

Lesson Three: To Which Class Of Society do The Prophets Belong?

In this chapter we are going to discuss the social origins of the Prophets themselves, i.e., to find out the social class to which the Prophets belonged. We are going to see whether they belonged to the rich people, aristocrats and holders of worldly power or to the poor, the needy and the deprived. It is, in fact, very important to know the social and economic classes from which the Prophets have arisen in the course of history, founded monotheistic movements and revolutions and provided the masses with divine words and messages.

The Holy Qur'an, the Traditions and the *Nahjul Balaghah* are rich sources, which can help us in the analysis of this matter, but here the emphasis is only on the words of the *Nahjul Balaghah*. In the long and famous sermon of *al-Qasi'ah* (the Sermon of Disparagement) there are statements which deserve careful reflection and which offer information concerning the matter being discussed.

The statements run as follows: "certainly, if God were to allow anyone to indulge in pride, He would have allowed it to His selected prophets and vicegerents. But God, the Sublime, disliked vanity for them and liked humbleness for them. Therefore, they laid their cheeks on the ground, smeared their faces with dust, bent themselves down for the believers and remained humiliated people (they were from the oppressed people). God tested them with hunger, afflicted them with difficulties, tested them with fear, and upset them with troubles."¹

Here, the Commander of the Faithful speaks about pride and vanity and emphasizes that since God disliked these two qualities; He misrepresented them in the eyes of His Prophets and righteous beings. Therefore, the Prophets hated self-deceit and superiority complexes, but liked humbleness and humility. Thus, they bent themselves down for the believers, lived among the lowest classes of the people, rubbed their faces with the dust (in prostration) before God and refrained from indulging in haughtiness. They did, in effect, what the Holy Qur'an orders to be done to the parents. It says:

„... and lower to them (one's parents) the wing of humbleness out of mercy ... “ (17:24)

The Prophets, according to the Commander of the Faithful were from the oppressed masses of the people. They knew the pains and agonies of the needy. They felt, for instance, what hunger was, because God had tried them with hunger. The Holy Qur'an quotes Moses, peace be upon him, to have said, ***"Oh God! I need what you shall send me."***

According to narrations, Moses, peace be upon him, was hungry and implored God in this manner to send him bread so that he could satiate his hunger. Thus, the Prophets felt the pains of hungry people. They had tasted the sufferings of life. They knew well the troubles of hard physical labor in cold and hot weathers. They understood the meaning of hardship.

Timidity and the state of being fearful are characteristics of the oppressed. They are usually fearful of the future, poverty and the dominance of a powerful hand over their destinies. They are always worried and in a state of mental disturbance, concerning the existing situations and the coming conditions. They expect at any moment to be put under pressure by a Powerful oppressor.

Likewise, the Prophets suffered from such fears and anxieties and, to say the least, were so surrounded by hardships and difficulties as to become pure in the same way as gold derives its purity under the pressure of very hot temperature. In fact, the Prophets were not pampered individuals to suddenly come Out of their Palaces and call the people to make a revolution.

There was a close link between them and the common people. They had, like all members of the society been subjected to ignorance, tasted the pains and sufferings of life and then became worthy to be called 'Prophets'.

The Definition of the Deprived (mustad'af)

A society dominated by ignorance is always made up of two groups of people. One group consists of those who make Plans, administer society and have total authority over all affairs. The other group consists of the subjects and subordinates who have nothing to do with different affairs of society. They work hard (and thus they are not good-for-nothings as they are usually called, compared for example, to the amount of work Pharaoh performed with the slaves in building the Pyramids), but they have no right to apply their will, personality and points of view in the administration of the affairs of their society.

The first group is a minority consisting of the powerful families and dynasties with various degrees of authority over society. They are called 'the arrogant' (*mustakbirin*). The second group are the common people and the masses who are regarded as the weak and who are devoid of authority whatsoever. They are called 'the deprived' (*mustad'afin*). Our own country, during the corrupt regime of Pahlavi, was administered by a limited number of individuals, with the Shah at the head of them. It is true that an institution named the 'National Consultative Assembly' existed but all the decisions were made by the Shah and his American advisers and dictated to the members of the Assembly, who had no will of their own.

