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## Section Two: The Contributions and Blessings of the Prophets

### General Objectives

After studying this discourse, students are expected:

1. To be acquainted with the contributions and blessings of the prophets (‘a) in the domains of science, ethics, social justice, and mysticism; and
2. To realize the status of knowledge in religion and to be informed about the various approaches concerning the relationship between science and religion.

In the discussion on the necessity of prophethood, we pointed out a set of blessings of prophethood the absence of which would indicate failure in the guidance and deliverance of man or at least would make it very difficult for man to tread the path of felicity. Now, we shall make an overview of the blessings of the prophets which facilitate wayfaring in the valley of deliverance in this world and the hereafter.

### The Prophets and Morality

Ethics or morality [*akhlaq*] which is one of the perennial foundations of human life has always been observed. It is so valuable that even those who are practically deprived of it verbally praise and wish to have it.

Within ethics there is discussion about voluntary actions and man’s psychological judgment on their being good or bad, mandatory or not mandatory.

As the spokespersons of religion, the prophets (‘a) have a pivotal role and contribution within the domain of ethics. Some functions of the prophets (‘a) and divine revelation in the domain of ethics are related to

the identification of the goodness or badness of man's volitional actions and states. The function of revelation is to introduce and identify truths. Revelation expounds in detail what the intellect generally perceives.

In addition to this, the prophets (‘a) and revelation have another vital role or function which is related to moral training. This role or function manifests itself in two ways:

1. Divine revelation facilitates moral training and development. That is, because it regards moral actions in this world as the preconditions for happiness and prosperity in the next world, it encourages progress in this regard. In fact, eternal happiness and prosperity is a reflection of the moral actions or righteous deeds of the world.
2. Through their actions, the prophets (‘a) set perfect examples for mankind and pave the necessary practical grounds for moral training.

Those who are acquainted with affairs related to upbringing, training and education know the extent of the necessity of functional models for the moral training of humankind. The lives of the prophets (‘a) demonstrated practical models for their respective communities. Through their innate attractive qualities, they guided their people toward their well-being and deliverance:

﴿لَقَدْ كَانَ لَكُمْ فِي رَسُولِ اللَّهِ أُسْوَةٌ حَسَنَةٌ﴾

***“In the Apostle of Allah there is certainly for you a good example.”<sup>1</sup>***

Yes, the intellect and intellectuals have a role or contribution in promoting morality, but intellectual language (philosophy) is not clear, expressive and attractive enough for the common people. As such, human history has always owed its greatest moral achievements to the prophets (‘a) for they were the ones who imparted moral teachings to the common people in simple language. It is the last of the prophets who explicitly said: “Indeed I have been sent to perfect moral values.”<sup>2</sup> He (ﷺ) also said: “Indeed I have been chosen for the perfection of good deeds.”<sup>3</sup>

The efforts of philosophers in searching for moral principles and those of moral teachers in identifying moral affairs cannot be denied, but if human history were devoid of the presence of the prophets (‘a) the discussion on ethics would be confined to the four walls of the classroom and there would be no indication of the common people's reception to it. Since the edifice of civilization lies in morality, it can be imagined to what extent the different civilizations of the world are indebted to the teachings of the prophets (‘a) and their actual conduct in life.

# The prophets and knowledge

Nowadays, science is a great facet with a crucial role in the life of humanity. At the present time, the word “science” refers primarily to the empirical sciences which are divided into two areas: (1) natural sciences and (2) social sciences and humanities. In the past, different types of knowledge were all under the rubric of “philosophy” which means “love of knowledge,” and *‘ilm* [knowledge or science] was understood in its general sense and it included every science or branch of knowledge. As such, we shall assess in this book the contributions of the prophets (‘a) to *‘ilm* in its general sense, i.e. “knowledge”, and also examine their influence—and basically the relationship between science and religion—to *‘ilm* in its new sense, i.e. “empirical sciences.”

