

Islam and Historical Materialism

Does Islam accept the theory of historical materialism? Is the Qur'anic logic based on historical materialism regarding the interpretation and analysis of historical events? There is a group of people who claim that historical materialism was forwarded by the Qur'an at least one thousand years before Marx. Dr. 'Ali al-Wardi, a Shi'ite scholar of Iraq and author of several controversial books including the one entitled *Manzilat al- 'aql al-bashari*, ("The Place of Human Intellect"), is most probably the first to raise this issue. It has become a fashion among a group of contemporary Muslim writers to analyse history in Islamic phraseology from this point of view, which is considered a mark of being an intellectual.

But in our view those who think in this way either do not correctly understand Islam or historical materialism or both. A general review of the five fundamental principles of historical materialism and the six conclusions discussed earlier is sufficient to tell anyone well acquainted with the logic of Islam that the logic of Islam and historical materialism are radically opposed to each other.

In view of the fact that this approach to the study of society and history—especially when it is tinged with Islamic colour and bears the stamp of Islamic acceptability for enhancing its authority and worth—is a grave danger for the thought and teachings of Islam, I consider it essential to investigate and analyse the problems which may otherwise lead to the misunderstanding that Islam considers economy as the basis of society and regards history as being materialistic in essence.

I would also like to remind that I have here discussed these issues in a more comprehensive manner than put forward by the proponents of this view themselves. The advocates of this view pick up two or three verses from the Qur'an or a few traditions of the Prophet (S) in support of certain points. I have dealt not only with their arguments, but also with those problems which they have not touched at all, but which, in my opinion, can be raised by them, thus making the whole discussion inclusive and comprehensive. Following are the arguments of those who imagine that the Qur'an believes in historical materialism.

1. The Qur'an has put forward various social notions, and I have already quoted about fifty sociological terms from the Qur'an while discussing sociology. The study of the verses having sociological implications, where these terms occur, may lead one to infer that from the Qur'anic viewpoint societies

are in a 'sense bipolar, i.e., they are divided into two classes. On the one hand, the Qur'an points out a kind of polarization of society on the basis of material conditions, i.e., on the basis of prosperity and deprivation of its people.

The Qur'an refers to one class by such names as, *mala'* (ruling clique), *mustahbirun* (the arrogant, oppressors, tyrants), *musrifiin* (the extravagant, the wasteful), *mutrafiin* (the affluent), and refers to the other class by such names as *mustad'afun* (the oppressed, the weaken and deprived), *nas* (mankind, masses), *dhurriyyah* (the insignificant, the unnoteworthy—as opposed to the *mala'*), *aradhil or ardhalin* (the vilest, the lowest).¹ The Qur'an regards them as two opposite poles. On the other hand, the Qur'an puts forward the notion of bipolarity of society in spiritual terms.

On the one side are the *kafirun* (infidels), the *mushrikun* (idolaters, polytheists), the *munafigun* (hypocrites), the *fasiqun* (the corrupt), and the *mufsidin* (mischief mongers), and on the other side are the *mu'minun* (the believers), the *muwahhidun* (monotheists), the *muttaqun* (the pious, the God-fearing), the *salihun* (the virtuous), the *muslihun* (correctors, reformers), the *mujahidun* (the warriors), and the *shuhada* (the witnesses, the martyrs).

If we study and analyse the material and spiritual polarities in the context of the Qur'anic verses, we shall observe a kind of correspondence between the first material pole and the first spiritual pole and also between the second material pole and the second spiritual pole. That is, the *kafirun* (infidels), the *mushrikun* (idolaters), the *fasiqun* (the corrupt), and the *mufsidun* (corrupters) are the same people who are called the *mala'* (the ruling clique), the *mustakbirun* (the tyrants), the *musrifun* (the prodigal), the *mutrafun* (the affluent) and the *taghuti* ones.

They neither form a separate group nor draw other people into their fold to form a composite group. The *mu'minun* (the believers), the *muwahhidun* (the monotheists), the *salihun* (the virtuous), and the *mujahidun* (the warriors) are the same people as the *mustad'afun* (the oppressed), the *fuqara* (the poor), the *masakin* (the wretched), the slaves, and the deprived. This pole does neither consist of a separate group nor is a combination of various other groups or persons. It means that society is not composed of more than two poles.

The opulent, the oppressors, and the exploiters, who are also the disbelievers are on one side and the oppressed, who are also the believers, are on the other side. It is quite obvious that the division of society into oppressors and oppressed is responsible for giving rise to two groups at level of faith viz., the disbelievers and the believers. Oppression is the essential condition accompanying polytheism, disbelief, hypocrisy, inequity, and corruption; being oppressed is the condition accompanying belief, monotheism, virtue, goodness, and piety.

In order to be sure of the meaning of this correspondence, it is enough to study the verses of Surat al-'A'raf beginning from the verse 59 *لقد أرسلنا نوحاً الى قومه* (We sent Noah unto his people...) till the end of the verse 13, *و دمّرنا ما كان يصنع فرعون وقومه و ما كانوا يعرشون* (... We annihilated all Pharaoh and his folk

had done and that they had contrived.). In these forty verses, the stories of Noah, Hud, Salih, Lot, Shu'ayb and Moses are narrated. In all these stories (with the exception of the story of Lot) it may be observed that the class that followed the prophets was the oppressed class (*mustad'af*), and the class that arose in revolt and negated them was the ruling class (*mala'*) of the tyrants (*mustakbirun*).

This correspondence is explained by nothing except class consciousness, which is the requisite condition as well as the result of historical materialism. Thus according to the Qur'an the conflict between belief and disbelief reflects the corresponding struggle of the oppressed and the exploited against the oppressors and the exploiters.

The Qur'an clearly considers *ghina* (i.e. ownership, property and wealth) to be the source of man's rebellion, against God i.e., the riches are contrary to the values of modesty, humility, and submission—the virtues to which the prophets called the people:

﴿كَذَٰلِكَ إِنَّ الْإِنْسَانَ لِرَبِّهِ لَكَنَّاظٍ ﴿٦﴾ أَن رَّآهُ اسْتَغْنَىٰ ﴿٧﴾﴾

Verily man is rebellious when he thinketh himself wealthy {and contented}. (96:6,7)

Again we see that, in order to show the evil of property and ownership, the Qur'an narrates the story of Korah. Korah was not an Egyptian, but belonged to the tribe of Israel. He was one of Moses' people, the same oppressed people whom Pharaoh was exploiting. However this man belonging to an oppressed people, after becoming wealthy, started exploiting his own fellow sufferers and rebelled against Moses. The Qur'an says:

إِنَّ قَارُونَ كَانَ مِنْ قَوْمِ مُوسَىٰ فَبَغَىٰ عَلَيْهِمْ

Now Korah was of Moses' folk, but he rebelled against them (28:76)

Does it not show that the stand of the prophets against rebellion is actually the stand against the haves, the rich, and their wealth? The Qur'an has disclosed in some of its verses that the real adversaries of the prophets were the affluent class, the *mutrafun*: those who were immersed in the good things of life, being the pampered of history. In *Surah Saba'*, verse 34, this view is developed in the form of a general principle and a universal law:

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا فِي قَرْيَةٍ مِّن نَّذِيرٍ إِلَّا قَالَ مُتْرَفُوهَا إِنَّا بِمَا أُرْسِلْتُمْ بِهِ كَافِرُونَ

And We have sent not unto any township a warner, but its pampered ones (the mutrafun) declared, 'Lo: We are disbelievers in that which you bring unto us.' (34:34)

All. this indicates that the confrontation of the prophets with their adversaries and the struggle between faith and infidelity reflect the hostility between two social classes: the oppressed and the oppressors.

2. The Qur'an calls its addressees '*nas*' (mankind). '*Nas*' means the deprived and underprivileged masses. This indicates that the Qur'an acknowledges the concept of class consciousness, and considers the deprived masses as the only class capable of responding to Islam's invitation. This also indicates that Islamic ideology is class-oriented and it means that Islam is the religion of the oppressed and underprivileged masses. The addressees of Islamic ideology are the underprivileged masses alone. This provides another basis for inferring that Islam regards economy as base and approves of the materialist conception of history .

3. The Qur'an makes clear that leaders, reformers (*muslihun*), warriors in the way of God (*mujahidun*), martyrs (*shuhada*) and ultimately the prophets, the apostles of God, arise from among the masses and not from the affluent, the wealthy, and the pampered class. Regarding the Prophet of Islam (S), the Qur'an says: .

هُوَ الَّذِي بَعَثَ فِي الْأُمِّيِّينَ رَسُولًا مِنْهُمْ

He it is Who has sent among the illiterate (ummiyyu) a messenger of their own (62:2)

The *ummah* (the religious community) is none other than the underprivileged masses. Similarly, the Qur'an declares about the martyrs in the way of God:

وَنَزَعْنَا مِنْ كُلِّ أُمَّةٍ شَهِيدًا فَقُلْنَا هَاتُوا بُرْهَانَكُمْ

And We shall raise from every nation {the same deprived masses} a shahid (martyr) and We shall say, 'Bring your proof forward (i.e. your martyr;) (28:75) .