At the lower levels, the big money makers who acted in collusion with governmental personages, by governor–generals and so forth, made decisions. In fact, the total authority was centralized in the hands of one person, the Shah. If all the ministers, Assembly members, director

Generals and the like agreed on something, but the Shah opposed; it was his will and decision, which prevailed. The rest of the people, i.e. the masses, had no authority (even over their own destinies) to interfere with the affairs pertaining to foreign relations (with Russia and America, for instance), internal industries, agriculture, animal husbandry, etc. let alone matters concerning religion and morality. They had no right to meddle with the total course of affairs of their society due to the absolute lack of democracy, voting and elections in the country.

This state of affairs is nowadays an obvious characteristic of all socialist countries but in a more respectable form, i.e. one party (the Communist Party) possesses the total power and authority in administering the affairs of these countries. In fact, the high governmental cadres, supreme councils and the general secretary himself determine all the affairs of these countries. Other people have no right to express their viewpoints, and their will and decisions are not taken for granted. Thus, mental development is repressed in such countries, and perhaps this is why the youth usually engage in Sports and physical training and blossom out as the first rate athletes in international competition such as the Olympics as we observed in the recent Olympic games held in Russia.

In western societies, too, the situation is more or less the same (mostly in the so–called civilized countries of America and Europe where 'freedom' and 'democracy' have widespread literal application). Nowadays, there are unfortunately some people who try to transform freedom and democracy to western conceptions of freedom and democracy, without knowing that the West itself is bereft of real freedom; (in America, West Germany and the likes, people imagine that they elect their representatives freely whereas the reality is that it is specific currents which lead them to one side or another to cast their votes in favor of one party or another. Recent elections in America and the conflicts between the Democratic and Republican parties are the best evidence, verifying this reality).

Generally speaking, in all countries of the world, people are divided into two classes: the deprived and the arrogant. The deprived masses are themselves two groups: the needy and the non–needy. In fact, a poor and wretched peasant who performs fifteen hours of physical labor a day under the difficulties of rain, snow and hot weather and one who lives an ordinary life, being a shopkeeper, or employee, etc., without suffering so much, are both in the category of the deprived, because both of them are considered to be worthless and good–for–nothing and are devoid of the right to participate in the administration of their society.

According to the Commander of the Faithful in the quoted Sermon, the Prophets belonged to the deprived classes and, like them, have been deprived of the authority to carry out a responsibility in their society. A historical review of the life–accounts of Muhammad, peace and the mercy of God be upon him and his descendants, and other Prophets will clarify this matter further.

Moses, peace be upon him, was born to a deprived family among the children of Israel who lived under severe pressures. But after birth he was brought in a completely arrogant house and became a favorite with the Pharaoh's family although he had not been born of the Pharaoh's wife.

He was brought up under the best living possibilities, the most delicious food and different kinds of luxuries (as a perfect aristocrat). Then, when Pharaoh noticed that he was nourishing an enemy within his house, Moses decided to escape. In fact, Moses had begun his invitation and calling people to God, had started his revolutionary propagations within the royal palace and had succeeded in converting the Pharaoh's wife to submission to God when Pharaoh experienced a feeling of danger and decided to prosecute him. Moses escaped to Egypt.

To say the least, Moses became a Prophet and invited the people to make a revolution when he was within the royal house and at the peak of arrogance (this biographical account of Moses is narrated in the Qur'an, and no use was made here of the Traditions).

Our Prophet, Muhammad, peace and the mercy of God be upon him and his descendants was born in a tribal house of high rank. He was the grandson of and a favorite with 'Abd al-Muttalib, the chief of Mecca (although he was, unlike Pharaoh, a pious, chief and a believer in God). When his father, Abdullah, who was one of the dearest children of 'Abd al-Muttalib, died in youth, the latter brought up Muhammad, peace and the mercy of God be upon him and his descendants, until he became four years of age (although Moses was the favorite with a great emperor and Muhammad with a tribal chief, both of them enjoyed the favor of highly respectful families).