## 1. The prophets (‘a) and knowledge

Under the motto of teaching and training, the prophets (‘a) have always embarked upon propagating the religion and conveying the divine message. They exerted most of their efforts in removing the obstacles along the way of ‘search for knowledge’. The prophets (‘a) were often hated because of their incessant struggle against ignorance, superstition and blind following.

“No prophet has come with a mission other than inviting his people to desist from blindly following their forefathers and the ancients, asking them to reflect and freeing them from the bondage of dominant or prevailing unpleasant traditions.”<sup>4</sup>

The following famous account is familiar to all. One day the Holy Prophet (ﷺ) saw two groups in the mosque—one group was busy in worship and devotional acts, and the other was engaged in learning and seeking knowledge. By conveying a hint that showed the value of knowledge in the sight of the prophets (‘a), he expressed more pleasure towards the group that was engaged in learning and seeking knowledge.

Yes, the learned and the ignorant are not equal and in the religious value system; the learned, on account of the knowledge they possess, are always superior to the ignorant. Even a little knowledge of religious teachings and principles is an indication of literacy and love of knowledge, and everyone must know that religion is not a hindrance to knowledge but rather its vanguard. How could the religion whose motto is, “Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave” encourage ignorance, illiteracy and blind following?

The following statement of the Holy Prophet (ﷺ) to ‘Abdullāh ‘Alī (‘a) in this regard is quite interesting:

“O ‘Alī! In the race for nearness to God, if you mount the horse of knowledge, learning and reflection, you will be ahead of everybody including those who hasten toward God by means of worship, prayer and fasting, and you will attain divine proximity.”<sup>5</sup>

## 2. The prophets ('a) and empirical sciences

To know and understand properly the positions of science and religion is so important for us. Alfred North Whitehead,<sup>6</sup> a great mathematician and philosopher of the 20th century, says:

“When we reflect on the value and importance of religion and science for mankind, it is not absurd to say that the future course of history depends on this generation’s treatment of the relationship between these two.”<sup>7</sup>

Before mentioning the different viewpoints on the relationship between science and religion, it is necessary to note that man is in need of religion as well as science. Any perspective on man not being in need of both religion and science is inconsistent with the reality of man. Throughout history, there have been those who have striven to observe natural phenomena and explain them based on religion and also search for the source of natural laws from the Bible.

Sometimes, contributions in this context were even treated unkindly. An illustrious example of these oppositions was the case of Galileo whose scientific theory that the sun was the center of the universe—in opposition to the then prevailing Ptolemaic geocentrism—was strongly condemned by the ecclesiastical authority.

Under the pretext of religion, if we want to assume that human beings are not in need of empirical sciences and ignore their scientific efforts, it will bring nothing except darkness, ignorance and Bedouin life. Have not those who regard science thus in the name of religion read the Qur’an which invites us repeatedly to the study nature?

﴿ قُلْ سِيرُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ فَانظُرُوا كَيْفَ بَدَأَ الْخَلْقَ ﴾

***“Say: Travel over the land and then observe how He has originated the creation”<sup>8</sup>***

﴿ إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَةً لِّقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ ﴾

***“There is indeed a sign in that (the life of the bees) for a people who reflect.”<sup>9</sup>***

﴿ إِنَّ فِي خَلْقِ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَاخْتِلَافِ اللَّيْلِ وَالنَّهَارِ لَآيَاتٍ لِّأُولِي الْأَلْبَابِ ﴾

***“Indeed in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of night and day, there are signs for those who possess intellects.”<sup>10</sup>***

Therefore, religion does not seek to replace or put an end to scientific theories. In fact, encouragement

to learn the natural sciences is an integral part of correct religious teachings.

Regrettably though, by excessive reliance on science under the pretext of progress in empirical sciences, some have imposed restrictions on religion and regarded mankind as needless of religion in this age of scientific progress and development. Scientism has so much rubbed some of discernment that they have not only been deprived of proper understanding of religion and its role in their lives, but they have also lost sight of their object of worship (i.e. science as it must be known and its jurisdiction and limitations).