The fact that leaders of revolutions and reform movements necessarily arise from the deprived masses also implies that there is a necessary correspondence between social and religious origin on the one hand and economic and class origin on the other. This necessary relation cannot be interpreted except on the basis of the materialist conception of history and on the basis of assumption that economy is the real base.

4. The prime target of the mission of the prophets and their social movement is the base not the superstructure. It is inferred from the Qur'an that the mission and the message of the prophets aimed at establishing justice and equity by implementing social equality and obliterating class distinctions and divisions. The prophets have always started their mission from the base and later on brought changes in the superstructure, not the other way round. The superstructures, i.e. doctrines of faith, dogmas, moral and behavioural reforms, always occupied a secondary place in prophetic missions, as they were

attacked only after the base was transformed. The Prophet (S) said:

من لا معاش له لا معاد له

One who does not have a means of- subsistence does not have Hereafter either (which is a product of spiritual life).

This statement indicates the priority of the means of subsistence over the Hereafter, and the priority of material existence over spiritual existence. If stretched to its logical conclusion, it means that spiritual life is synonymous with superstructure and is based upon material conditions of human life. The Prophet (S) also said:

اللهم بارك لنا في الخبز، لولا الخبز ما تصدقنا و لا صلينا

My God, bless our bread with abundance; for had it not been for bread we would not have been charitable, nor would we have offered prayers.

This statement also indicates the dependence of the spiritual superstructure upon the material base.

Nowadays, majority of people tend to believe that the prophets had set before them the task of reforming only the superstructure; that is they aimed at making men true believers and were interested only in the reform of their beliefs, morals, and behaviour; they were not concerned with changing the foundation, or at the most they considered matters related with the base or economic activity merely secondary in importance. It is imagined that the prophets thought that once the people became true believers all the matters would automatically be set right; justice and equality would be established and the exploiters would come up on their own to surrender their privileges to the exploited and the oppressed.

To be short, it is believed that the prophets have used faith and belief as the weapon for attaining their goals, and their followers should follow the same path. This is nothing but deception and an illusion that the priests and clergymen associated with the class of oppressors and exploiters have invented and imposed on the society in order to render the teachings of the prophets ineffective and futile.

In the words of Marx, "The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, consequently also controls the means of intellectual production The material rulers are the intellectual rulers of the society and rule over the social mind as well." [2](#)

The approach and the method of work of the prophets were quite opposite to the view generally accepted by the majority of people. The prophets first delivered society from the evils of social polytheism social discrimination, injustice, repression, and exploitation which are the root causes of ideological polytheism, and moral, behavioural, and religious perversions. After socially emancipating the

people they engrained in their souls the faith in the unity of God (*tawhid*), and taught them the methods of attaining moral and behavioural piety.

5. The Qur'an holds that the logic of the opponents of the prophets has always been opposed to the logic of the prophets and their followers throughout the entire course of history. The Qur'an explicitly explains that the Ideology of the opponents has been always conservative, obscurantist, traditional, and backward-looking, whereas the Ideology advocated by the prophets and their followers has been necessarily dynamic, anti-traditional, progressive, and futuristic.

The Qur'an clearly propounds the view that the first group practised the same ideology which according to sociological analysis is practised in a society divided into two classes of exploiters and exploited by the class of exploiters, who are the beneficiaries of the existing system and advocate the ideology of status quo. The prophets and their followers on the other hand followed and practised the ideology which sociologically speaking, is employed by the sufferers and deprived in human history.

There are frequent references in the Qur'an to the specific logic held by the opponents and the followers of the prophets, indicating what sort of philosophy these two groups followed. They are actually meant for pointing out that these two types of philosophies, like the two groups themselves, have always been opposed to each other. The Qur'an, by pointing out the logic of the opponents and that of the followers of the prophets, provides us with a criterion for today.

The Qur'an pictures several scenes in which these two ideologies confront each other. Those who are interested may study the following Qur'anic verses. *Surat al-Zukhruf*, verses (40–50); *Surat al-Mu'min*, verses (23–44); *Surat Taha*, verses from 49 to 71; *Surat al-Shu'ara*, verses from 16 to 49; *Surat al-Qasas*, verses from 36 to 39. Here, for the sake of example, we quote verses from 20 to 24 from *Surat al-Zukhruf* with some brief explanatory remarks about their meanings:

وَقَالُوا لَوْ شَاءَ الرَّحْمَنُ مَا عَبَدْنَاهُمْ مَا لَهُمْ بِذَلِكَ مِنْ عِلْمٍ إِنْ هُمْ إِلَّا يَخْرُصُونَ ﴿٢٠﴾ أَمْ أَنَيْنَاهُمْ كِتَابًا مِّن قَبْلِهِ فَمَبْهُم بِهِ مُسْتَمْسِكُونَ ﴿٢١﴾ بَلْ قَالُوا إِنَّا وَجَدْنَا آبَاءَنَا عَلَىٰ أُمَّةٍ وَإِنَّا عَلَىٰ آثَارِهِم مُّهُتَدُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾ وَكَذَلِكَ مَا أَرْسَلْنَا مِن قَبْلِكَ فِي قَرْيَةٍ مِّن نَّذِيرٍ إِلَّا قَالَ مُتْرَفُوهَا إِنَّا وَجَدْنَا آبَاءَنَا عَلَىٰ أُمَّةٍ وَإِنَّا عَلَىٰ آثَارِهِم مُّقْتَدُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾ قَالَ أُولُو جِبْتِكُمْ بِأَهْدَىٰ مِمَّا وَجَدْتُمْ عَلَيْهِ آبَاءَكُمْ قَالُوا إِنَّا بِمَا أُرْسِلْتُمْ بِهِ كَافِرُونَ ﴿٢٤﴾

And they say: 'If the Beneficent had so willed, we should not have worshipped them (the angels). (Now that we worship them, it means that it is the will of God—absolute determinism). They have no knowledge of whatsoever of that; they are only conjecturing (about the matter of determinism). Or have We given them any Scripture before (this Qur'an) to which they hold' (i.e. it is nothing of these two. neither a sound faith in determinism nor any Scripture which could serve as evidence).

Nay, for they say only 'We found our fathers following a religion, and we are guided by their

footprints. ' And even so We sent not a warner before thee into any township, except that men who lived at ease (mutrafun) said, 'We indeed found our fathers following a religion, and we are following their footprints. (And the warner) said: 'What! even though I bring you better guidance than that you found your fathers following? [i.e. although the path shown by me is more in accordance with correct logic?] They answered, 'We disbelieve in that you were sent with.' (43:20-24)

We see that the opponents of the prophets sometimes utilize the idea of fatalism and predestination to impress upon people that we are not free to act according to our will. This idea, as sociologists point out, always suits the interests of the beneficiaries of the status quo, who do not want any change in the existing conditions and, therefore, take shelter in the doctrine of predestination as an excuse. Sometimes they lay emphasis upon following the traditions of ancestors and consider the past as something sacred and worthy of imitation. Everything related with the past is accepted as right and correct, and is considered sufficient for guidance. This is the logic preached by the champions of status quo and vested interests.

In opposition to this view, the prophets never supported traditionalism and fatalism. They upheld logic, knowledge, and emancipation, which represent the approach of the revolutionaries and the sufferers under the status quo. The adversaries, when they see that they cannot win the battle due to their weak logic and arguments, as a last resort, declare that whether we believe in fatalism or not, whether we respect tradition or reject it, we are against your message, your mission, and your ideology, because your message contradicts the present social reality and class structure.

6. The most obvious aspect of the Qur'anic teaching is its siding with the oppressed. The Qur'an promises, in accordance with the prophecy of historical materialism on the basis of dialectical logic, that in the struggle between the oppressed and the oppressors the final victory is on the side of the oppressed.

The Qur'an through this alignment really affirms the necessary course which history is determined to follow, because according to it the class which is revolutionary in character ultimately emerges victorious in its struggle against the class which is reactionary and conservative due to its class situation, and is destined to inherit and rule the earth:

وَنُرِيدُ أَنْ نَمُنَّ عَلَى الَّذِينَ اسْتُضْعِفُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَنَجْعَلَهُمْ أَئِمَّةً وَنَجْعَلَهُمُ الْوَارِثِينَ

And We desired to show favour unto those who were oppressed in the earth, and to make them leaders and to make them the inheritors. (28:5)

Similarly the verse 137 in Sural al- 'A 'raj declares:

وَأَوْرَثْنَا الْقَوْمَ الَّذِينَ كَانُوا يُسْتَضْعَفُونَ مَشَارِقَ الْأَرْضِ وَمَغَارِبَهَا الَّتِي بَارَكْنَا فِيهَا وَتَمَّتْ كَلِمَتُ رَبِّكَ الْحُسْنَىٰ عَلَىٰ بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ بِمَا صَبَرُوا وَدَمَرْنَا مَا كَانَ يَصْنَعُ فِرْعَوْنُ وَقَوْمُهُ وَمَا كَانُوا يَعْرِشُونَ

And We caused the people who were oppressed to inherit the eastern parts of the land and its western parts, thereof which We had blessed. And the fair Word of the Lord was fulfilled for the Children of Israel because of their endurance; and We annihilated all that Pharaoh and his folk had done and that they had contrived. (7. 137)

This view of the Qur'an, that history moves in the direction of the victory of the oppressed, the exploited, and the enslaved, fully corresponds to I ill: principle derived from historical materialism, according to which reaction .md conservatism are the characteristics of exploitation which are opposed to till: law of evolution, and are, therefore, bound to face extinction. The essential character of the exploited is enlightenment, dynamism, and I evolutionary spirit, which being in harmony and agreement with the law of evolution are bound to be victorious.