Then 'Abd al-Muttalib passed away and Muhammad came under the guardianship of his uncle Abu Talib who did not enjoy the same respect as his father, 'Abd al-Muttalib, but who was himself a distinguished personality, not belonging to the masses.

Abu Talib acted as a good guardian for a period of time and then he was afflicted with poverty. Thus, Muhammad lost the (financial) support of his uncle at this time. But before long he married Khadija, a rich woman. He first acted as a functionary to Khadija but later on, (fifteen years before his appointment to prophethood) he married her, thus becoming a relatively rich man in Medina.

The very financial state remained with him until he became a Prophet at the age of forty (this is why it is said that Islam advanced through Khadija's wealth and "Ali's sword").

Accordingly, the Prophet of Islam was born to an aristocratic family and lived a comfortable and affluent life until God appointed him to prophethood. After the appointment, however, due to the high expenses of propagation and calling people to monotheism and due to the lack of opportunity for conducting business, he became poor.

Other prophets, too, were more or less wealthy. It is in the Traditions (although there is no clear, historical accounts available) that Job, for example, possessed lands, gardens and trees which were

destroyed when God wanted to test his belief. David, too, had a rural origin. He was a commoner. Yet he became a commander and a ruler. Solomon was born in the house of this commander (David).

In fact, this chosen Prophet of God (although there is no difference between him and Moses as far as his purity, piety, revolutionary spirit and prophethood are concerned) was the son of a ruler. Abraham was born in the house of an idol-carver, and the history of nations and religions reveals that idol-carvers were not only not among the low, deprived classes but were also considered to be saintly and respectable.

We come to the conclusion, therefore, that a considerable number (not all of them) of the Prophets have been brought up among affluent and powerful families. Thus, we have two points here to be considered along with each other: First, in the Commander of the Faithful saying that Prophets have belonged to the deprived and humble masses of the people. Second, the Prophets (some of them), as we see above, have been born among the socially, comfortable families of high ranks.

Are these two realities incompatible? No It is not the main point here to see whether they are compatible or not, The main point is to nullify the (communists') imaginary legend that all the revolutionary agents have originated from the proletarian, bare-footed and needy classes. What is essential is that a revolutionary person (be he a leader of the revolution or a commoner) should be dressed with revolutionary morals and Attributes.

Materialists and the interpreters of Marxism, in fact, hold a wrong belief that only those individuals can enjoy revolutionary morals and Attributes who themselves belong to the poor, bare-footed or proletarian classes, for man is always and everywhere a human being and thus corrigible. He can, like the Prophets about whom 'Ali says, „They were from the deprived people,” equip him with correct, revolutionary habits and with the attributes of the deprived.

It is true that aristocratic training and education entail no result but an aristocrat human being, yet it is untrue to believe that such an education (in a person who is brought up in an aristocratic atmosphere) is unchangeable and indestructible.

In fact, should divine guidance (either in the form of thinking, meditation and the awakening of conscience of the individuals themselves or through training and purification of the soul by the teachers of morality, i.e. the Prophets) enlighten the sick bodies of those who are under the influence of aristocratic habits and training, they would come out of their spiritual depression and become dressed with revolutionary dispositions.

Summary

Two points are perceived when the social origin of the Prophets is put to discussion: First those who are appointed to prophethood are dressed with the Attributes of the deprived, revolutionary morals and

combative spirit against the existing class systems of the arrogant, i.e. at the time of the appointment (and even before it) they have an anti-arrogant position in support of the deprived.

Second, having these Attributes does not necessarily imply that all the Prophets belong to the deprived classes. They can either belong to these classes or not but, as was mentioned before, even at the time of appointment to prophethood and at the beginning of their revolution they may belong to the arrogant strata, having a comfortable life. There is no need for them to have suffered from forced labor and hard work before the appointment. Of course, they should have felt pain and distress but this does not necessarily mean that they should curtail the bonds of relationship with their social class and their (comfortable) life.

Spiritually exalted Beings Have Understanding as Well as the Feeling of Sympathy.

Subsequent to the discussion concerning the arrogant and the deprived, it should be added here that such a class division does not exist in monotheistic societies. It is, in fact, the exclusive characteristic of societies suffering from ignorance and alienation. We have of course, rulers, ruling classes, caliphs, holders of religious authority and governments in monotheistic societies but none of them are arrogant enough to manage the affairs of these societies on the basis of personal beliefs.

