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## Lesson Six: What is Revelation?

Within the overall scheme of being, revelation is the precise, complex and unique relationship that links the Prophets to God. It is the sole source for the knowledge of prophethood, the basis for the cognition and insights of the Prophets, and the vehicle for their exalted mission of bringing about fundamental and positive change in human society. Through their superior, clear and direct awareness of the realities of being, the Prophets are inspired by God with heavenly teachings and laws, which they then present to the human beings as messages from the realm of the unseen.

The process of revelation consists of an angel softly conveying certain matters to the hearing of a Prophet. Sometimes the Prophet sees the angel and exchanges words with him. If matters are conveyed only to the heart, this is a question of inspiration, not of revelation.

Prophets who shone forth in the darkness at a time when discrimination, injustice and disunion had reached their height, began their missions with a command received through revelation. By arousing human beings' minds, they directed their attention to the subtle perceptions latent within their own primordial nature and attempted to cleanse them of the effects left by the beliefs and customs they had acquired from their environment.

Thus they were able to make blossom the higher capacities and urges of the human being and to guide them towards happiness and the good.

Of course, the ultimate nature of revelation and the type of perception that leads to it is not known to us, because it lies beyond the categories accessible to normal perception and the forms of awareness that are available to the human being through the operation of his creative intellect on the data and knowledge that he acquires. Despite the spiritual and intellectual legacies that have been passed down to us, we are unable to perceive the particular characteristics of this relationship with God. This has always remained a dark corner inaccessible to our thought and imagination, and it may always remain so.

Nonetheless, it is certain that abundant spirituality and extraordinary inward purity in a given individual

may create in him a certain receptivity that fits him to receive God's abundant revelation and to be chosen for undertaking the mission of a Prophet.

At the same time, being actually able to receive heavenly commands and to be linked to the pre-eternal source of revelation depends exclusively on the will of God. The purity and worthiness of an individual cannot be a causative factor in the establishment of that relationship.

Since the purpose of prophethood is the comprehensive guidance of the individual and society toward perfection and the laying down of a legal system and a social order for mankind, the assumption of responsibility involved is necessarily heavy and taxing. To accept bearing the burden of prophethood requires great capacity and energy. God therefore bestows the station of prophethood on those who have the ability and capacity to bear the heavy responsibilities of delineating a practical course for the human being to follow through the light of revelation.

Being appointed to this mission is like a storm that envelops the whole being of the Prophet. It causes his mind to overflow with the light of insight and wisdom, and by virtue of this clarity of vision, as well as his freedom from arbitrary and selfish desires and erroneous thought, he mobilizes all his capacities with an inexhaustible ardor to fulfill his Divine mission.

Iqbal, the celebrated thinker of the Indian subcontinent, compares the Prophets with other spiritual personalities whom he calls mystics. Although what he has to say is interesting, the comparison of Prophets with mystics is inadequate.

"The mystic does not wish to return from the repose of 'unitary experience'; and even when he does return, as he must, his return does not mean much for mankind at large. The Prophet's return is creative. He returns to insert himself into the sweep of time with a view to control the forces of history, and thereby to create a fresh world of ideals. For the mystic, the repose of 'unitary experience' is something final; for the Prophet it is the awakening, within him, of world-shaking psychological forces, calculated to completely transform the human world." [1](#)

The phenomenon of revelation neither contradicts the norms of creation nor is it possible to find in philosophy or those of the natural sciences that have not been contaminated by dogmatic prejudices masquerading as science, any proof for the impossibility of such a relationship between the human being and God, for the content of revelation does not constitute a category opposed to science. It is possible that in the course of time, science will advance to a point where it can show interesting findings in this area.

As we know, being is infinite; therefore, the possibility of knowledge and perception also extends toward the infinite. In our judgment of matters we should not imagine that we are able, within our own limited historical period, to comprehend the entirety of being and its complex realities in their majesty and infinitude.

Rather we must hope that as human knowledge expands and increases, certain mysteries will be disclosed to us and matters of which we are now ignorant will become clarified.

The ability of the Prophets to communicate with God, to receive and pass on messages from the world of the unseen without any material instruments, is in no way inferior to a radio receiver and transmitter; on the contrary, its effectiveness is much greater and stronger than that of any instrument manufactured by humans.

At night, ships on the ocean make use of radar in order to find out about other ships approaching, and radar can also be used to send pilotless planes to whatever destination may be desired. If the human mind can produce radar waves, why cannot it not also emit and receive other waves that are unknown to us and unrecognized by us? Is the human being less than the instrument he has created himself?

Once we understand the truths suggested by these questions, we can no longer assume an attitude of denial when faced with mysterious and complex phenomena. With a profound understanding of phenomena, and with a wide panorama open in front of him, human being's consciousness and culture will ultimately reach a point where many truths and mysteries will be unfolded before him.

Although the human being has sense perception in common with the animals, some senses are far more highly developed in certain animals than in the human being. There are mysterious forms of perception in animals that scientists are unable to comprehend.

It is not necessary that waves should be transmitted by means of metal instruments. Moths have something similar to radar waves, so, in principle, we may say that waves can be produced, received and emitted by flesh, skin and bones. Would it be correct to regard the human being as less than a moth?

