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Lesson Twenty-one: An Answer to the Materialists

The materialists say to us: "Since change and development are regarded as the most fundamental and pervasive law of nature, nothing in the world enjoying stability, the principles of change cannot be reconciled with the claim of Islam to eternal validity."

The first part of this statement is correct and entirely defensible. However, it does not represent the entire truth of the matter.

It is true that everything in the world is subject to change, but that which is changing in nature and destined to disappear is matter and the phenomena arising from it, not the laws and systems prevailing in nature.

Both the natural order and the social order (insofar as it corresponds to natural norms) are exempt from change; universality and temporality are among the defining characteristics of laws. It is these properties that give laws the ability to retain their validity.

Stars and planets come into being, rotate, disseminate light and energy, and finally are extinguished. However, the law of gravity that governs them remains in force.

The human being enters the world, in accordance with a Divine custom and norm and the general movement of all things toward perfection, and after passing through his allotted lifespan, weakens and dies. Death is the inevitable end of every human being, but the laws that govern the human being and the world that surrounds outlive him.

Numerous sources of heat, at different temperatures, appear in the world and then become cold, but the law of heat is not extinguished.

If natural man is the object envisaged when drawing up laws and his fundamental structure and disposition are kept in mind by the lawgiver, temporal changes can never induce the slightest change in this kind of law, because the essence and fundamental substance of the human being is unchanging.

The founder of Islam has closed his eyes on the world, but the Divine Law he brought remains eternally valid, because it draws on the very nature of the human being. This is the secret of the stability and permanence of the laws of Islam.

Islam is not a political and social phenomenon. It represents a series of principles, together with their derivatives, that are illumined by the primal light of all existence. It is a law and a worldview which in the very nature of things cannot change its character.

Islam is not a religion for a certain season or place or race; it belongs neither to the Arabs nor to the non-Arabs. The words of the Qur'an are addressed to the whole of humanity:

"O mankind, We have created you out of a man and a woman and made of you different lineages so that you might recognize each other. The greatest of human beings in God's sight is the most pious." (***49:13***)

"Oh sons of Adam! Let not Satan deceive you, as he drove your father and mother from Paradise and stripped from them the garment of dignity." (***7:27***)

Holding fast to immutable laws despite the advances made in science and civilization and the changes that appear in certain human needs does not involve any problem. For throughout the process of his development, the human being continues to be subject to needs that arise from the very nature of his life and the depths of his spirit or are connected with his bodily structure.

Their trace is to be seen everywhere in history and they are marked by continuity and permanence. As long as the human being continues to live on this planet, change will never affect the essence of the human being or those elements in him which form the nucleus of his desires.

There is another set of needs relations to the human being's exploitation of nature and the resources he needs for his welfare, and others again touching on the blossoming of his creative capacities. Here, the occurrence of a new set of circumstances may indeed change the conditions of life: developments in technology, for example, may confront society with new wishes and desires. It is in areas such as this that change and transformation occur, not in the sphere outlined above.

This means that the human being should not sacrifice all the authentic and valuable criteria he has inherited to changing spatial and temporal circumstance, and that he should not turn his back on what is truly creative in the name of a facile innovativeness.

Change and innovation in needed tools and instruments, made necessary by the development of civilization, do indeed involve a series of secondary laws and regulations. It is up to those who are specialized in Islamic concerns to determine those laws, based on the specific conditions of the time, to deduce them from the fixed and general principles of the law, and to implement them.

Laws of temporary validity can, then, be drawn up for matters that are subject to change, but not for

those that are immutable. The legislative system of Islam maintains a clear distinction between the two categories.

For example, Islam has assigned to the just and competent Islamic government broad powers in deciding on matters relating to the preservation of internal security, commercial relations, political relations with foreign countries, questions of defense and mobilization, public health and so on – all of these being matters which cannot be beneficially regulated outside of the framework set by the realities of the day.

These are all changeable matters, relating to the superstructure of society; their nature may change at any time. Islam, therefore, with the vitality and dynamism that characterize it, has not laid down laws for matters subject to change, providing instead general and comprehensive criteria to which to refer.

Such an approach is capable of bringing about a profound transformation in the life of society, enabling it to exploit more fully the resources of nature and to raise the general level of awareness.

But the laws of Islam relating to the sphere that derives from principles and characteristics essential to the human being are tied up with his very nature, are fixed and not exposed to the tempest of spatio–temporal change.

For example, the love and affection of a father and mother for their child represents one continuous and permanent manifestation of the essential disposition of the human being, and rights such as those of inheritance which derive from this relationship of love are necessarily eternal. Likewise, the need of the human being to establish a family is a general and universal one, and throughout history his life has always taken on a collective form.

So from the very first day that the saplings of thought and reflecting grew from the human spirit, throughout all the vicissitudes of history and the rise and fall of civilizations, indications are to be found that the human being was always social by nature, in all the different stages of his development, and always had the need to establish a family.

The relevant criteria and ordinances must therefore be of permanent validity, for the human being's tendencies today are intermingled with the past in the depths of his essence. The existential fabric of the human being, his distinctive inward nature, will never undergo a substantial or fundamental change; nothing will prevent it from continuing on its appointed and unchanging path.

For matters such as family relationships and social relationships in general, and the rights of individuals, Islam has therefore established fixed and unchanging laws. If these laws be based on justice and are rooted in the depths of human nature, why should they be changed or modified? In what direction, away from justice and conformity to human nature, should they be made to develop?

In addition, fundamental concepts such as conscientiousness, trustworthiness, or negative attributes

such as oppressiveness, treacherousness and mendacity, are also fixed and constant, both in their individual and their collective manifestation. Permanence and constancy must then be extended also to the laws relating to them, although the method of implementing those laws may be subject to change.