Here it would not be inappropriate to quote a passage from an article lately published by a group of so-called Muslim intellectuals who have left intellectualism behind to embrace Marxism. There, under the above-quoted Qur'anic verse, the following explanatory remarks are made:

... What is greatly remarkable is the position of God and all the phenomena of existence with respect to the world's oppressed. It cannot be denied that the oppressed of the earth according to the Qur'anic teachings, are the underprivileged, enslaved masses, who are forced not to play any role in determining their own fate ... If we pay attention to this fact, taking into consideration the absolute will of God governing the course of being and all the phenomena of life, which tend to favour the oppressed, the question arises: Who are the persons that are instrumental in realization of the Divine Will? The answer to this question is quite obvious.

When we evaluate the administrative organizations of societies as two poles of the oppressors and the oppressed, with the knowledge that the Divine Will can be translated into action, on the one hand, by bestowing the inheritance and leadership of the earth upon the oppressed, and on the other by destroying the institutions of exploitation and ultimately negating them, we find that the oppressed themselves and their apostles and committed intellectuals, who arise from within the oppressed class, act as the agents of the Divine Will in realizing this end.

In other words, they are these chosen apostles³ and the departed martyrs from among the oppressed⁴ who make the initial moves in the struggle against destructive *taghuti* regimes, moves which pave the road for establishing the leadership of the oppressed and enabling them to inherit the resources of the earth.

This view, in fact, represents our understanding of the Qur'anic interpretation of historical upheavals and the monotheistic revolutions in the sense that in the same way as monotheistic revolutions,⁵ from a

sociological point of view, revolve around the axis of the leadership of the oppressed and their inheritance of the earth, so also the leaders and the groups in the vanguard of this movement should necessarily arise from among the oppressed.

Their ideological and social views should also be derived from the intellectual attitude and social alignment of the oppressed and exploited masses.

There are several implications of this statement.

- a. From the viewpoint of the Qur'an, society is bipolar and is always divided into two classes representing the oppressors and the oppressed.
- b. The will of God (according to the expression used in the article, 'the position of God and all phenomena of existence') with respect to the leadership and inheritance of the oppressed and the downtrodden is universal and applies without any discrimination whatsoever to believers and non-believers, monotheists and polytheists. It means that the relative pronoun (...) is used in a general sense applicable to all people.

The Divine promise guarantees the victory of the oppressed qua oppressed over the oppressors. In other words, the main conflict going on throughout history up to this date is between the exploited and the tyrants. The purpose of the evolution of the universe dictates that the downtrodden should emerge victorious against the oppressors.

- c. The will of God is executed through the means of the oppressed. The leaders, guides, apostles and martyrs necessarily arise from among the oppressed; not from the other side.
- d. The ideological base is always in harmony and correspondence with the social base and class character .

Thus we see how certain Marxist principles regarding history are derived and inferred from the Qur'anic verse, and how it is claimed that the Qur'an, one thousand and two hundred years before Marx came into the world anticipated and echoed his thought and philosophy!

Well! now that such a view about history has been found in the Qur'an what conclusions can be drawn in its light while analysing contemporary history? These gentlemen have hastily tried to draw conclusions from this so-called .Qur'anic principle, applying it as a test to the contemporary movement of the 'ulama'. They say that the Qur'an has taught us that the leaders and guides of revolutions should necessarily be from the class of the oppressed.

On the contrary, nowadays we see that the 'ulama' who represent one of the three dimensions of the system of exploitation throughout history, have shifted their social base and have become revolutionary. How is this phenomenon to be explained?

The solution is simple. We can surely and with certainty conclude that there is an intrigue involved in this affair. When the ruling class finds itself in trouble, it asks the allied clergy to arrange a revolutionary pageant to manage its own escape. This is another conclusion derived from this Marxist–excuse me, Islamic–view. It is quite clear who will pocket the profits yielded by such interpretations.

Criticism

All that has been said about the justification of historical materialism from the Qur'anic viewpoint may be regarded as being either basically wrong, or if correct the inference drawn from it is totally wrong. We have to critically examine the arguments given above.

1. The claim that the Qur'an has divided society materially and spiritually into two classes and that these two classes coincide with each other, is absolutely false. To say that according to the Qur'an the group consisting of the *kafirun* (unbelievers), the *mushrikun* (idolaters), the *munafiqun* (hypocrites), the *mufsidun* (mischief mongers), is the same as that of the *mala'* (ruling clique), the *mustakbirun* [6](#) (arrogant, oppressors) and the *jabbarun* (tyrants), on the one hand, and on the other hand the group consisting of the *mu'minun* (believers), the *muwahhidun* (monotheists), the *salihun*: (righteous), the *shuhada'* (martyrs) is the same as the oppressed and the exploited class, and to say that the confrontation between the believers and the unbelievers reflects the basic conflict between the oppressed and the oppressors respectively, is not correct. This type of coincidence is not at all validated by the Qur'an. On the contrary we find that the Qur'an affirms the absence of such a coincidence.

In its treatment of the lessons of history the Qur'an cites the examples of believers who belonged to a tyrannical ruling class yet revolted against that class and its values. The believer of the family of pharaoh whose story is narrated in *Surat al-Mu'min* is an example of such individuals. The Qur'an also mentions Pharaoh's wife, who, in spite of being his life partner and equally sharing his luxurious life style, was a true believer in God.[7](#)

The Qur'an, in several places, in a moving style recalls the story of Pharaoh's magicians, and shows how the natural truth-seeking conscience of man, when faced with the truth, can rise on occasion against falsehood and error, setting aside all personal interests and ignoring with contempt Pharaoh's threats:

لَأَقْطَعَنَّ أَيْدِيَكُمْ وَأَرْجُلَكُمْ مِنْ خِلَافٍ ثُمَّ لَأُصَلِّبَنَّكُمْ أَجْمَعِينَ

***"I shall assuredly cut off alternately your hands and feet then I shall crucify you all together."* (7: 124)**

Basically, the revolt of Moses (A) as related by the Qur'an, contradicts historical materialism. It is true that Moses belonged to the tribe of Israel – he was neither an Egyptian nor a kinsman of the Pharaoh –

but Moses was brought up since Infancy like a prince in Pharaoh's household. The same Moses who was brought up by Pharaoh revolted against the tyrannical system of his patron, a system in the midst of which he had grown up, renouncing him and preferring to work as a shepherd for the old man of Medina, until he was chosen by God for prophethood when he formally confronted Pharaoh.

The Holy Prophet (S) was orphaned in childhood and led a life of poverty until his youth. It was after his marriage with Khadijah that he became prosperous and rich. The Qur'an refers to this point when it says:

﴿أَلَمْ يَجِدْكَ يَتِيمًا فَآوَىٰ﴾ ﴿٦﴾ ﴿وَوَجَدَكَ ضَالًّا فَهَدَىٰ﴾ ﴿٧﴾ ﴿وَوَجَدَكَ عَائِلًا فَأَغْنَىٰ﴾ ﴿٨﴾

***Did He not find thee an orphan; and shelter thee? Did He not find thee needy, and suffice thee?
(93:6,8)***

It was in this period of prosperity that the Prophet (S) devoted his time to prayer and contemplation in solitude. According to the doctrine of historical materialism, during this period the Prophet (S) should have changed and assumed the role of a conservative advocate of the status quo. But it was during this period that he started to propagate his revolutionary message, rising in rebellion against the capitalists, the usurers, and the slavers of Mecca, and revolted against the practice of idolatry which symbolized the corrupt life of those days.

As all the believers, the monotheists, and the monotheistic revolutionaries did not arise from the oppressed class, the prophets also absorbed the good-natured and the relatively untainted natures from among the oppressor classes and aroused them to revolt against themselves (by way of repentance) or against the interests of their own class (by way of revolution). In the same way, all the oppressed people did not belong to the ranks of the believers and the monotheistic revolutionaries.

The Qur'an pictures numerous scenes where the people belonging to the oppressed class are counted among unbelievers and included among the doomed subject to Divine chastisement.[8](#)

Therefore, neither all believers belong to the oppressed class nor all oppressed are believers. The claim that there is complete correspondence between them is absolutely absurd. Undeniably, the majority of the followers of the prophets have belonged to the oppressed class, or at least came from those whose hands were not stained with blood and repression. Similarly the majority of the opponents of the prophets belonged to the class of oppressors.

This is so because although the human nature which accepts the Divine message is common to both classes and exists in everyone, but the oppressors, the affluent, and the extravagant confront a great barrier because their souls are polluted and their habits are deeply entrenched in the evil existing system. There are few out of this class who are capable of freeing themselves from under the mountain load of these evils. But the oppressed class has no such restraints.

Their nature not only responds readily to the Divine call, but they see in it the opportunity to recover their lost rights. Identifying themselves with believers has a double advantage for them. It is on this account that the majority of the followers of the prophets consist of the oppressed and individuals of the opposite group among the believers form only a minority. Despite it the notion that the group of believer and the class of the oppressed are one and the same is totally groundless.