An animal can be blindfolded and transported hundreds of kilometers away from its home, but astonishingly it is able to make its way back. What capacity and what type of perception is it that enables it to return to its original location? What capacity is it that gives rise to this remarkable, unerring sense of direction? What instrument produces these rays, and in accordance with what frequency?

Scientists have undertaken different experiments to understand how birds find their direction, but they have never been able to neutralize this capacity either in a bird or in any other animal.

Numerous waves are broadcast from every corner of the globe, waves which may be received elsewhere, yet we are totally unaware of them. We do not yet understand the true nature of energy, of light, or of waves, so how can we grant ourselves the right to deny revelation which arises from the elevated nature, the pure vision, and the special relationship of Divinely chosen personages with God? Does the fact that such a relationship is unavailable to us constitute a proof of its impossibility for everyone?

There is no scientific proof negating the possibility of revelation. The fact that science has been unable, down to the present, to discern the sources of revelation does not mean that the fact of revelation should be regarded as a scientifically unacceptable phenomenon.

When we cannot fully solve, with some scientific interpretation, the problem of the unique and astonishing perceptions and sense that are used by animals to guide them in their existence; when we cannot comprehend the nature of the mysterious transmitter that is secreted in certain birds, enabling them to communicate with the opposite sex over great distances – given these inabilities, how can we insist on trying with the methods of the empirical sciences to solve the problem of revelation, the unique relationship existing between one exalted human being and the source of all being?

If the phenomenon of revelation lies outside the scope of sense perception and experimentation, and human knowledge has been unable, up to the present, to clarify this kind of reality, why should the impotence of science in this area arouse doubt and hesitation in us? The French scholar de la Mane says concerning the impossibility of knowing the ultimate reality and essence of God: "What a fool is the denier who says, 'since I do not understand His true essence, therefore, He does not exist.'! If he can define a single grain of sand, I will bring God before him!"

Revelation is a particular mode of awareness and perception that occurs in certain rare individuals. The nature of that awareness is clear enough to them, and if it is unknowable to others, it is because they do not find in themselves that mysterious super awareness. However, through studying the properties and effects of that form of awareness, they can discern the truth or falsehood of those who lay claim to it and see whether or not they truly possess that great and abundant source of knowledge.

## **Revelation in the Qur'an**

The word revelation is used frequently in the Noble Qur'an, and its various occurrences demonstrate that revelation is not confined to human beings. However, the unfolding of revelation is connected to the general progress of all beings toward perfection, and the highest stage of revelation, which the human being alone is fitted to receive from the world of the unseen, consists of that which God sends to His chosen Messengers based on the need of them for Divine guidance.

All phenomena – whether it be the plants that raise their heads above the soil, in the planets, the constellations, and the sun which aid us with their heat, their light and their rotation – benefit the human being by fulfilling their functions in accordance with a certain type of revelation.

The laws and the order which govern the whole expanse of being and on the basis of which all things take shape, demonstrate that the whole of being is imprinted with a certain revealed law.

The entire universe is, then, never deprived, even for an instant, of the favor of God's law.

Once we see matters in this light, is there any phenomenon which can be said to lie beyond the scope of

God's revelation? Is not obedience to the order of creation a form of worship, one which involves neither logic nor knowledge? God provides for the needs of the infant even before its birth by placing milk, the most appropriate form of sustenance for it, in the reservoir of the mother's breast, so that the sustenance of the child is ready for it as soon as it enters the world. Why then should it not be possible for God as Sustainer to have prepared in advance the life-giving food needed by human beings and societies as they evolve, thereby providing future generations with the appropriate and necessary sustenance?

Considering the fact that revelation is not restricted to the human being, and the will of God and His signs are at work in the ordering of the sun and the moon and the succession of day and night, the revelation sent to the Prophets may also be said to lie at the very heart of the mechanism of the universe, following its general and comprehensive laws while preserving its own distinctive features. This should not be taken to negate the role of the human being as a free and independent being living within the world of contingencies; the assistance rendered unilaterally by nature to the human being does not diminish his value and standing.

Clearly, the spirit of every individual human being does not receive revelation; not everyone can establish a direct relationship with the heavenly realm and receive laws and ordinances from God without intermediary. One of the reasons for this is that humans as a species are strongly subject to instinctual desires and material causes and limitations; this constitutes an obstacle which prevents the human being from attaining the conditions necessary for a direct relationship with the supramaterial realm. In addition, as was pointed out above, the receipt of commands from heaven depends entirely on God's will. Thus the Qur'an says:

***"God knows best where to place His message." (6: 124)***

Without recourse to some instrument, we cannot hear the waves that are broadcast by transmitters throughout the world, so we need an instrument with two complementary capacities: on the one hand, it must receive the waves in the air exactly as they are transmitted, and on the other, it must convey them to our ear. Failing this, we will be unable to benefit from the waves that are being broadcast.

Likewise, mankind similarly needs those outstanding individuals who have two complementary properties: on the one hand, they will be linked to the material dimensions of human life, and, on the other hand, on account of certain powerful spiritual capacities, they will be in simultaneous contact with two worlds.

Those individuals are, of course, the Prophets, who on account of possessing these two properties have been chosen by the Creator as highly evolved beings able to receive His message. Having received from the source of all being those positive, constructive commands of God and the elevated principles of culture that derive from them, they then convey them to the inhabitants of the world.

<sup>1</sup>. Allama Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, ed. M. Saeed Sheikh, Lahore, 1986, page 99.

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