This notion that science is the panacea to all problems of humankind was at its peak during the Renaissance and the scientific revolution and even now some still believe in it.

According to this idea, anything that cannot be empirically tested is meaningless and has no truth-value. Hence, religious claims such as the existence of God, angels and the Resurrection are all claims devoid of any truth-value for they cannot be put to experiment. Accordingly, even if religion once had a role in the life of humanity, it had already played its role and its period has expired.

Of course, scientific empiricism is not that prominent at present. Natural scientists acknowledge that the foundations of the sciences are elements that cannot be empirically tested. They emphasize that many scientific principles are actually derived from religion. According to these scientists, by emphasizing the reality of nature, the inherent unity of its different facets, the possibility of discovering its laws, and the status or station of nature as a reflection of divine knowledge, it is religion which has provided the necessary points of departure for the formation of science in the life of humankind.<sup>[11](#)</sup>

Science is indebted to religion more than is imagined or generally accepted. It is religion which considers nature as a mirror to know God, encouraging and giving us hope to know Him and helping us in seeking knowledge at the threshold of religious civilizations.

الَّذِينَ يَذْكُرُونَ اللَّهَ قِيَامًا وَقُعُودًا وَعَلَىٰ جُنُوبِهِمْ وَيَتَفَكَّرُونَ فِي خَلْقِ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ رَبَّنَا مَا خَلَقْتَ هَذَا بَاطِلًا ۖ سُبْحَانَكَ

***“Those who remember Allah standing, sitting, and lying on their sides, and reflect on the creation of the heavens and the earth [and say], ‘Our Lord, You have not created this in vain! Immaculate are You!’”***<sup>[12](#)</sup>

إِنَّ فِي خَلْقِ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَاخْتِلَافِ اللَّيْلِ وَالنَّهَارِ وَالْفُلْكِ الَّتِي تَجْرِي فِي الْبَحْرِ بِمَا يَنْفَعُ النَّاسَ وَمَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ مِنْ مَّاءٍ فَأَحْيَا بِهِ الْأَرْضَ بَعْدَ مَوْتِهَا وَبَثَّ فِيهَا مِنْ كُلِّ دَابَّةٍ وَتَصْرِيفِ الرِّيَّاحِ وَالسَّحَابِ الْمُسَخَّرِ بَيْنَ السَّمَاءِ وَالْأَرْضِ لَآيَاتٍ لِّقَوْمٍ يَعْقِلُونَ

***“Indeed in the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the alternation of night and day, and the***

***ships that sail at sea with profit to men, and the water that Allah sends down from the sky—with which He revives the earth after its death, and scatters therein every kind of animal—and the changing of the winds, and the clouds disposed between the sky and the earth, are surely signs for a people who apply reason.***”<sup>[13](#)</sup>

Moreover, if ever mankind hoped that science would solve all human problems during the past two centuries, today it has fully realized that it has not only failed to solve all problems but rather it has brought about even more serious problems. Progress in physics has heightened universal concern about destructive nuclear wars. Advanced production technologies have created worry about rapid environmental destruction. Worse still, technology has caused apprehension that humanity is now exploiting the divine blessings (natural resources) that belong to the human race at a rate that will deplete these non-renewable reserves.

In any case, science is no more that ‘deity’ that attracts scientists from all persuasions. Today, the need to pay closer attention to the role of religion in life and even its role in establishing scientific foundations and restrictions has been heeded and acknowledged by many scientists. As such, we must have a balanced view and understanding of the role and function of religion and science and place each of them in its own domain.

There are three views regarding the relationship between religion and science as follows:

### **A. Science and religion are two opposing poles**

Some imagine that science and religion are rivals and that if religion flourishes it will have an arbitrary effect on science and vice versa. Unfortunately, it cannot be denied that the improper attitude of the clergy—particularly during the Middle Ages—in dealing with science has strengthened the rationale behind this notion.