There is an acute difference between the fundamental principles regarding the nature of history laid down in the Qur'an and the basic doctrines of historical materialism. In view of the Qur'an, the spirit is a fundamental reality, and matter in no way is prior to the spirit. The spiritual needs and urges are fundamental to human existence and are not dependent on the material needs. Thought is also independent of action and the psychological nature of man precedes the social makeup of his personality.

The Qur'an, since it believes in the fundamental nature of the human being, a nature which is found even within extremely dehumanized persons like Pharaoh, who is a natural human being whose growth has been arrested, it also admits even for the most corrupt persons the possibility, however weak, of moving towards truth and self-realization. Accordingly the prophets were encharged to admonish the tyrant in the first place and perchance to liberate the natural man imprisoned within the oppressor, arousing his inherent humanity against his evil social personality. We know that success was achieved in a great number of cases, and what is called "repentance" is the name of this phenomenon.

Moses (A) at the initial stage of his prophethood, was entrusted with the task of persuading Pharaoh and awakening in him the true human nature by means of admonition. He was advised to fight against him only if he failed in this attempt. In Moses' view Pharaoh had internally captivated and fettered the man within himself, and enslaved and imprisoned other human beings externally. Moses first attempts to arouse the man imprisoned within Pharaoh to revolt against himself. He endeavours to arouse the remnants of humanity left in him against his social personality, i.e. the Pharaoh forged and fabricated by perverse social conditions:

اٰذْهَبْ اِلٰى فِرْعَوْنَ اِنَّهُ طَغٰ ﴿١٧﴾ فَقُلْ هَلْ لَكَ اِلٰى اَنْ تَزَكَّى ﴿١٨﴾ وَاَهْدِيْكَ اِلٰى رَبِّكَ فَتَخْشٰى ﴿١٩﴾ فَاَرَاكَ الْاَلِيَّ
﴿٢٠﴾ الْكُبْرٰى

Go to Pharaoh, he has waxed insolent. And say, 'Hast thou the will to purify thyself, and that I should guide thee to thy Lord, then thou shalt fear?' (79: 17-19)

The Qur'an believes in the power and value of guidance, advice, admonition, reminder, argumentation and logical reasoning (in Qur'anic terminology, *hikmah*, wisdom). According to the Qur'an these devices can change a man, alter his course of life, transform his personality, and bring about a spiritual change in him. This approach is contrary to Marxism and materialism, which restrict the role of guidance to merely transforming the 'class-in-itself' into the 'class-for-itself' by bringing about consciousness of

class antagonism and realization of class character.

2. It is claimed that the addressees of the Qur'an are *nas* (mankind, people), and *nas* as a term is synonymous with the deprived masses. Hence Islam addresses itself to the oppressed class, and Islamic ideology is the ideology of the oppressed class; therefore, Islam recruits its followers and warriors exclusively from the underprivileged masses.

This whole line of argument is wrong. Of course the addressees of the Islamic message are *nas*, i.e. human beings, which include the whole mankind. No dictionary of Arabic language gives the meaning of the word *nas* as the underprivileged or oppressed masses, and this word does not refer to any particular class of men. The Qur'an says:

.. وَلِلّٰهِ عَلَى النَّاسِ حُجُّ الْبَيْتِ مَنِ اسْتَطَاعَ اِلَيْهِ سَبِيْلًا

...It is the duty of all men towards God to come to the House as pilgrims; whoever can afford to make his way there...(3:97)

Does this verse refer to the underprivileged masses only? The phrase *يا ايها الناس*, "O, mankind!" which repeatedly occurs in the Qur'an, nowhere refers exclusively to the underprivileged masses but to all mankind in general. The universality of the Qur'anic address is also derived from the principle of universality of human nature propounded in the Qur'an.

3. It is said that the Qur'an claims that the leaders, the guides, the prophets, and the martyrs arise exclusively from among the oppressed. This is yet another mistake regarding the Qur'an. The Qur'an never makes such a statement.

The argument concerning verse 62:2... *هو الذي بعث في الاميين* that messengers of God arise from among the *ummah* (community) and the *ummah* is equivalent to the oppressed masses, is ridiculous. The word *أميين* (*ummiyyin*) is actually the plural form of the word (*ummi*) which means a person who is unlettered. Furthermore *أمي* is derived from *أم* (*umm*) not from *أمة* (*ummah*). Moreover, the meaning of the word *أمة* is a society which is composed of different groups and occasionally different classes.

By no means can it be used to signify the 'underprivileged masses.' Still more ridiculous is the argument regarding the verse 75 from *Surat al-Qasas* about martyrs: *و نزعنا من كل امة شهيدا فقلنا هاتوا برهانكم*. They have interpreted it (or rather distorted it) to mean this: "We shall raise from every *ummah* (the masses) a *shahid* (martyr in the way of God); i.e. We shall make him a revolutionary, then We shall ask every *ummah* to produce its proof, which is the same as its martyr – the revolutionary killed in the way of God."

Firstly, this verse follows another verse and both of them are related to the Day of Judgment, the day when God would address idolaters. The preceding verse is as follows:

وَيَوْمَ يُنَادِيهِمْ فَيَقُولُ أَيْنَ شُرَكَائِيَ

Upon the day when He shall call unto them. and he shall say, 'Where are now those whom you claimed to be My associates?' (28: 74)

Secondly, نَزَعْنَا (*naza'na*) means that “We shall separate,” or “We shall draw near.” It does not mean “We shall raise” or “We arouse.”

Thirdly, the word شهيد (*shahid*) is not used here in the sense of martyr but in the sense of witness – witness to the actions of his people.

The Qur'an considers every prophet as a witness to the actions of his *ummah* (people). There is not a single instance in the Qur'an where the word شهيد (*shahid*) is used for martyr as it is currently today, for one killed in the way at God. The word شهيد was of course used by the Prophet (S) and the Imams (A) in this sense, but not in the Qur'an. Thus we see how the verses of the Qur'an have been distorted for the purpose of reconciling the Qur'anic teachings with an inconsistent philosophy like Marxism,

4. What was the principal aim of the prophets? Was their primary goal to establish justice and equality, or to strengthen the relation of man with God by means of faith and knowledge? Did they combine both the alms together and were dualist in approach? Do we require some other explanation? I have already dealt with this problem while discussing prophethood⁹ and there is no need to repeat what we have said there. Here we shall deal with this subject only from the viewpoint of the prophets' methodology.

While discussing the practical implications of *tawhid*¹⁰ (the principle of Divine Unity), I have already explained that the prophets neither concentrated their efforts on reforming man and liberating him from within by breaking off all bondages to the worldly things—as the Sufis maintain—nor did they devote all their energies to bringing about equity and reform in external human relations, considering this reform as sufficient for the reformation of man's internal relations (with God and himself)—as advocated by some materialist schools of philosophy. The Holy Qur'an, in the same breath and in a single sentence says:

... تَعَالَوْا إِلَى كَلِمَةٍ سَوَاءٍ بَيْنَنَا وَبَيْنَكُمْ أَلَّا نَعْبُدَ إِلَّا اللَّهَ وَلَا نُشْرِكَ بِهِ شَيْئاً وَلَا يَتَّخِذَ بَعْضُنَا بَعْضاً أَرْبَاباً مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ ...

...Come now to a word common between us and you, that we shall worship none but God, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords besides God ... (3:64)

But the question is, from where did the prophets start their mission? From within or from without? Did the prophets initiate their work by transforming men from within by means of impregnating them with religious faith and spiritual fervour and after that people had undergone religious, moral, intellectual, and emotional transformation they made use of this change for attaining the aims of social unity, social

reform, social justice and equality?

Or did they act other way round by first concentrating their efforts to change material conditions by calling public attention to deprivation, backwardness, and oppression and by mobilizing the people to eliminate social disunity, discrimination and injustice, and attending to the task of cultivating faith, correct doctrine and morals only after this goal was realized?

A little study of the methods employed by the prophets and saints would reveal that they, contrary to the practice of so-called social reformers and the advocates of human welfare, started their work with emphasis on right thinking, correct doctrine, belief, spiritual fervour, love of God, and constant remembrance of the origin of the world (*mabda'*) and the Day of Resurrection.

A glance at the chronological order of the surahs and revelation of the Qur'anic verses with reference to the problems discussed in them and a study of the life of the Prophet (S) and his approach to the problems he dealt with during the thirteen years of his stay in Mecca and the ten years of his life in Medina, is sufficient to throw light on the methods employed by the prophets.

5. That the opponents of the prophets should have maintained a conservative logic is quite natural. If it could be deduced from the Qur'an that the opponents of the prophets, without exception, believed in this logic, one might justifiably say that all opponents of prophets belonged to the affluent, privileged, and exploiter class. But what can actually be deduced from the Qur'an is that this type of thinking is the logic of the leaders of the opponents, the *mala'* and the *mustakbirun*, whom Marx regards as owners and distributors of the society's intellectual products.

That the logic of the prophets should be a logic of dynamism, rationality, and indifference to custom and tradition is also natural. But It is not justifiable to say that deprivation, exploitation, and oppression of the lower classes have been responsible for moulding their consciousness in this manner, and that their thinking is naturally determined by their deprivations and privations.

