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Lesson Twenty: The Sealing of Prophethood

The sealing of prophethood has always been regarded as one of the fundamental components of belief in Islam; it negates the possibility of the emergence of any Messenger after the Prophet of Islam.

In any discussion of Islam, we cannot overlook the role played in it by the sealing of prophethood with the Prophet Muhammad.

What Muslim is there who does not immediately think of the Prophet's aspect as seal whenever he call him to mind, or who has any doubt that the Qur'an is the final revealed message of God?

No religion is known to us that like Islam proclaims the sealing of revelation, nor any heavenly personality who has claimed eternal validity for his message.

More than fourteen centuries have passed since the rise of Islam, and throughout this period the Prophet of Islam has always been regarded as the Seal of the Prophets. He perfected existing laws, and with the rich content of his own logical and thorough program of action, he demonstrated the ultimate value inherent in all the prophetic missions.

By contrast with other schools of religious thought, the validity of which was restricted to a certain time or place, Islam represents a comprehensive summation of all prophetic messages, and it recognizes no boundaries, whether spatial or temporal.

The Qur'an itself also depicts the brilliant visage of Muhammad, upon whom be peace and blessings, as the one by means of whom the gate of prophethood has been closed.

How can we solve the apparent contradiction between the need for Prophets as the condition for the vitality of human existence, on the one hand, and the permanent sealing of prophethood, on the other? How can we reconcile the principle of the immutability of the ordinances of Islam with the principle of social development and the everlasting search for new concepts and norms?

Industrial and technological developments have turned the human being into a creature always desiring

novelty, and wishing to connect every aspect of his life to new principles and institutions.

How can such a human being organize his social life and development on the basis of a religion that originated more than fourteen centuries ago and summons the human being to recognize a series of fixed and unchanging values? Having expounded the doctrine of the sealing of prophethood, Islam itself provides the answers to these questions.

One of the reasons for the sending of new Prophets was the corruptions and distortions that had crept into the teachings and books of their predecessors, with the result that they lost their efficacy in the guidance of the human being.

But once the human being reaches a stage in his growth where he can preserve the norms and teachings of religion from corruption or change and propagate them in their authentic form, the most fundamental reason for the sending of new Prophets disappears.

The age in which the Prophet of Islam made his appearance thus differs completely from the ages in which earlier Prophets had emerged: the human being had reached a level of intellectual maturity which permitted the sealing of prophethood.

The attainment of maturity by society, the rise of science and learning, and the human being's acquisition of the ability to preserve and propagate heavenly religion – all this meant that an essential precondition for the sealing of prophethood had been met. It was now possible for the duty of propagating religion and guiding people to be entrusted to scholars and learned persons.

From now on, it was up to the human being to preserve his historical heritage and spiritual achievements and to protect the final revelation from corruption by seeking aid in the Qur'an itself and drawing on his cultural and social maturity. Instead of the responsibility being placed on a single individual, the message was now entrusted to a collectivity. As the Qur'an says:

"There should be a group among you who summon to virtue and enjoin good upon them and restrain them from evil." (***3:104***)

In his social development, the human being reaches a stage where he no longer stands in need of repeated surgical intervention and is instead ready for a form of permanent prophethood where human beings shape their own destiny on the basis of clear vision, correct choice and reflection on the contents of revelation.

Under such conditions, a social and intellectual order is needed that will free the thoughts and acts of human beings from the wearying and stultifying burden of attachment and give shape and direction to their constant exertions in the realm of both thought and action. The eternal miracle that is the Noble Qur'an sets forth the main principles of such a system by following which human being is able to advance.

Among all the heavenly books the Qur'an is the only one to have withstood the ravages of time so that we have in our possession a complete and uncorrupted text clearly reflecting its abundantly creative teachings . The Qur'an itself proclaims:

"We it is Who have sent down this Qur'an and We it is Who will protect it." (***15:9***)

This verse indicates that the most important reason for the sending of new Prophets no longer obtains.

