Islam

"cleanliness is part of faith." It is imperative that a Muslim take care of his appearance and use perfume to be pleasing to people with whom he associates.

In Forou'a al-Kafi, Volume 6, the Book of Decoration, the chapter on "Cleanliness," narration four, Imam Abu Hassan (peace be upon him) is quoted to have said: *"It ill-becomes a Muslim to use perfume less than once a day. Should he find himself unable to, he then ought to put on perfume every other day or at least every Friday. He should enhance his appearance. He should trim his beard and style his hair properly and decently. He should check his appearance in a mirror before leaving home and go out only with a neat, smart and clean appearance and clothing"*.

Behavior-wise, Muslims are ordered to be cheerful and sociable. A man once asked the Holy Prophet for advice on how he should behave. The messenger of God advised him to "meet your Muslim brother with a cheerful and pleasant face." Imam Sadiq was asked what "good morals" meant. The Imam replied, "Be humble before people". You should use pleasant language and should never meet your brother (in faith) without a smile on your face.

In "Al-Kafi", the Book of Faith and Unbelief, the chapter on "Pleasing Appearance," in narrations three and four, we read that *"pleasant and honest words are outstanding signs of one's faith in Islam."* Lying undermines the very foundation of social relations, preventing people from trusting one another. This is what has afflicted present day Muslim societies and has shaken their pillars.

A Muslim should not be suspicious of others: one should be considered innocent unless proven otherwise. We must be aware of the content of Verse 12 of Surah Al-Hujurat:

***"O, ye who believe, Shun much suspicion; for lo, some type of suspicion is a crime...."(49: 12)***

Man's thoughts, words and deeds should be governed by self-restraint. He cannot follow just any line of thought that may occur in his mind. He should not, for instance; judge a certain person to be against him just because he had not received him warmly on an occasion; or for instance he had ignored him during a gathering, etc. Islam enjoins upon the believers to: "always judge the deeds of your Muslim brother most favorably and refrain from being suspicious of him." A Muslim should not talk behind people's back. He should not make remarks in the absence of his Muslim brother that will make the latter resentful. Verse 12 Surah Al-Hujurat says:

***"And spy not, neither backbite one another. Would one of you love to eat the flesh of his dead brother?" (49: 12)***

One had better solve his problems with his brothers- in faith in direct encounters rather than talk ill behind their backs which will provide the ill-willed persons with a pretext to foment enmity between people. Once one speaks ill of others, one actually provides excuses for malevolent people to magnify the issue and relay it to the concerned person. Thus a big problem will be created. As stated in the Quran:

**"...persecution is worse than slaughter...." (2: 191)**

Besides, Islam advises the faithful never to cast away their family and personal dignity and reputation nor to treat others arrogantly:

***"And do not turn your face away from people in contempt, nor go about in the land exulting overmuch; surely Allah does not love any self-conceited boaster"(31: 18)***

These are but a few evidences of the significance that Islam places on the unity of Muslims and their cohesive relation. Islam wants its followers to "be like one soul in various bodies." In the words of Rumi:

*The faithful are numerous, but their faith is one,*

*Numerous in body are the believers but one in soul,*

*The souls of the wolves and dogs are asunder but united are the souls of the lions of God.*

*I perceive their souls as one*

*Since a soul is a hundred compared to the body*

*It is like the sun in the sky*

*whose light scatters as a hundred rays, upon yards of houses,*

*But these hundred rays come from one in heavens.*

*When from among houses walls are removed,*

*And their foundations demolished.*

*The souls of the faithful will merge into one.*

However, this spiritual union as discussed by Rumi differs slightly from what I am driving at. What he has said concerns a gnostic understanding of the unity of cleansed souls. But what I mean refers to the social union of Muslims; how they relate to form one whole unit just as limbs and organs function as a unit to make up the human body; or as the foundation and pillars give rise to a building.

The book. "Kunuzu-1-Haqqa'iq" (p. 136) has quoted the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) as having said: *"Muslims are related to one another as the parts of a building are. Each part is a support for another contributing to its solidification."*

Muslim relations should resemble the coherence of the parts of a building which may collapse if a part of its base is removed. To meet their internal needs, Muslims should establish very close ties with each other. It ill-becomes Muslim communities to stretch their hands towards non-Muslims, like they do

today. The Muslims should be strong, military wise, to be able to defend themselves against invasion and should never succumb to humiliation and defeat. Let us all note the message of Verse 29, Surah Al Muhammad:

***"Verily, Muhammad is the messenger of God and those with him are firm against unbelievers and compassionate among themselves; thou seest them bowing down, prostrating, and seeking Allah's blessings and satisfaction; mark of prostration is seen in their faces, such is their description in the Torah and the Gospel - as sown corn that sendeth forth its sprout then strengthens and becomes stout and stands firm upon its stern, delighting the sowers, that He may enrage the disbelievers at the sight of them."(48:29)***

Islam wants the faithful to destroy the causes of corruption and disruption that may lead to disintegration of the society. It urges Muslims to set up an organized and powerful community. Islamic codes have also been made in such a way as to guard the society against differences, conflicts and dualism. This is a valuable principle to which close attention must be paid in studying Islamic laws and ethics.