The basic assumption here is that religion, like empirical sciences, aims at discovering natural laws. However, in most cases the ever-changing scientific views are at odds with some immutable religious accounts especially about the natural world. The Christian Bible, according to the church leaders, supports the geocentric notion that the earth is the center of the universe, while science has acknowledged the sun as the center of the universe (solar system). As another example, religion endorses the theory of fixed creation of species while science allegedly talks about the evolution of species.

Those who enjoyed the utilities of science and considered them to be in conflict with religion denied the latter. It is said that whenever a person turns away from the true religion, another thing or a set of things will pose as “religion” though it may not explicitly assume the name “religion”. At our present period, some have replaced religion with science. The reason behind this is insufficient knowledge of the true religion and the reality of the world, which is marred with hundreds of mistakes.

## **B. Science and religion are two parallel lines that do not intersect each other**

The contention of those who cannot agree with the setting aside of religion in the domain of life is that religion and science are two different and separate things and have their own specific yet different functions and utilities. As such, any contradiction between them is baseless. Contradiction between two things happens when they deal with a single subject and give different opinions about it. However, if the subject, goal and even method of one are different from that of the other, conflict between them will never happen. The basic assumption here is that the function of science is to explain natural events through observation and experiment in order to predict future events and gain supremacy over nature. In contrast, the function of religion is totally different and applicable somewhere else.

Carl Bart, a Protestant theologian, believed that theology and science dealt with basically different subjects. The subject of theology was the manifestation of God in Christ while that of science was the natural world. The Almighty God could only be known through His manifestation while nature was known through the human intellect.

Existentialist philosophers usually regard scientific knowledge as objective and impersonal and religious knowledge as profoundly personal and subjective. The subject of science is material objects and their roles and functions while the subject of religion is personal and moral realities.

Hermeneutists treat religion and science as two different linguistic games, each of which has been programmed for a specific goal. The goal of the scientific language is generally prediction and control while the language of religion is used for purposes like prayer and peace of mind. [14](#)

In any case, those who believe in the basic distinction between religion and science—as well as the subject, method and goal of each of them—try to bring back again religion in the life of man after being sidetracked by those who believe in their conflicting nature and assign a role to it which is different from that of science.

## **C. Science and religion are complimentary**

In recent years, some have claimed that it is possible for religion and science to have a single subject while each has its own goal or aim. They do not accept that the subject of one must be different from that of the other, arguing that in many cases, religion has also dealt with natural events. Having an identical subject does not bring about any conflict between them even though the religious explanation of a natural event may be quite different from the scientific explanation. For example, there may be two different explanations of an advertisement billboard posted at a library. One explanation may be concerned with the billboard's quality and the like while the other explanation's concern may be the intention of the billboard's owner for displaying it. Both explanations pertain to one and the same thing but, since they have different goals, no contradiction between them arises. In fact, the explanations are complimentary.

Those who believe that science and religion are complimentary have asserted that whenever religion talks about the natural world, the purpose is to unravel the *meaning* and *implications* of natural events while science is concerned with the *causes* of natural events.

If we pay careful attention to these three views, one thing seems to be common in all of them and that is that religion does not talk about the *causes* of natural events. When religion discusses nature, it pertains to the significance and *implications* of real events—the main motive in any religious message is to highlight the *meaning* of events. For this reason, the Holy Qur'an considers events in the world as "signs" [ʾāyāt] which show the power, knowledge and grace of God. It is said that the phenomena in the world are all "beauties" [jamālāt] which suggests that they are all linked to God and orient us back to Him—the origin of all beauty.

However, negligence of one important and fundamental point has led to a misunderstanding regarding the relationship between science and religion, and that point is that sometimes religion does actually discuss the *causes* of things and events—just as science does. Religion has mentioned the manner of the occurrence of rain, currents of rain, etc. Discussion of the meaning of events is not in conflict with examination of their causes. This is basically the distinctive feature of the religious worldview—to link meanings and ideals with events in the world and reflect them in the fundamental realities of the universe. It must not be overlooked, therefore, that some religious textual accounts do indeed have scientific relevance.