In addition, we should be aware that belief in all the Prophets signifies belief in a continuous historical process, one which began with history itself and the origins of human society has expressed itself in a struggle between truth and falsehood and will continue until the final triumph of the former over the latter. In each age, the Prophets have advanced the awareness and maturity of human beings in accordance with the circumstances and capacities of society.

Differences with respect to certain laws and ordinances do not touch on the fundamental principles and nature of religion because this apparent lack of harmony relates to subsidiary matters, not fundamental concern connected with the very nature of religion.

To correct deviations in thought and belief is possible, in fact, only if a variety of programs of action, each congruent with a set of objective realities, are adopted. If an apparent lack of harmony can be observed in the methods followed by the Prophets in the course of their continuous efforts, this has no connection with their fundamental aim.

There is no contradiction among their missions with respect to the principal goal – changing and forming anew the thoughts of human beings who had lost touch with reality and were living in darkness, both culturally and socially. The Glorious Qur'an says:

"After earlier Prophets, We sent Jesus, son of Mary; he confirmed the Torah brought by Moses." (***5:46***)

The Qur'an Confirms the Mission of Previous Prophets

Not only does the Qur'an not negate and invalidate previous revelations, it positively confirms the messengerhood of all previous Prophets and true guides, and praises those great men for their efforts and exertions.

In the Qur'an, the names of those revered by Jews and Christians as their leaders have been mentioned repeatedly and with respect. Does this praise and veneration of those figures not indicate the veracity, truthfulness and trustworthiness of the message of the Qur'an, as based on revelation? After all, the followers of Judaism and Christianity were intensely hostile to the new religion of Islam, and the fact that the Qur'an praises the figures sacred to those two religions proves how far removed the Qur'an is from all petty rivalry and how alien to it are all kinds of power seeking.

The Qur'an proclaims:

"We have sent this book down to you in truth, confirming, verifying and protecting the previous heavenly books." (***5:48***)

Since religion is rooted in the essential disposition of the human being, as one of his fundamental impulses that find expression in his view of the world and his deeds, it is basically one and unvarying. The Noble Qur'an says:

"Turn directly towards religion, for God has created the human being's fundamental disposition in accordance with it." (***30:30***)

So although the human being is subject to the norms that prevail in the phenomenal world and gains meaning by entering into relationship with those phenomena and the law of growth toward perfection that governs them, his path to happiness is single and unique. It is religion alone that can show him the specific path to a specific goal.

Montesquieu says: "It is in the very nature of human laws that they obey events and occurrences. That is to say, events influence them. By contrast, heavenly laws do not change on the basis of events or the changing will of the human being. Human laws always aim at attaining the best of solutions; heavenly laws actually discover the best of solutions.

Virtue and goodness have, no doubt, many different aspects and varieties, but the best of all solutions is necessarily unique and also, therefore, immutable. The human being can change human laws because it is possible that a given law be beneficial in one age but not in another. Religious systems always offer the best laws and because they cannot be improved upon, they are unchangeable." [1]

If we turn our backs on Divine Laws and have recourse to manmade regulations, we have, in fact, abandoned the broad and open plain of the universal law of religion for the narrow and uneven alley that is the limited mind of the human being.

The fundamental difference between the mission of the Prophet of Islam and that of the other Prophets lies in the fact that their revelation served as the basis for a temporary program of action.

Once Islam made its appearance and earlier religious systems had begun to weaken and crumble, it was no longer possible to adhere to those religions and systems of belief.

The value-system of Islam, by contrast, completes the whole structure of prophethood: its logical coherence and unshakable firmness embrace all the extensive dimensions of prophethood, and it includes within itself all that the preceding Prophets put forward to satisfy the human being's needs for social regulation, as well as all other moral and material needs.