Islam wants the Muslims to form a solidified and organized community as expressed in Verse 4 of surah AlSaff:

***"Allah loves those who, In His cause, fight in ranks as if they were a solid structure."(61: 4)***

The believers should be united in ranks when performing prayers and other acts of worship, social activities as well as when engaged in battles. Verse 43 of Surah al-Baqarah (2) enjoins upon the faithful to perform their prayers in ranks with those who bow in worship in congregational prayers.

There are some significant points in this regard that have escaped popular attention, on which Islam's view should be clarified. One of them concerns factors that contribute to Muslim disunity such as class differences. What does Islam propose for the eradication of such problems?

Differences of views are also among the basic factors which impede social coordination and cooperation. Assuming that all are invested with enough perceptive 'clairvoyance' and good attention in a reforming environment, is it possible that all share one and the same view and attitude towards social issues? Certainly not.

A group of concerned Muslims who wish to improve social affairs may sit together, discuss a certain issue and yet fail to arrive at a conclusive decision and consensus. It is natural that an issue face opposition; one cannot prevent it. What solution then does Islam propose to eliminate differences in popular views and choices? There are also other issues of secondary significance the solution of which depends on the solution of the points previously discussed. Indubitably, nations and communities have been confronted .with such problems, found solutions and have succeeded in removing obstacles to a great extent. Actually, the main factor that will precipitate progress and superiority lies in their struggle to solve such social problems.

Now, if our Muslim society wishes to advance, it also has to tackle those problems and strive to remove them in accordance with Islamic principles. We can never make any achievement if our people turn to corruption and debauchery and exceed all bounds of piety and continence.

I once again stress that the key to advancement of living nations of the world lies in their efforts to solve these basic social problems, problems which we, as the Muslim Iranian nation, have not only failed to solve, but which we have not even thought of solving.

There is not much time left for us to discuss these two issues further tonight but I hope to talk about them more in detail some other time. However, some of my colleagues and perhaps some writers interested in Islam have dealt with these two major problems. I, myself, have considered these issues within limits set by Islamic principles and will discuss my views at an appropriate time.

But I would like to mention here as I have already said before that, thanks to God, cognizant and concerned faithful Muslims interested in social reforms have increased in number. Distinct from the rest of the society, many of them have somehow established strong relations with each other, forming a "new class in our society."

To the members of this new class I have this message: "You defenders of the Islamic cause, you who are gifted with profound devotion, pure insight, it is truly deplorable that not everybody who professes Islam practice it in their daily lives. But nevertheless, I call upon you on whom our society has pinned its hope for a brighter future to practice these lofty teachings. Be truthful, refrain from backbiting, establish sincere and strong friendly ties among yourselves, eschew arrogance and selfishness and cooperate with one another in social affairs. Can you say prayers and fast in Ramadhan (which strengthens one's faith and purifies one's soul) and at the same time attend to ethical and social issues? Can we, who are committed to a common cause, talk less and act more?"

Would it not be better if we take efforts to know each other more? Would it not be better if we shun pomposity and ceremonial ambiguities when communicating and socializing? Would it not be better if we abide by the Islamic teachings and laws in our business transactions, contracts and dealings and thereby practically display our Islamic tendency. We should never fail to reflect on the merits that obedience generates just because not all people abide by the Islamic orders.

When Hadhrat Ali was lying on his deathbed after receiving his assassin's fatal blow, he enjoined upon members of his household and others "*to never deflect from Islamic ethics and teachings even if all people did so.*" He also urged them to be kind and close to one another and never to be disunited. During his last moments the Imam asked his family members and others to "*support each other in social dilemmas. Employ all means; do not spare even your lives and property in defending one another.*"

Even in this declining society of ours, if a group of people endeavor to become excellent examples of Islam, they can certainly pave the way toward the crystallization of their goal in spite of the unfavorable social conditions.

A competent young man who studies and was trained under me and some of my friends in Qum for a while has been sent to Europe for further studies. His behavior in a Western environment has been such that his father thanked us saying that his son has made himself quite a reputation through his right conduct; and that he both studies and propagates Islamic teachings. This young man is invested with truthfulness, Islamic faith, perseverance and competence. Self-confident and determined, he has launched a battle against the present corrupt environment lest it should affect him.

Should we, like members of a certain social group, not take efforts to put reins on our environment by seriously abiding by the supreme teachings of Islam?

I implore God, the Almighty to help us succeed in becoming better men of action. May we gain a more complete understanding of Islam and be able to abide by its laws. May we be granted the capability to take steps to know and cooperate with one another, and never shun our social responsibilities.

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