In such an interpretation of religion, there is the possibility of lack of harmony between a "religious account" and a "scientific finding". In reply, it must be stated that there must always be a logical explanation for conflict between these two, and there are ways that harmony can be established. One way is to interpret religious texts as much as permissible so that they are understood in the proper context. Another method is to realize that scientific theories are mixed with speculation and need for further investigation. To pay heed to these two points is enough reason not to take these alleged contradictions between science and religion too seriously.

A more fundamental and important point is that the many contradictions between the Bible and science cannot be applied to the Qur'an. Perhaps, one of the reasons behind the occurrence of contradiction between science and religion in Christianity is the distortions [taḥrīf] made to the Bible and this blemish has not been able to taint the Qur'an with regard to science.

Many testimonies have been made and books written about the compatibility of the Qur'anic verses with scientific findings. It is clear that far from being based on realities, this alleged contradiction between science and religion derives from the conflict between religion and scientism, as well as the clash between science, and religious intransigence and narrow-mindedness. As such, belief in any sort of contradiction between religion and knowledge has no benefit except hindering scientific progress and undermining the credibility of religion, while perfect harmony and compatibility exists between the two.

All basic scientific presumptions have flourished and gained acceptance under the auspices of Islamic teachings and perhaps the following saying of Imam ‘Alī (‘a) points to this indisputable truth:

“The life of knowledge lies on faith.”<sup>15</sup>

## The prophets and social justice

One of the proofs advanced by Muslim philosophers regarding the necessity of prophethood and the existence of prophets (‘a) is the necessity of the implementation of just laws in society so that the people can live in peace and tranquility:

﴿لَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا رُسُلَنَا بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ وَأَنْزَلْنَا مَعَهُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْمِيزَانَ لِيَقُومَ النَّاسُ بِالْقِسْطِ﴾

***“Certainly We sent Our apostles with manifest proofs, and We sent down with them the Book and the Balance, so that mankind may maintain justice.”***<sup>16</sup>

However, the prophets (‘a) have a further role in the implementation of justice and that is their incessant struggle against tyrants and oppressors, which sometimes had led to their persecution or their martyrdoms.

Many accounts of the prophets’ (‘a) confrontations with the oppressors of their respective times, from which we can learn so many lessons, have been mentioned in the Holy Qur’an. These struggles against oppression taught lessons of martyrdom and bravery to others and gave a religious and ideological color to their confrontations so as to remove forever the notion that their struggles for justice were for worldly purposes from the minds of comfort-seekers who urged people to keep silent under all conditions.

## The prophets and mysticism

Having the splendid celestial fragrance, the prophets (‘a) have enlivened the sacred emotions of humanity, elevated the emotions and feelings beyond the level of animal instincts, and opened the windows of the Unseen [*ghayb*] and celestial world [*malakūt*]. The greatest mystical discovery and intuition have occurred in the midst of religious civilizations. Certainly, had it not been for the efforts of the prophets (‘a) in fostering fondness and familiarity between celestial beings and mortals, humankind could not have sensed the aroma of the unseen by the use of his intellect and perceptions.

The Lord of the prophets (‘a) is compassionate. He answers the call of anyone, anytime. He is nearer to man than his own jugular vein.<sup>17</sup> Such a God is always heart-ravishing for man. It is this very love of Him which is the driving force for humankind to seek His pleasure. God delivers humanity from bewilderment and confusion and informs of the purpose behind creation. By doing so, God gives assurance, enthusiasm and interest in life. Belief in the Resurrection is not only belief in the immortality

of the soul, but also a depiction of the physical existence of human beings in the next world which reflects the way they led their lives in this world. Therefore, mindfulness about and reflection upon the Resurrection play pivotal roles in dispelling hopelessness and despair in life.

The blessings brought by the prophets (‘a) are far beyond that which could be written. So, we shall end our discussion here by citing an example of the manifestation of their blessings throughout history.