The prophets have this logic because they have attained to a stage of human perfection with respect to their logic, reason, feelings, and emotions. In fact, the more a human being acquires perfection, the lesser is his attachment and dependence on his natural and social environment and material conditions, and greater is his independence. We shall talk more about it later. The independent logic of the prophets requires that they should not be tied to customs, habits, and traditions. On the contrary it requires of them to liberate the people also from the shackles of blind imitation of decadent customs and traditions.

6. Whatever has been said in the context of oppression (*istid'af*) is also unacceptable. Why? Because, firstly, the Qur'an has itself clearly explained the evolutionary course of history and its ultimate goal variously in several verses. These verses explain and interpret the meaning of the above-mentioned verse (28:5) and are complementary to it, as they suggest that its contention is true only under certain conditions. Secondly, contrary to the common belief, the verse of *istid'af* (28:5) cannot be interpreted as formulating any universal law in itself.

This is so evident that there is little need for any elaborate comparison with other related verses or any detailed interpretation or explanation. This verse is related to the verse preceding it and the one following it. When these verses are read in successive order we find that this verse does not contain the universal principle which has been inferred from it. I would like to discuss this verse in two parts. The first part of our discussion is based upon the assumption that this verse may be separated from the ten verses preceding and following it and that a universal principle may be derived from it.

Then we compare this verse with other verses which propound another historical principle which contradicts the assumed principle, and see what conclusion can be drawn from this comparison. In the second part we shall show that this verse basically does not propound the universal historical principle that has been inferred from it.

(i)

In several verses of the Qur'an the ultimate destiny and fate of history as well as its course of evolution is pictured as the ultimate victory of faith over faithlessness, victory of piety over uncontained lust, the victory of righteousness over corruption, and victory of good and godly conduct over perverse behaviour. The verse 55 of *Surat al-Nur*, reads thus:

وَعَدَ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مِنْكُمْ وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ لَيَسْتَخْلِفَنَّهُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ كَمَا اسْتَخْلَفَ الَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِهِمْ وَلَيُمَكِّنَنَّ لَهُمْ دِينَهُمُ الَّذِي ارْتَضَى لَهُمْ وَلَيُبَدِّلَنَّهُمْ مِنْ بَعْدِ خَوْفِهِمْ أَمْنًا يَعْبُدُونَنِي لَا يُشْرِكُونَ بِي شَيْئًا

God has promised those of you who believe and do good works that He will surely make them to succeed in the earth, even as He caused those who were before them to succeed [others}, and that He will surely establish for them their religion which He has approved (or them, and will give them in exchange safety after their fear. They shall sense Me, not associating with Me anything (24:55)

In this verse the people who are promised final victory viceregency of God, and inheritance of the earth are no doubt the righteous believers. Contrary to verse 28:5 which mentions the condition of being oppressed, deprived, and exploited as the main characteristic of the believers, this verse relies upon ideological, moral and behavioural characteristics. It proclaims the ultimate victory and domination of a particular kind of belief, faith, and mode of behaviour.

In other words this verse promises the ultimate victory of the human being who has attained conviction of faith, realization of truth and sublimity of character. One of the implications of the promised victory is 'succession in earth,' that is, wresting of authority from previous rulers and powers. The other implication is regarding the establishment of the rule of Religion, that is realization of all ethical and social values of Islam, such as, justice, chastity, piety, courage, self-sacrifice, love, worship of God, sincerity, purity of soul, etc. Thirdly, it implies rejection of all forms of polytheism (shirk) either in worship (*ibadah*) or in

obedience (*'ita'ah*).

In *Surat al-'A'raf* the verse 128 states:

قَالَ مُوسَى لِقَوْمِهِ اسْتَعِينُوا بِاللَّهِ وَاصْبِرُوا إِنَّ الْأَرْضَ لِلَّهِ يُورِثُهَا مَنْ يَشَاءُ مِنْ عِبَادِهِ وَالْعَاقِبَةُ لِلْمُتَّقِينَ

And Moses said to his people, 'Seek help in Allah, and be patient; surely the earth is God's and He gives it for an inheritance to whom He Will of His servants and ultimately to the God-fearing, [i.e. in the end the God-fearing would be the inheritors of the earth] (7: 128)

In *Surat al-'Anbiya*, the verse 105 declares:

وَلَقَدْ كَتَبْنَا فِي الزَّبُورِ مِنْ بَعْدِ الذِّكْرِ أَنَّ الْأَرْضَ يَرِثُهَا عِبَادِيَ الصَّالِحُونَ

We have written in al-Zabur, after the Remembrance, 'Indeed the earth shall be the inheritance of My righteous servants.' (21: 105)

There are other verses also relating to this subject.

What shall we do now? Should we accept the verse 28:5 related with *istid'af* (oppression) or the verse 24:55 concerned with the matter of *istikhlaf* (succession) and several other verses of its kind? Can we say that these two types of verses though apparently different in meaning express the same fact, that the oppressed are the same as the believers, the righteous, and the pious, and vice versa? Can we say that *istid'af* (being oppressed) is the social and class character of the same people who are ideologically identified as men of faith, righteousness, and piety? Of course.

As I have already argued, the theory of correspondence between the so-called 'superstructural' characteristics of belief, righteousness, and piety, and the so-called 'infrastructural' characters of being oppressed, exploited, and deprived is not justified from the point of view of the Qur'an. From the Qur'anic viewpoint it is just as possible that a group of oppressed may not consist of believers. The Qur'an has introduced both of these groups.

However, as I have pointed out earlier, whenever a monotheistic ideology based upon the Divine values of justice, self-sacrifice, and benevolence is presented in a class society, it is evident that majority of its followers should belong to the oppressed class; because they do not have to overcome the obstacles which block the way of nature as in the case of the opposite class. But it does not necessarily mean that the class of believers is exclusively comprised of the oppressed class.

Secondly, each one of the above-mentioned verses presents two different mechanisms of history. The verse concerning oppression (28:5) identifies the course and movement of history with class struggle.

The mechanism of movement is explained as being due to the pressures created by the oppressors and their reactionary character on the one hand, and the revolutionary spirit of the exploited class on the other hand.

This struggle undeniably results in the victory of the oppressed class, irrespective of their commitment to the Qur'anic ideal of good conduct, and applies also to such peoples, for example, as that of Vietnam and Cambodia. If we try to interpret this verse from the religious point of view, we shall have to say that this verse expounds the principle of the Divine support for the oppressed. The Qur'an declares:

وَلَا تَحْسَبَنَّ اللَّهَ غَافِلًا عَمَّا يَعْمَلُ الظَّالِمُونَ

And deem not that God is unaware of what the wicked do (14:42)

This is an affirmation of Divine justice. The verse concerned with *istid'af* (oppression) containing the notions of leadership (*imamah*) and inheritance (*wirathah*) is indicative of Divine justice.

But the verse relating to *istikhlaf* (succession) (24: 55) and other similar verses, expound a different mechanism operating in history as a natural process. From the religious point of view this mechanism implies a principle more comprehensive and inclusive than the principle of Divine justice, since the latter is included in it.

The mechanism expounded in the verse 24: 55, and other similar verses, can be explained in this fashion: Among the various kinds of struggles throughout the course of world's history, almost all of which have had waged for the sake of some material interest and gain, only that struggle which has been waged for the sake of God (*lillah wa fillah*) has been exclusively motivated by sacred values, free of any selfish material interest. This struggle, under the leadership of the prophets and the believers following them, has been instrumental in the advancement of humanity and human civilization.

Only this type of struggle is worthy of being called the battle between good and evil. It were these battles which pushed forward history from the humanistic and spiritual point of view. The real motivating force behind these struggles was not the upsurge of a certain class but man's natural and instinctive urge for truth and understanding of the mystery of existence and his craving for justice, which aims at creating an ideal social order.

It was not the sense of deprivation and loss but the natural urge for self-perfection that had been instrumental in man's progress.

The animal faculties in man have remained unchanged from the beginning of history until now; they have neither developed in any way nor can they develop now. But his human aptitudes gradually develop and blossom, so that in future, more than today, he will be able to emancipate himself from material and economic bonds and incline more and more towards faith and spiritual perfection. The ground on which

history has developed and evolved was not the battles fought for class interests and material gains, but the ideological and spiritual struggles based on Divine faith. This is the natural mechanism of man's evolution which ensures the ultimate victory of the righteous, the pious, and the warriors of the Divine path.

Let us discuss the Divine view of this victory. Whatever participates in the process of history and undergoes gradual evolution, attaining its ultimate goal as history approaches its culmination point, is manifestation of God's Lordship (*rububivvah.*) and Benevolence (*rahmah*), which necessitate that creatures attain perfection. It is something more than what is called Divine justice which necessitates only 'compensation.' In other words, what has been promised is issuance and manifestation of the Divine Attributes of Lordship, Benevolence, and Bountifulness, and His Attributes of Omnipotence and Vengeance [retribution].

Thus, we see that the verse 28:5 concerning *istid'af* and the verse concerning *istikhlaf* (and other verses similar to it), each has a specific logic of its own. They differ in import with respect to the perspective of history, the class which is victorious, the course followed by history to ensure the promised victory, the mechanism or the natural process responsible for the movement of history, and with respect to the manifestation of relevant Divine Attributes.

