

Neither fanaticism nor infallibility

Ali marched steadfastly on the path of action fixed by him for himself. He always looked upwards. He prescribed the economic rights of man as well as other rights without which the economic rights cannot materialize. He did not do favour to any particular creed, colour or race. All human beings are alike and all of them are entitled to live and to share the amenities of life even though they may be different in their creed, colour or race. Ali was considerate to the entire mankind. According to him there was no difference between the white-coloured and the black coloured, the Arabs and the non-Arabs, Muslims and non-Muslims in the matter of economic rights and the amenities of life.

Although Ali was the successor to the Prophet, the fortress of Islam, and the Commander of the Faithful, he did not at all wish that the non-Muslims should be compelled to embrace Islam. According to him the people were free to worship God as they liked and to hold the beliefs of their choice subject to the condition that they did not harm others. ¹ He allowed freedom of faith because all human beings are the slaves of God and religion is a means of connection between Him and His creatures.

According to Ali one's being a human being was sufficient for his being honoured, befriended and dealt with kindly as well as for his rights being immune from infringement by others. In the testament written by him for Malik Ashtar, the Governor of Egypt, he said: "Do not become a ferocious animal for them so that you may devour them. ² There are two kinds of persons amongst the subjects, out of whom some are your brethren-in-faith and others are creatures of God like you, and you should be forgiving towards them just as you wish God to be forgiving towards you. You should not feel elated when you accord punishment.

In the circumstances everyone possesses the same rights as you do, even though some or all of his beliefs may be opposed to yours. The object of religion is certainly that it should enable you to establish brotherly relations with others. Others are as much human beings as you are. This similarity of creation is a stronger connection between you and others. You should, therefore, behave kindly with all human beings. If your brother commits a mistake or sin you should overlook his lapse and forgive him, and should not at all feel ashamed in doing so. Purify the hearts of others of enmity and grudge by purifying

your own hearts of these bad qualities in the first instance.

It is obligatory for every descendant of Adam, to whatever religion or creed he may belong, that he should sympathise with his fellow beings. He should like that for others which he likes for himself and should not like that for them which he does not like for himself. He should expect from others to the same extent to which he meets the expectations of others. A real believer is he who endeavours to do good deeds. The best act is perfect justice which means that you should be absolutely impartial and should not discriminate between different persons.

He who follows the ways of Muhammad in leading his life is not different from one who follows the ways of Jesus or other accomplished personalities. The object of the creation of man is this that he should acquire virtues and excellence and should acquire good attributes. He is free to achieve this end by any means he likes.

Ali says: "It is necessary for you to follow the Prophet's actions when the world was contracted from under his feet and he was kept away from its enjoyments and embellishments. And if you so desire you may see Jesus Christ who used to recline on a stone, wore coarse dress and ate tasteless and insipid food. Hunger was his bread, the moon was his lamp, east and west were his shade, and the grass constituted his fruits and perfume. He had no wife who could allure him and no children for whom he might be worried. He had no wealth which might attract his attention nor any avarice which might humiliate him. His feet were his means of transport and his hands were his servants".

At another place Imam Ali says: "These were the people who made the earth their carpet and its dust their bed. They contented themselves with water instead of perfume and passed away from the world as Jesus did".

The same reality which Muhammad had in view when he said: "The Prophets are brothers of one another. Their mothers are different but their religion is one and the same". The same reality was before Ali when he said about Muhammad: "The Prophet spent his life in the same way in which the earlier Prophets spent their lives".

In these two statements it has been clearly admitted that virtue is the thing which unites the people at one point just as humanity is basically the point of unification.

What has been stated above makes it abundantly clear that just as man possesses many other rights he has, according to the laws enunciated by Ali, this right also that he should be free in the matter of his beliefs and there should be no restriction on his holding any belief he likes. Freedom cannot be divided. It is not possible that man should be free in some respect and a captive in some other respects.

A Muslim is the brother of a Christian whether he likes it or not, because a man is the brother of a man whether he admits it or not. If in the eyes of Ali the main object of creating man as a free being had not been this that he should make efforts to acquire virtues and if, according to him, freedom had not been a

sacred right, he would not have praised the followers of Jesus in the same manner in which he praised the followers of Muhammad.