Therefore those laws have value and validity that have been drawn up with attention to the true nature of the human being and his ineluctable destiny, that relate him to the universal movement of all beings as well as to the specific aim for which he was created.

Such laws are capable, in every age, of helping people live constructively, to administer their affairs properly and to attain true guidance.

If Islam has not promulgated laws of eternal validity for the human being's efforts to satisfy his needs, it is because failure to take into consideration the changing nature of such concerns when formulating the law would be a weakness, just as the failure to take into consideration the human being's unchanging inner disposition in other matters is also a weakness.

We know as well that the human being is himself an abundant source of social and environmental factors. He may endow himself with great value and loftiness, but at the same time he is not immune to deviation and error and their harmful consequences.

Sometimes he may advance in the direction of his true interests, while at other times he rebels, to the detriment of his interests.

It is necessary for him to believe that not every newly appearing phenomenon is an acceptable manifestation of civilization, once measured against his system of values; such an assumption would be impossible to support logically.

The human being attains value only when he combines the acceptance of progress with a creative role in modifying or controlling its products and continues to struggle against all that leads ultimately to the destruction of his true happiness.

Not only is Islam not opposed to whatever may lead a person to a better and happier life, it promises a reward to all who strive to bring that about, for it believes that the world should advance toward the fullest possible development of the human mind. It is precisely this belief that serves as an important factor in bringing about movements for the constructive development of the human being.

A matter that has received particular attention in Islam is the spirit and meaning of life and the paths that lead to the attainment of that ideal. Islam has therefore left people free in choosing the outward shape and form of their lives, which enables them to select their own path forward in coping with the demands of the age in which they live and the deficiencies and contradictions they inevitably encounter. Thus at each new stage they reach a higher and broader level than before.

Since Islam aims at the perfecting of human beings and at the same time bases itself on realities, it

regards it as indispensable that the law be linked with reason, and assigns reason such value that it counts it as a source of legal ordinances. On the basis of specific and precise criteria, it assigns to reason the solution of certain problems.

Another matter which gives permanency to the teachings of Islam and vitality and dynamism to its ordinances consists of the extensive powers that have been accorded to the just Islamic government. so that people will know at all times what is required of them, the government is permitted to draw up appropriate laws that are consonant with the needs of the time, whenever new situations require this. In doing this, the government must refer to the established general principles of the law.

The assignation of such powers to the Islamic government is in order to permit experts in Islamic affairs to adopt a suitable attitude to newly occurring circumstances. Employing their intellects free of any restraint and engaging in independent judgment (ijtihad) they seek to solve the needs of society as determined by the changing nature of modern life and the unceasing advances of technology in a manner conformable to the unchanging principles of the shariah.

For change forces the life of society into new channels and gives it a whole new aspect. This principle permits us to solve even the gravest and most complex of problems.

Not only do the true interests of Islamic society and its protection against corruption form the principal consideration in drawing up laws and issuing ordinances, but the greater the degree to which a law serves that purpose, the more it is preferred. Basing itself on this principle, Islam has permitted the scholars and jurists, whenever they encounter a situation in which two interests contradict each other, to sacrifice the lesser interest in favor of the greater, thus solving their dilemma.

Similarly, whenever circumstances turn a religious command into an imposition beyond the human being's power, a person is relieved of the responsibility for carrying it out.

All these are factors which give flexibility and vitality to Islam, and enable it to retain unlimited validity and the ability to advance together with the progress of human life.

It is a mistake to imagine that determining historical factors necessarily place a limit on the validity of a given law or system.

The extent to which those determining historical factors actually exercise an effect must be assessed to see whether a given law actually enjoys permanence or not, for the effect of a particular historical factor depends on the type of that force: if the force enjoys permanence, so will its effect; and if it does not, neither will its effect.

One factor in history is the historical factor; belief in religion has been a constant norm of history. Attachment to the source and origin of existence is something that wells up from the human being's inner being, and it plays a role in differing ways in all the successive stages of his life. The natural norms of

history have themselves determined that religion should always retain a permanent and autonomous identity in human life.

The point of view that this suggests gives us the possibility of looking at things in a certain way, and to make choices accordingly.

It would be a sign of extreme fanaticism to imagine that regarding all facts from a single point of view furnishes an adequate criterion for judging and assessing things – to assume, for example, that economics alone is the sole basic factor throughout history.

Some people are of the opinion that the economic factor plays a uniquely determining role, that impervious to people's will it can destroy all value systems and change all situations as it pleases. But we must ask what role people play in the unfolding of this determining role. Does the human being's free will and choice – that which distinguishes him from all material phenomena – have anything to do with this ineluctable process?

The Prophets never surrendered to the bitter realities that confronted them. Realism in assessing the environment in which they operated did not prevent them from setting certain goals and acting to achieve them; they were never tempted to justify everything by invoking historical determinism.

Golzerman, a famous scholars says: "In just the same way that it would be wrong to deny absolutely all necessity in history, it would also be wrong to accept that everything in history is determined."[1]

No realistic person will base his judgment on the principle that a self-sacrificing person who is overflowing with love, who changes the values and criteria of the human being, who looks pityingly on all forms of indolence, arrogance, greed and animal pleasure, who is constantly advancing towards creativity, perfection, nobility, wisdom and justice – that such a person is in fact a mono-dimensional being, imprisoned in the confines of his personality and a prisoner to objects. It is such an assumption that underlies the assertion that economics alone is the determining factor in religion, science, philosophy, ethics, and all other aspects of life.

To judge matters in this way is far from objective. Those who dogmatically assume such positions and insist on their own point of view as furnishing a comprehensive and neutral interpretation of the whole of history have abandoned all fairness and justice.

1. Ilm-i Tahavval-i Jami'a.

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