Nevertheless, we see that the verse 24:55 concerned with succession is more comprehensive than the other one in respect of the conclusions it yields. Whatever man obtains on the basis of the verse concerning oppression is only a part of what he attains on the basis of the verse concerning succession. The moral value we derive from the verse concerning oppression is deliverance of the oppressed from the tyranny of the oppressor, which implies that God is the Saviour of the oppressed (thus highlights only one attribute of God), whereas the verse concerning succession embraces all the Attributes of God, including the one designated by the former.

(ii)

Now the second part of our discussion regarding the verse concerning oppression. The fact is that this verse is not meant to lay down any universal principle. It consequently, neither describes the course of history nor indicates the mechanism of history for the ultimate victory of the oppressed qua oppressed. The erroneous presumption that this verse lays down a principle is caused by separating it from its preceding and succeeding verses and generalizing the meaning of the relative pronoun *الذين* in the phrase *الذين استضعفوا* to deduce a principle which conflicts with the one deduced from the verse 24: 55 concerning succession. Consider the following three verses:

إِنَّ فِرْعَوْنَ عَلَا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَجَعَلَ أَهْلَهَا شِيَعًا يَسْتَضَعِفُ طَائِفَةٌ مِّنْهُمْ يُذَبِّحُونَ أَبْنَاءَهُمْ وَيَسْتَحْيِي نِسَاءَهُمْ إِنَّهُ كَانَ مِنَ الْمُفْسِدِينَ {4} وَتُرِيدُ أَنْ نَمُنَّ عَلَى الَّذِينَ اسْتُضْعِفُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَنَجْعَلَهُمْ أَئِمَّةً وَنَجْعَلَهُمُ الْوَارِثِينَ {5} وَنَمَكِّنَ لَهُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ وَنُرِي فِرْعَوْنَ وَهَامَانَ وَجُنُودَهُمَا مِنْهُمْ مَا كَانُوا يَحْذَرُونَ {6}

Indeed Pharaoh exalted himself in the earth and made its people into castes, Abasing one party of them, slaughtering their sons and sparing their women, surely he was of those who work corruption, And we desired to show favour unto those who were oppressed in the earth, and to make them leaders and to make them the inheritors, and to establish them in the earth, and to show. Pharaoh and Haman (his prime minister) and their hosts that which the) feared from them, (28:4-6)

These three verses are interrelated and can be interpreted only when read together.

We see that the clauses **وَنُزِرِي فِرْعَوْنَ وَهَامَانَ** ...'and to establish them in the earth,' and **وَنُكِّنَ لَهُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ** ...'and to show Pharaoh and Haman...' in the third verse are related to the phrase **أَنْ نَّمُنَّ** 'that We shall favour,' in the second verse which is complementary to their meaning. Therefore, these two verses cannot be separated from each other.

Besides, the content of the second clause in the third verse, i.e. **وَنُزِرِي فِرْعَوْنَ وَهَامَانَ** is related to the content of the first verse, and makes an assertion –about the fate of Pharaoh whose tyranny is described in the first verse. Thus we cannot separate the third verse from the first verse, as the third verse is related to the second verse and complements it. The second verse, also, cannot be separated from the first verse,

Had the third verse not been there or had it not dealt with the fate of Pharaoh and Haman, it would have been possible to separate the second verse from the first, and to consider it as independent, so that a universal principle could be deduced from it. But the inseparable connection of these three verses absolutely excludes the possibility of deducing any principle. What is meant is that Pharaoh indulged in acts of self-aggrandizement, discrimination, repression and infanticide, while God had determined to bestow leadership and inheritance of the earth upon those who were humiliated, oppressed, and deprived of their rights. Hence the pronoun **الَّذِينَ** in the second verse should be taken in the restricted sense of reference to the people who were promised, not in a general sense applicable to all oppressed.

Moreover, there is another point in the verse to be noted. The phrase **وَنَجْعَلُهُمْ أَئِمَّةً** 'We shall make them as leaders...' refers to the phrase **أَنْ نَّمُنَّ**, 'that We shall favour...' It does not say **بِأَنْ نَجْعَلُهُمْ** which would have been more proper if it was meant that the Divine favour involved amounted to bestowing of leadership and inheritance.

This is the general interpretation of the verse. However, the verse means to say, 'We intended to show favour unto the oppressed through a prophet and a revealed Scripture (Moses and the Torah), through religious teaching and training, and through generation of monotheistic faith in them, making them righteous believers, and as a result the leaders and inheritors of the land [their own land]. Hence the verse intends to make this statement:

وَنُرِيدُ أَنْ نَمُنَّ عَلَى الَّذِينَ اسْتُضِعُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ (بِمُوسَى وَالْكِتَابِ الَّذِي نَنْزَلَهُ عَلَى مُوسَى) وَنَجْعَلَهُمْ أَئِمَّةً وَنَجْعَلَهُمُ

We desired to show favour unto those who were oppressed (by sending Moses and the revealed Scripture) and to make them leaders and inheritors...

Therefore, though the verse 28:5 concerning oppression (*istid'af*) bears a specific meaning, it is quite similar in import to the verse 24:55 concerning succession (*istikhlaf*), i.e. it partially conveys the general meaning of the verse. Furthermore, aside from the relation of the phrase *و نجعلهم أئمة أن نمن*, basically we cannot presume that the verse intends to say that the children of Israel would have obtained the leadership and inheritance of their land by sole virtue of being oppressed whether Moses would have appeared as a prophet or not, irrespective of his heavenly teachings and regardless of their following those heavenly teachings,

Possibly, the advocates of justifiability of the theory of historical materialism from the Islamic point of view may raise another point. They may say that the Islamic culture in its essence and character is either the culture of the oppressed or of the oppressors, or it is a blanket culture. If the Islamic culture is the culture of the oppressed, it is bound to have the character of its class: its audience, its message, its alignment, and everything must revolve around the oppressed class. And if the Islamic culture is the culture of the oppressors, as claimed by the opponents of Islam, besides having its class character and revolving around its interests, it should be a reactionary and anti-human culture and so necessarily of a non-Divine origin.

No Muslim would accept this point of view. Moreover, the entirety of this culture bears witness to the contrary. Now the claim that the Islamic culture is a blanket culture. A blanket culture is a neutral culture, a culture of isolation and indifference, without responsibility, and commitment, whose motto is, "Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give back to God what belongs to God." It is a culture which attempts to reconcile water with fire, oppressed with oppressor, exploited with exploiter, by bringing together all of them under the same roof, a culture that neither roasts the meat nor hums the spit.

Such a culture is practically a conservative culture which serves the interests of the oppressors and the exploiters. A neutral, indifferent, and noncommitted group, which does not participate in any social conflicts between the exploiter and the exploited, practically supports the exploiting class by not constraining its freedom. Similarly a culture whose spirit is neutral and indifferent should of necessity considered to be the culture of the oppressive class. Taking this into account, it is claimed that since the Islamic culture is neither neutral nor a supporter of the oppressive class, it should be a culture of the oppressed with respect to its origin, its alignment, its message, and its audience, all revolving around the axis of this class.

This argument is totally fallacious. I think, there are two fundamental reasons for the inclination of this section of Muslim intellectuals towards historical materialism. Firstly, they presume that if Islamic culture

is to be regarded as a revolutionary culture—or if Islam is to be equipped with a revolutionary culture—the recourse to historical materialism is inevitable. The rest of their talk and their claims that it is an idea inspired by the Qur'an and specifically derived from the verse 28:5 about *istid'af* are nothing but excuses and devices to conceal this prejudgement. This is the reason for their outright departure from the essence of Islamic logic, which makes them degrade the sublime, natural, Divine and human logic of Islam to the level of a materialistic philosophy.

These intellectuals have imagined that the only way open for a culture to be revolutionary is to identify it with the oppressed and the deprived class, to consider it bound to its interests, and as being exclusively related to it with respect to its source, alignment, and audience. Therefore, they think, all leaders and ideologues should arise solely from this class, the relation of this culture to all the other classes and groups being one of sheer hostility, antagonism, and conflict.

These intellectuals presume that the way to a revolutionary culture should necessarily end in the stomach, and that all great revolutions of history, even those led by the prophets, were the revolutions of the stomach, for the stomach. For the same reason, out of the great Abu Dharr, the wise man of the *urnnah*, a staunch monotheist, a sincere and honest supporter of Islam, a determined warrior in the way of God, a man who fearlessly fulfilled the duty of *al-amr bi-al-ma'ruf wa al-nahy 'an al-munkar*, they have carved an Abu Dharr of the stomach, a psychopath remarkably sensitive to the pangs of hunger, who, for the sake of satisfying his hunger, considered in not only permissible but obligatory to draw the sword against all men.

The highest value attributed to his life, in their view, is his personal experience of hunger, due to which he could understand the agony of the hunger class. His sympathy with the hungry caused him to develop a complex against those who were fighting against them. That's all there is to Abu Dharr. The whole personality of this Luqman of the ummah, this monotheist see, this ardent crusader, and one of the greatest personalities of Islam, is degraded to the level of a materialist.