In the foregoing pages we have mentioned that a Christian stole the coat-of-mail of Ali and claimed that he had purchased it. We have also mentioned how Ali behaved with the Christian as a person equal to himself, rather in the manner in which a father behaves with his son. We have also stated how Ali lodged a complaint in the court of the judge Shurayh and what its outcome was and how the Christian became one of his sincere disciples and vehemently helped him.

The history of Arabia is proud of the following sentence of Ali which adorns its pages: "If a carpet is spread for me and I sit on it, I shall decide the cases of the Jews according to their book 'the Torah', of the Christians according to their book 'the Evangel' and of the Muslims according to their Qur'an, in such a way that everyone of these books will cry out: "Ali has spoken the truth".

Ali instructed Ma`qal son of Qais as under:-

"O Ma`qal! Fear God. Don't be unjust to the Muslims and don't oppress the **Zimmis**. Don't be proud, because God doesn't like the proud".

It shows that according to Ali 'fear of God' means this that a person should not oppress his fellow-beings and should not in any way be unjust to them. Furthermore, he places the Muslims and the non-Muslims at the same level and does not accord preference to anyone of them.

This equality of the Muslims and the non-Muslims can be observed in each and every order of Ali. It would appear that he considered the protection of the people from injustice to be more important and necessary than acquiring other Islamic virtues. He says: "If you follow the path of truth, and the tenets of Islam become clear to you, neither a Muslim nor a **zimmi** will be oppressed". He severely reprimanded the Muslims when Sufyan son of Auf Asadi, a commander of Mu`awiya's army invaded the city of Anbar and committed atrocities on its residents but they (the Muslims) did not side with the truth, and did nothing to prevent oppression.

In the course of his speech he said:- "I have received information that, a member of this group used to enter the houses of Muslims and **Zimmi** women and removed the anklets from their feet and the bangles from their hands as well as the necklace and earrings which they were wearing and they had no means of protection except that they should say: 'We are from God and we have to return to Him' and remain patient.... Now if a Muslim dies of sorrow on account of these tragedies he cannot be blamed for it. In my opinion it ought to be so".

Ali censured and rebuked those people because they failed to defend their brothers and sisters living in the city- whether they were Muslims or Zimmis - against oppression.

When he appointed Muhammad son of Abu Bakr as Governor of Egypt he instructed him thus: "I

recommend to you to be equitable to the Zimmis, to do justice to an oppressed person, to be severe upon the oppressor and to be indulgent towards the people as far as possible and to be kind to them. It is also necessary that in the matter of truth the far and the near should be equal in your eyes”.

The following sentence also appeared in the pact which he concluded with the Christians of Najran: “They will not be subjected to injustice and oppression nor will any of their rights be reduced”.

He also fixed the same blood-money for a Christian, which is the blood-money for a Muslim.

According to Ali every human being was entitled to respect. It was for this reason that although the ignorant and brainless followers of all past religions were extremely fanatical and hated other religions, Ali was loved very much for his justice by the knowledgeable Christians during his own time as well as afterward. All of them lauded and praised him. Allama Ibn Abi'l Hadid writes thus in Sharh Nahj al-Balaghah: “What should I say about that man (Ali) whom the **Zimmis** loved ardently although they did not acknowledge the prophethood (of Muhammad)”.

Ali had laid the very foundation of his treatment of the non-Muslims on this principle “Their property is like our property and their lives are like our lives”.

The facts narrated above show clearly that religious fanaticism was considered by Ali to be something very indecent and despicable. The freedom, which he believed in, in a wide sense, and measured with an extended measure was totally opposed to fanaticism.

When we visualize the treatment meted out by Ali to the non-Muslims, and compare it with the treatment of the clergies of the Church in Europe of the Middle Ages, especially those clergies who were responsible for the **`Inquisition'**, and when we contrast the kindness and forgiveness shown by Ali with the severity and harshness of the European religious leaders, we come to know how exalted Ali was and how low those people were.