The role that the Prophets played in correcting the errors and deviations of society and establishing a

correct mode of thought and action is now to be assumed by the religious leaders who draw on the inexhaustible resources of Islam. The Qur'an, the value system of which nurtures the whole of Islam and endows it with validity, also determines the direction in which the Muslims are to advance and serves as the source of comprehensive laws which leave nothing beyond their all–embracing purview. In addition, the Qur'an contains the essence and fundamental meaning of the teachings proclaimed by all the bearers of God's word.

Once the human being reaches a stage in his development where he is able to comprehend universal truths and Divine teachings and laws, the scholars and the learned emerge as successors to the Prophets, with the function of firmly implanting the authentic criteria of religion in the minds of people.

In pursuit of the exalted ideals of their religion, they take on the tasks of investigation and research and struggling against distortion of religion; they propagate the teachings of God in their true form.

In many verses of the Qur'an, human beings are invited to study natural phenomena with care, in order to perceive by way of deduction the spirit that rules over the scheme of creation.

The constant attention paid by the Qur'an to reason and experience and their utility and the significance it accords to nature and history as sources for the attainment of knowledge, are connected them with the sealing of prophethood by the Qur'an and the Prophet of Islam. They indicate the prevalence of a new worldview in the history of mankind.

Abstract goals must inevitably be transformed into objective realities if they are to have validity. We see, indeed, that for almost fifteen centuries the human being has proven his ability to assume these heavy but fruitful responsibilities by preserving his religious and scientific heritage and exhibiting both profundity and realism in analyzing and interpreting it.

This is in itself an indication of the human being's attainment of independence and his readiness to preserve the Divine verses with utmost care and his ability to assume the duty of propagating, interpreting, teaching and disseminating religion.

Once the final Divine Command had reached the human being, there was no possibility for the coming of a new Messenger.

The sealing of revelation may be compared to the case of a certain piece of land where all necessary archaeological excavations have been carried out with the utmost care to unearth ancient artifacts.

There is nothing left hidden in the earth to justify new research and digging.

Once prophethood has passed through different stages to reach its final degree of perfection and exaltedness, and from the point of view of revelation all the dark and obscure matters that lie within the range of human thought and comprehension have been clarified, there is no road left to be traveled, no explanation to be made. Prophethood has fulfilled its role and reached its final destination. Nonetheless,

its life continues by means of the inexhaustibility of revelation, which provides a single social, cultural and value system beyond the confines of time.

The Prophet of Islam proclaims, in a clear and pleasing fashion: "Prophethood is like a house, the building of which has now been that brick in its place."[2]

Although the mission of the Prophets to proclaim the Divine message and aid humanity came to an end with the blossoming and maturity of human thought, the spiritual relationship between the world of the human being and the world of the unseen has never been severed. The human being's path to exalted station necessarily continues to pass through the purification of the spirit and the cultivation of sincere devotion to God.

The human being has numerous creative dimensions, and it is only through sustained spiritual effort that he will be able to actualize his potential capacities. He will then enter into communication with the world of the unseen and see and know what those who are absorbed in the outer appearances of the material world cannot see and know. It is again such spiritual effort that gives the human being a truly human aspect, enables him to appear as God's viceregent on earth, and grants him access to values that give his life meaning and content.

Numerous, therefore, are those persons who have a high degree of religiosity and abundant spirituality without attaining the lofty degree of prophethood and the religious leadership of mankind.

The doors of illumination and inspiration are open to all those who wish to purify their inner beings of the pollution and darkness of sin and who turn their hearts toward the life-giving breeze of Divine knowledge.

Spiritual grace is never cut off from the human being, nor does it suffer any decrease. The degree to which the human being may benefit from it, in a direct and profound way, depends only on his spiritual capacity and abilities. These determine the extent to which he may draw on the unceasing and limitless favor and grace of God.

1. L'esprit des lois (Persian translation), p. 725.
2. Majma al-Bayan on Ahzab, 40.

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