These intellectuals subscribe to the view of Marx according to whom a revolution can originate only in a violent movement of the masses. [11](#)

They are unable to imagine that a culture, a school of thought and an ideology which has Divine origin and addresses all human beings, and in fact the human nature itself, through a universal and comprehensive message, aligned with the values of justice, equality, piety, spirituality, love, benevolence and struggle against tyranny, is ever capable of giving birth to a great revolution accompanied with profound changes. But it is a revolution guided by the Divine light and the human conscience, and is accompanied with religious fervour, spiritual ecstasy, Divine motives, and humanistic values, similar to those monotheistic revolutions which have been witnessed by history again and again. The Islamic Revolution is a clear example of such a revolution.

These intellectuals fail to conceive that it is not essential for a culture to necessarily originate in the

oppressed class in order to be committed and purposive and not to be neutral and indifferent. They presume that a blanket culture is necessarily neutral and indifferent. They are unable to understand that it is impossible for a comprehensive school of thought and a blanket culture to be neutral, indifferent irresponsible, and noncommittal if it has a Divine origin and is addressed to the human nature.

That which creates the sense of responsibility and commitment is not affinity with the oppressed class but dedication to God and human conscience. Ignorance of this fact is the root cause of their misunderstanding regarding the relationship of Islam with revolution.

The other main reason for this misconception should be sought in the relationship between Islam and its social alignment. These intellectuals have observed that there is a clear inclination in favour of the oppressed in the Qur'an reflected in its historical discourses about the movements led by the prophets. On the other hand, they have accepted with unquestioning credulity the validity of the Marxist doctrine of correspondence between the social base and ideological base, according to which the origin and alignment of an ideology correspond with each other.

Since it has never crossed their minds to question the validity of this doctrine, they have been forced to draw this inference that since the Qur'an clearly considers the goals of the sacred movements to be in alignment with the interests of the oppressed and oriented towards recovery of their rights, therefore, it means that the Qur'an regards all the sacred movements as originating from the oppressed and exploited class. This leads to the conclusion that the essence of history from the Qur'anic viewpoint is materialistic and economic, with economy as the base of the social structure.

From what we have said so far it becomes clear that the Qur'an believes in the principle of human nature and considers it to be the logic which governs human life. This logic, which may be called the 'logic of the human nature,' is diametrically opposed to the 'logic of profit,' which is the logic of the beastly and degenerate human being.

Accordingly Islam does not accept the doctrine of correspondence between the social origin and alignment of an ideology or the doctrine of correspondence between the social and ideological bases. Islam regards it as an inhuman doctrine applicable to semi-human beings who have not received any human education or training, and so are devoid of any sense of higher values. Such stick to the logic of profit only. But it does not apply to human beings who have attained humanhood, having received human education and training; their logic is the logic of nature.

Aside from all this, to say that the alignment of Islam is in favour of the oppressed is a sort of loose statement. Of course, Islam is aligned with the values of equity, equality, and justice. Obviously the people who are benefited by this alignment are the oppressed and the deprived. Those who are adversely affected by it are the oppressors, the exploiters, and the despots.

It means that Islam, even while striving for the rights of a certain class, its principal goal is realization of a value and promotion of a human principle. It is here that the extraordinary worth of 'the principle of

nature,' clearly expounded by the Qur'an, becomes evident in the Islamic culture as the fountain-head of all Islamic teachings. [12](#)

Much that is said about nature [in other philosophies] fails to elucidate its depth and to comprehend its full dimensions. Even those who often talk about nature, since they do not pay due attention to the various aspects of its vast dimensions, ultimately come up with views which contradict this principle.

Another example of this error, which is more appalling, is the theory regarding the origin of religions. Whatever we have discussed till now concerns the nature and origin of historical phenomenon from the viewpoint of religion (particularly Islam). Now we shall deal with religion as a socio-historical phenomenon, which has existed from the dawn of history up to the present time, and concerns with the origin and alignment of this social phenomenon.

We have recurrently pointed out that the Marxist doctrine of historical materialism believes in a correspondence between the origin of every cultural phenomenon and its class alignment. There is a universal principle generally believed in by Muslim mystics and philosophers, according to which the end of everything is a kind of return to its origin.

النهايات هي الرجوع الى البدايات

The ends return to the origins.

And Rumi has said:

جزئها را رویها سوی کل است ببلانرا عشق با روی کل است

آنچه از دریا به دریا می رود از همانجا کآمد آنجا می رود

از سر کُهِ سیلِهای تیزرو وزتنِ ما جانِ عشقِ آمیزرو

*The parts are forced towards the whole,
Nightingales are in love with the rose's face;
What comes from the sea flows back into it,
And everything returns to its source;
Like the restless waves gushing from mountain-tops,
My soul burning with love, is restless to be free from the body.*

Marxism holds a similar view with regard to intellectual, aesthetic, philosophical, and religious matters,

and in fact all socio-cultural phenomena. This school claims that all ideas are directed towards the source from which they originate. The end of everything is directed towards its source and origin. There is no such thing as a neutral or non-aligned philosophy, religion or culture. There is also no such thing as a philosophy or religion which seeks social reform that is not wholly to the benefit of the social class from which it arises.

According to it, every class has its specific intellectual and cultural manifestations. Therefore, in all societies divided into two classes from the economic point of view, there are two distinct types of emotional, philosophical, moral, artistic, literary, aesthetic approaches, and two different types of sensibilities and world outlooks, and occasionally even two types of scientific knowledge. Whenever the infrastructure and property relations are of two forms, this division leads to bifurcation in two cultural and intellectual patterns and systems.

Marx personally accepts two exemptions from this principle: religion and the State. According to him, these two are special creations of the oppressive class and are used by it as instruments of exploitation. Naturally, they are aligned with the interests of the oppressors. As for the exploited class, due to its social position it is neither the source of religion nor the State. Religion and the State are imposed upon them by the opposite group. Hence two systems of government or religion do not exist anywhere.

Certain Muslim intellectuals, contrary to Marx's view claim that religion can be also divided into two different systems. As morality, arts, literature and all other cultural phenomena in a class society represent two systems and each of them has a specific origin and orientation related to its respective class—one system is related to the ruling class while the other is related to the ruled –so also religion is of two types: the religion of the rulers, and the religion of the ruled.

The religion of the rulers is polytheism (*shirk*), and the religion of the ruled is monotheism (*tawhid*). The religion of the rulers is partisan and discriminatory, whereas the religion of the ruled advocates equity and equality. The religion of the rulers justifies the status quo, while the religion of the ruled demands revolution and condemns the status quo. The religion of the rulers is static and stagnant, and silences all criticism; whereas the religion of the ruled stimulates upsurge, dynamism, and protest. The religion of the rulers is the opium of the society, and the religion of the ruled is a tonic for it.

Therefore, Marx's theory, that the social orientation and alignment of religion is absolutely to the interests of the rulers, is true only for the religion of the ruling class, which is against the ruled and is the opium of the masses. This is the type of religion which has practically always existed and has been in vogue and power. But it is not true of the religion of the ruled, i.e., the religion– of the truthful prophets, which was not tolerated by the ruling class and was suppressed by all means.

These intellectuals in this manner reject Marx's theory which considers all religions as an instrument employed in the interests of the ruling class, and presume that thereby they have rejected Marxism itself. They do not realize that what they have said, in spite of its going against the views of Marx,

Engels, Mao, and other Marxists, is nothing but a confirmation of the materialist–marxist interpretation of religion – something which is far more appalling. After all they accept that the religion of the ruled has a particular class origin.

Thus they approve of the principle of correspondence between a religion's class origin and its class orientation and alignment. In others words, they have unconsciously affirmed the materialistic conception of religion and all cultural phenomena and hence the doctrine of necessary correspondence between the origin of a cultural phenomenon and its objectives. The only thing they have done is that contrary to the Marxist views, they have affirmed the existence of a religion which originates in the oppressed class and serves its interests. They have given an interesting explanation of the religion of the oppressed and its social orientation. But they ignore that this view in itself accepts the doctrine of materialist–economic character of religion.

Furthermore what sort of conclusions are drawn from this view? It is concluded that the polytheistic religion of the ruling class is the only religion that has played an objectively significant role in the lives of people throughout history. Due to the determinism of history, which supported it, and the economic and political power vested in its hands, the religion of the ruling class, which necessarily justified its situation, has been always the predominant religion. On the other hand, since the monotheistic religion could not materialize and objectify its social objectives, it did not play any historical role in society, as the super–structure can not precede the economic base or infrastructure.

According to this view, the monotheistic movements of the prophets, being the expression of the aspirations of the oppressed and the defeated, could not play any historical role and were bound to be defeated, The prophets preached the religion of unity of God and justice, but all their attempts proved to be short-lived, because the religion of the rulers under the mask of monotheism and prophetic teachings distorted the true religion and suppressed It. The religion of the ruling class flourished by drawing its nourishment from prophetic teachings while growing in power and using it for exploitation of the deprived class.

In fact, the truthful prophets of God strove to provide the people with bread, but brought disaster upon them, as their religion became a tool of the opposite class for tightening the noose further around the neck of the oppressed and the weak. The prophets could not achieve what they desired through their teachings; rather the outcome was contrary to their objectives, or, to use an expression used by Islamic jurisprudents, **مَا قُصِدَ لَمْ يَفْعُ وَمَا وَقَعَ لَمْ يُقْصَد**, ‘the intended did not happen, and what happened was not intended.’”