## **An example of the manifestation of the blessings of the prophets**

The most recent event of the sending of prophets (‘a) by God is related to the religion of Islam. Reflection on this event will lead to acknowledgment of what has been said. Islam was first propagated in the Hijaz<sup>18</sup> by the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ). The barren land of Hijaz had little trace of culture and civilization of its own. It was a land whose people used to describe in poetry their acts of aggression and plunder and vie with each other to gain reputation and glory.

The people of Hijaz had neither clean water nor wholesome food. Out of ignorance and a spirit of infanticide, fathers would bury their innocent daughters so as to be safe from the enemies’ taunt!<sup>19</sup> In the Hijaz might was right. The emotional outbursts of the people expressed descriptions of things relevant to animal instincts not reports of spiritual experiences.

However, in the same land of Hijaz, there emerged men and women who not only found the way to salvation but also paved the necessary ground for the emergence of the great Islamic civilization by leading others to the path of guidance and salvation. Hearts which had no equal in hardness and darkness turned into sources of mystical intuitiveness and attracted people from every direction. The alchemy of the presence of the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) and the assistance of his devoted companions, especially the Master of the Monotheists [mawlā al-muwaḥḥidīn] ‘Alī (‘a), turned the copper of the existence of these people into pure gold:

*Yes, by the blessing of your kindness,*

*The soil will turn into gold.*

Unfortunately, we cannot cover here all the dimensions of Islamic civilization whose seed sprouted in this very land (Hijaz) and whose branches and shoots extended to other lands. Even voluminous books and innumerable articles could not do the same.

<sup>1.</sup> – Surah A‘zāb 33:21.

<sup>2.</sup> – Kanz al-‘Ummā, vol. 11, p. 420, ḥadīth 31969.

<sup>3.</sup> – Ibn Sa‘d, Ṭabaqāt, vol. 1, p. 192.

<sup>4.</sup> – Muḥaḥhar, Nubuwwat in Majmū‘eh-ye Ṭhār, vol. 4, p. 36.

<sup>5.</sup> – Ibn Sīnā, Risālah Mi‘rājīyyah, n. p.

<sup>6.</sup> – Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947): a British mathematician and metaphysician, and generally recognized as one of the greatest 20th-century philosophers. His collaboration with his former pupil, the British mathematician and philosopher

Bertrand Russell, in writing the three-volume Principia Mathematica (1910–13) produced one of the world’s greatest works on logic and mathematics. [Trans.]

[7.](#) – Quoted in Barbour, ‘Ilm va Dīn, p. 13.

[8.](#) – Sūrah ‘Ankabūt 29:20.

[9.](#) – Sūrah Nā‘il 16:69.

[10.](#) – Sūrah ‘Alī ‘Imrān 3:190–191, 193.

[11.](#) – For further information about this theory that the foundations of science are based upon religious teachings, see Michael Peterson, et al, ‘Aql va I’tiqād Dīnī [Reason and Religious Belief], trans. Aḥmad Narāqī and Ibrāhīm Sulṭānī, p. 383.

[12.](#) – Sūrah ‘Alī ‘Imrān 3:191.

[13.](#) – Sūrah Baqarah 2:164.

[14.](#) – Peterson, et al, ‘Aql va I’tiqād Dīnī, p. 366.

[15.](#) – Nahj al-Balāghah (Subḥiyyat al-Ḥadīth), Sermon 156, p. 219.

[16.](#) – Sūrah Qad 57:25.

[17.](#) – Sūrah Qaf 50:16: “Certainly We have created man and We know to what his soul tempts him, and We are nearer to him than his jugular vein.” [Trans.]

[18.](#) – Hijāz: the region in Western Arabia bordering the Red Sea that includes Tif, Mecca and Medina. [Trans.]

[19.](#) – It alludes to Sūrah an-Nā‘il 16:58–59: “When one of them is brought the news of a female [newborn], his face becomes darkened and he chokes with suppressed agony. He hides from the people out of distress at the news he has been brought: shall he retain it in humiliation, or bury it in the ground! Look! Evil is the judgment that they make.”

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