Also, there are commoners in such societies, consisting of workers, businessmen, peasants, bricklayers, government employees and so forth, but none of them arrogant either. Each class has, in fact, some authority over its own social affairs in proportion to the total number of its members.

For example, under the present situations of Iran (although Iran is not a 100% or even 50% Islamic society at the present time), every individual has some authority and the right to vote as a member of a society with thirty-six million individuals.

It is on this basis that the great movements and even the political affairs of our country are nowadays managed and led by the people themselves, although it may be considered wrong so far as the prevailing patterns of politics on the international level are concerned. The truth is that if the people were not inclined towards certain actions and policies, connections and disconnections, the government (itself consisting of Muslims belonging to the low classes of people) would not dare take such positions as it does today and perform such courageous actions. This is indicative of an Islamic country (although Iran is still not a perfect Islamic country).

When Islam shall, God-willing, shed its light on our society in all its dimensions, the role of every individual in the administration of the whole country will be to the extent that he or she (although being the lowest in social position) can act and promise on behalf of the Islamic community. Today, if a given government or a certain action be condemned in the sermons of the Friday ritual prayer in front of a multitude of people, or if a treaty between our country and a given government be orally made (or violated) in such sermons, neither our own government nor the addressee will take care of it.

But in a perfect Islamic community, there is no irresponsible individual. In such a community, in which Islamic culture and education are perfectly dominant, every individual (being a businessman, a housewife and so forth) can conclude a treaty or announce an agreement for the cessation of hostilities or a special occasion and the Islamic government is obliged to take it into account, although that individual not be a minister, an army commander or a diplomat. In fact, every individual can decide for the whole community on specific occasions, and all accepts his or her decision.

This is not, however, practicable under the present culture and habits of our society. But as the society gets closer to Islam and its teachings, this is more likely to be accomplished. It should be added, of course, that when we say something is not for the time being practicable, it does not mean that Islam as a whole cannot be materialized. It can, but only when the world has a complete readiness for its acceptance.

Questions and Answers

Q. You said that Khadija's wealth and "Ali's sword made the progress of Islam possible. Does this not lead to a deviating concept that wealth and material things have been the only factors for the spread of Islam?

A. We do not believe that wealth alone played a role in this regard, but the truth is that wealth, too, had certain roles and this is undeniable. It was, in fact, necessary for the satiation of the newly converted people's hunger as well as for providing the expenses of those who were sent here and there by the Prophet. This does not negate the influence of the spirituality and dynamism of Islamic thought and ideology, since the very dynamism is in need of material things when acting and making progress in the same way as it needs physical labor and activity.

Q. You defined the deprived in its social and political aspects. Is it not necessary to explain the economic and cultural aspects of it as well?

A. The economic activities of the deprived (as previously defined) are also under the influence of the powerful, i.e. economic activities are usually centralized where power is centralized (under the previous regime of Iran, for example, no productive and economic activity took place except through the direct or indirect interference of the government).

Therefore, economic aspects are dependent on political aspects. It may, however, be argued that political power originates from economic power. This is possible but it lacks universality. Sometimes political power is the cause for the absorption of money and sometimes money gives rise to political power.

They are inter-connected, but in a society wherein political power is centralized in a certain group, economics cannot grow and progress independently. The cultural aspects (culture in its prevailing, not in

its revolutionary sense) of society, too, are affected by the opinion of those who possess political and economic power. Thus, when political oppression dominates society, the existing cultural and political aspects of the deprived are also influenced by it.

Q. Is the following tradition, narrated from the Imams concerning deprivation, authentic? „The deprived are those who endeavored in the way of God but could not achieve their aim in establishing the divine system. The highest of them are the Prophets and saints, next to them are the believers who make efforts in the way of God.”

A. It may be authentic for all the Prophets and their true followers belong to the category of the deprived. It provides us with the definition of the deprived not with the concept of deprivation.

¹. Ibid. Part two, page 406. Parenthesis is the translator's.

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