In short there should be no doubt about it because Ali's faith had sprung from the roots of humanity, freedom and authority and it was according to the view and belief which Ali held about life. Ali's faith was based on freedom and he considered freedom to be respectable whereas the faith of the religious leaders of Europe was based on habit and imitation of their ancestors and freedom had nothing to do with it.

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Fanaticism

Nowadays we are at war against religious fanaticism and consider it to be indecent and despicable, although religious fanaticism is not as dangerous as some other kinds of fanaticism. You will come across many persons who do not at all possess religious fanaticism but they are involved in fanaticism of

colour, race, nationality, political beliefs etc. Indulgence and forgiveness is possible in the matter of religious fanaticism but it is not possible in the case of other kinds of fanaticism. Such fanaticism is based on egotism, ignorance and profiteering and those who possess this sort of fanaticism say that their view is correct and only what they have concluded is right and their view about man and life is indisputable. They do not consider the view of anyone else as valid as theirs.

Ever since man has arrived on this earth fanaticism of every kind has been inherent in him, and there has not been any time during which he has not displayed fanaticism. The great leader of the world Ali fought not only against religious fanaticism but against all kinds of fanaticism. He considered racial fanaticism to be equivalent to rebellion and mischief, and burning up the attractive face of life.

According to Ali priding oneself on one's ancestry was also a sort of fanaticism. He addresses the fanatics of his time in these words: "Look here! You have opposed God openly, have been extremely oppressive and have created disturbance on the face of the earth. Fear God in the matter of priding yourselves on account of the self-conceit of the age of ignorance, because it is the source of enmity and grudge and the centre of Satan's enchantment with which he allured the past nations. Look here! Fear following your chiefs and elders who give themselves airs because of their position and pomp, and pride themselves on account of their ancestry (i.e. those who consider others humble and despicable, oppose Divine decrees and deny God's kindness in order to seize His blessings). These are the very persons who are the deep foundation of fanaticism and the pillars of the house of mischief.

In the first instance Ali likened family and racial fanaticism to rebellion and disfiguring life. Then he made his view more general and declared every fanaticism whether racial, political or religious, to be identical with rebellion and mischief and established a general rule, whose correctness will be established more and more as time passes. He says: "I have looked on all sides and have not found even one man in the world who supports something but that he has a reason in view for it, which becomes the cause of the mistake of the ignorant, or that he has an argument which gets glued to the intellect of the foolish".

You may go through all that has been said regarding fanaticism and the explanations given about it, but you will not find anything said by anyone which may be more than what Ali has said. Fanatics indulge in fanaticism either on account of ignorance or folly and both of them carry rebellion and mischief in their lap. Ali has drawn the picture of this fact in his two remarks reproduced above.

In short Ali considered fanaticism of every kind to be indecent and despicable. Of course if partiality is to be observed it should be observed in the matter of virtue, justice and public rights. One should side with the oppressed persons who are deprived of their earnings and rights by the oppressors. One should side with truth and conscience. One should be partial for the sake of human freedom and honour and for protecting the helpless from the fanatics. The Commander of the Faithful says: "If you wish to be fanatic and partial you should side with high morals, good manners and praiseworthy qualities, for example to protect the rights of your neighbour, to honour your covenants, to obey the righteous, to oppose the rebellious, to behave well, to avoid injustice, to remain aloof from bloodshed, to administer justice and

not to create mischief on the earth”.

How much he hated fanaticism can be realized from the recommendation which he made about the Kharijites, although they were his enemies. They fought a fierce battle against him, but he says: “Do not fight with the Kharijites after me, because one who seeks truth but goes astray is not like one who seeks falsehood and acquires it”.

The Commander of the Faithful made the people realize that as there was a possibility of their views and beliefs being mistaken it was necessary that they should not insist upon the correctness of their views and beliefs nor should they thrust them on others. He told them not to refrain from making consultations and not to hesitate in accepting the truth.

1. Islam allows freedom of faith to the Jews, the Christians and the Magi. They are called `Zimmis' which means non-Muslims living under the protection of the Islamic government.

2. The Egyptians about whom the Commander of the Faithful gave these instruction to Malik Ashtar were Christians.

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