What the materialists and atheists say about religion, that religion, that opium of the masses, it stupefies them, bewitches them, causes stagnation and passivism, justifies tyranny and discrimination, and is conducive to ignorance—all this is true but only for the religion of the rulers: the polytheistic religion of social discrimination which predominated throughout history. But it is not true of righteous religion, the religion of monotheism, the religion of the ruled, the oppressed, which was always suppressed and was driven

out of the arena of life and history.

The only role played by the religion of the ruled has been one of criticism and protest. It was similar to the role of a political party with minority seats in the legislature. The party which obtains majority forms the cabinet out of its members, carries out its programmes and resolutions. The other party despite being more progressive, because of being in minority, is reduced to the role of a critic of the majority.

The party in majority does not pay any heed to these criticisms. Ruling the society according to its own desires, it may occasionally even utilize the criticism of the minority for strengthening its own position. If it were not for the criticism of the opposition, it may possibly collapse under increasing pressures; but the criticism of the opposition makes it more cautious and helps it to further consolidate its position.

The foregoing statement is not true on any account. Neither is it true in respect of its analysis of the nature of polytheism, nor with regard to its analysis of the nature of monotheism, nor in its treatment of the part played by these two religions in history. Undeniably religion has always existed in the world, be it in the form of monotheism, or polytheism, or both of them existing simultaneously. As for the priority of polytheism over monotheism or vice versa, the sociologists advance different views. The majority of them hold that in the beginning there was polytheism, and religion gradually evolved towards monotheism. Some sociologists hold the opposite view.

Religious traditions, or rather certain religious principles, confirm the second theory. But as to the question how the religion of polytheism came into existence, and whether it was invented to justify the acts of injustice and tyranny by the oppressors, or if there was some other reason, researchers offer other explanations; and one cannot naively accept the view that polytheism is a product of social injustice. The interpretation of monotheism as the outcome of the aspirations of the oppressed classes to uphold the values of equality, brotherhood, and unity, as against the philosophy of discrimination and injustice of the rulers, appears to be more unscientific as well as incompatible with the basic tenets of Islam.

The above-mentioned view presents the truthful apostles of God as "the acquitted failures;" failures, since they failed in the struggle against evil and were overpowered throughout history; their religion could not influence society nor could it play any role comparable to the one played by the false religion of the rulers. Its role was restricted to passive criticism of the religion of the rulers. And the 'acquitted,' for the reason that, contrary to the claims of materialists, they never belonged to the pole of exploiters and plunderers, and were not agents of stagnation and passivism. Their alignment was not with the interests of the ruling class. On the contrary, they belonged to the pole of the oppressed and the exploited, arose from among them, experienced their agonies, worked in their interest, and strove for the restoration of their rights usurped by the ruling class.

As the truthful prophets are totally exonerated with respect to their call, message and their alignment, they are also exonerated from any accusation of failure; they were not responsible for it. It was the

determinism of history arising out of the institution of private property which supported and sustained the opponent, the ruling class. The existence of private property necessarily divided society into two halves: the exploiters and the exploited.

The half consisting of the exploiters, by virtue of its ownership of material production, necessarily monopolized intellectual products also. One cannot oppose "determinism of history"—which is a materialistic term for fate and predestination, predestined not by a god in heavens but on the earth, a deity which is material, not abstract, whose power represented by the "economic base of society" operates through the channels of the "tools of production." Therefore, the prophets are not responsible for their failure.

However, though the above-mentioned interpretation exonerates the righteous prophets, it negates the notion of a system of creation which is all good, is governed by truth, and where the good predominates over evil. The Islamic metaphysician optimistically maintains that the system of being is based upon truth and good, that evil, falsehood, and wickedness do not have a fundamental reality and do not exist independently; they are accidental, relative, and transitory. Truth and good form the axis of the system of being and the human society:

فَأَمَّا الزَّبَدُ فَيَذْهَبُ جُفَاءً وَأَمَّا مَا يَنْفَعُ النَّاسَ فَيَمْكُثُ فِي الْأَرْضِ

...As for the foam, it passes away as scum [upon the banks], while that which is of use to mankind remains in the earth...(13: 17)

It is also said that in the struggle between truth and falsehood, truth emerges victorious:

.. بَلْ نَقْذِفُ بِالْحَقِّ عَلَى الْبَاطِلِ فَيَدْمَغُهُ فَإِذَا هُوَ زَاهِقٌ

Nay, but We hurl the true against the false, and it invalidates it, and behold! Falsehood vanishes away...(21: 18)

It is further asserted that Divine providence has been with the truthful prophets all along:

إِنَّا لَنَنْصُرُ رُسُلَنَا وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا فِي الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا وَيَوْمَ يَقُومُ الْأَشْهَادُ

Surely We shall help Our Messengers and those who believe, in the life of the world, and upon the day when the witnesses arise. (40:50)

The Qur'an also asserts:

{وَلَقَدْ سَبَقَتْ كَلِمَتُنَا لِعِبَادِنَا الْمُرْسَلِينَ} {171} {إِنَّهُمْ لَهُمُ الْمَنْصُورُونَ} {172} {وَإِنَّ جُنَدَنَا لَهُمُ الْغَالِبُونَ} {173}

And verily Our word went forth of old unto Our servants, the envoys; assuredly they shall be helped, and Our host—they are the victors. (37: 171–173)

But the view discussed above refutes these principles because although it exonerates all the prophets, messengers, and reformers of the past their God is held responsible.

All these conflicting views pose a ticklish problem. On the one hand, the Qur'an presents an optimist view regarding the general course of the universe by repeatedly emphasizing that *haqq* (truth or right) is the axis of being and man's social existence. Theological philosophy on the basis of its particular principles claims that good invariably overcomes evil, right conquers wrong, and that evil is accidental, relative, and unreal, without any real and independent existence of its own.

On the other hand, a study of the history of the past and the present gives rise to a sense of pessimism regarding the laws governing the universe and appears to affirm that the view held by the pessimists that entire history is a cavalcade of catastrophes, oppressions, exploitations, and violations against right and truth, is not unjustified.

Is there any way out of this dilemma? Either our understanding of the system of reality and human society is wrong, or we are mistaken in our comprehension of the meaning of the Qur'an by ascribing to it an optimistic world outlook. Or if we are not mistaken with respect to either of them, we have to accept an inherent, unresolvable contradiction between the reality and the Qur'an.

I have discussed the doubts which arise regarding the system of existence in this context and have solved them by the grace of God in my book *Divine Justice*.¹³ The doubts which arise regarding the course of history and human society would be dealt with under the title "*The Battle between Good and Evil*."¹⁴ God willing, there we shall state our views for the resolution of this doubt. I will be delighted to learn the well-reasoned views of other scholars regarding this problem.

¹. Raymond Aron, op. cit., vol. I, p. 78.

². Also refer to 18:28, describing the followers of the prophets; 11:27 and 26:111 describing the followers of Noah; 10:83 describing the followers of Moses; 7:88–90 describing the followers of Shu'ayb; 7:75–76 describing the followers of Salih, etc. There are many more verses of the kind, but we confine here to refer to the above-mentioned.

³. Karl Marx, German Ideology

⁴. In the footnote, the verses 62:2 and 2:129 are referred to, to draw the conclusion that the prophets arise from among the "ummahs," and the word "ummah" is taken to mean "the underprivileged masses." We shall examine this argument later on.

⁵. In the footnote, the verse 28:75 has been referred to, and it is presumed that it means that the martyrs and those slain in the way of God always arise from among the "ummahs," and the word "ummah" is taken to mean "the underprivileged masses." We shall examine this argument later on.

⁶. The Qur'an itself does not use these detracting words, but quotes the ruling clique which uses them to refer to the followers of the prophets belonging to the oppressed classes.

⁷. These gentlemen, without expressing their real intention of presenting historical materialism of Marx in an Islamic guise,

pretend to have reinterpreted the Holy Qur'an.

[8.](#) The Qur'an, 66:11.

[9.](#) See verses 4:97, 14:21, 34:31–37, 40:47–50

[10.](#) See Wahy wa nubuwat (Revelation and Prophethood), the third book of the series, Muqaddameh bar jahan bini-ye Islami, of which the present book Jami'e wa tarikh is a part, pp. 35, 37–43.

[11.](#) Jahan bini ye tawhidi (The World Outlook of Tawhid), the second treatise of the Muqaddameh'l bar jahan-e Islami, pp. 62–81.

[12.](#) Andre Peter, Marx and Marxism, Persian translation by Shuja' al-Din Diyaiyan, p. 39.

[13.](#) Translator's Note: The author emphasizes the importance of the principle of nature in the Qur'anic conception of man, and regards it as being central to Islamic teachings. The term he uses is "umm al-ma'arif."

[14.](#) Translator's note: Martyr Mutahhari in his scholarly work "Adl-e Ilahi" (Divine Justice) has offered a convincing solution of this problem.

Source URL:

<https://www.al-islam.org/society-and-history-murtadha-mutahhari/islam-and-historical-materialism#comment-0>