

THE TRANSCENDENCE OF VALUES AND SHARED RESPONSIBILITIES

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(Establish) Allah's handwork according to the fitrah (pattern) on which He has made mankind: no change (let there be) in the work (wrought) by Allah: that is the standard religion.

The Holy Qur'an, Al Rum – The Romans: 30.

Tr. Abdullah Yusuf Ali

Surat al Rum (The Romans), which includes the above *ayat* (verse) describing *fitrah* (innate state of purity, natural pattern established by Allah, or divinely instilled instinctive belief in the One God) as a clear and immutable system for demonstrating the reality of the Divine Being and Oneness, comprises two basic approaches.

The first of these is internal, inward looking or 'innate', while the second is external or world-oriented. With regard to the first, we find that two *ayats* in the *surat* (chapter) begin '*fa aqim wajhhaka*' ('So set thy face truly'), which is a metaphorical way of describing



right thinking and clarity of purpose, similar to *'wajjahtu wajhy'* ('I have set my face'). On hearing them, the mind and the heart spontaneously open up to the deepest recesses of the *fitrah*, the *khilqah* (natural disposition) or the *ruh* (soul) and all that they entail so that they can ascend to the heights of Divine Existence and Eternal Oneness. This approach demands internal *jihad* (striving) or the exertion of effort, as referred to at the end of *Surat al 'Ankabut* (The Spider), which precedes *Surat al Rum*: *'And those who strive in Our (Cause) – We will certainly guide them to Our Paths'*.

The second basic approach, which I have called external though this is not strictly the case, begins by calling upon people to travel through the earth: *'Say: Travel through the earth and see ...'* (*Al Rum* v42) or *'Then contemplate (O man!) the memorials of Allah's Mercy! – how He gives life to the earth after its death ...'* (*Al Rum* – The Romans: 50) or *'Do they not travel through the earth and see ...?'* (*Al Rum* – The Romans: 9). An *ayat* in *Surat Fussilat* (Expounded) combines the two approaches: *'Soon will We show them Our Signs in the (furthest) regions (of the earth), and in their own souls, until it becomes manifest to them that this is the Truth'*.

(*Fussilat* – Expounded: 53)

The *fitrah* or *nur* (light), as it is called in *Surat al Nur* (The Light), illuminates the innermost parts of the *nafs* (soul or psyche) with the Divine Being. At the same time, intellectual contemplation on the universe and creation, in addition to belief in the Creator through intellect, is an act that has both a moral and a practical aspect. Firstly, it produces an awareness of the system established by the Creator while, secondly, it involves effort in order to become integrated within it.

So are these two approaches – the innate and the universal or looking into oneself and looking outwards to the world and one's surroundings – mutually complementary? Does the Qur'anic discourse wish mankind to adopt both of them equally, yet in accordance with circumstances and what is appropriate for the individual? Or is the former, ie. *fitrah* ('instinct' or 'light') something that is found naturally in all mankind, and is man called upon to acquire the latter – the intellectually contemplative approach – through learning in order to comprehend the Divine System



governing the universe through his intelligence, and conduct himself in accordance with it?

Whatever the case may be, as well as instilling certainty of belief, the *fitrah* approach also produces two direct effects: peace of mind and a moral dimension – or an ethical attitude to judging phenomena and people – while the world-oriented approach is concerned with practical, or behavioural, ethics and looks to man's social and human side. The *fitrah* view is faith-centred and sees the world of mankind in the context of morality, while the intellectual/world-oriented view operates within a broad vision of nature and creation. During the present era the *'ulama al deen* (religious scholars) are agreed that the concept of *deen* (religion) must include the following elements: the higher self, or higher thought; an ethical system; devotional rites; and a religious establishment. The definitions and relative significance of these elements vary from one religion to another, but they are present in every religion.

In this issue of *Al Tasamoh (Tolerance)* magazine, our concern is with values and their transcendental nature, in the sense that Westerners understand the term. In this connection we must recognise that over the past three centuries Europe and the world have undergone massive changes with regard to ethical values, including the emergence of secular, or non-religion-based – ethical systems that are neutral or hostile to religion. Asian religions and traditions, which are alien to the Abrahamic faiths, have become part of modern ethical thinking, while chauvinist tendencies appeared in the West and created a blend of religion, nationalism and racism during the West's domination of the world; sometimes this took the form of material power, while at other times it claimed to be carrying out a civilising mission.

From de Tocqueville's study on the rise of the state and democracy in America to Max Weber's study of the Protestant ethic and world capitalism, values were always the prime concern of thinkers and philosophers in Europe, and the debates have continued.

If the Westernisation trend is negative and objectionable, the other two trends – Asian and secular, which became highly influential during



the twentieth century – deserve consideration by adherents of the religions that believe in One God. The secular trend has given rise to the concept of natural human rights and led to the creation of the UN Charter and the World Declaration of Human Rights and its appendices, while the Asian religions and ethical systems are seen as having produced massive economic success in challenging, or competing with, the Western (US, European and Russian) world.

There is, of course, no connection between the secular and Asian systems, though the secularists and Protestants have been affected by Asia's economic success (ie. the successes of Japan, China and India). Many of them praise Asia's discipline and self-confidence, which they see as having contributed to its tremendous upsurge.

When examining all these issues, we should take into account two phases that the debate has undergone during the past four decades, beginning in the 1960s. The 2nd Vatican Council (1962-65) saw a strong readiness for dialogue with, and recognition of, Islam, and the idea of a Muslim-Christian dialogue gained considerable traction. Here there were three trends: one that favoured revising the past and was critical of the confrontation theory; another towards highlighting the positive aspects of the Abrahamic faiths and their common elements (the main ones being belief in the One God and ethical values); and a third in favour of dialogue with Muslims about present-day problems and on ways of developing the common faith and ethical elements between Muslims and Christians to form an effective partnership that would influence the world of today and the future.

The defeat of the Communist world created a sense of triumphalism in extremist Protestant and Catholic circles and led to the rise of the theory of the 'Clash of Civilisations', which was targeted at Islam. There was also a revival of rejectionism, as exemplified in the concept of Judaeo-Christian civilisation, accompanied by a growing hostility to Muslims in Western societies, particularly in the Catholic countries of Europe.

All these factors led to a religion-based civilisation clash. Today, however, it appears that prevailing views in the West have gone beyond triumphalism,



although after the Cold War a new theory, 'The End of History', arose, which intellectuals regarded as significant; this theory saw the whole of mankind as being in a similar relationship vis-à-vis Western values, a relationship in which they would find themselves faced with the choice of either surrendering to those values or continuing along the path of progress and renaissance in line with democratic, humanitarian and rationalist/materialist principles. This development helped generate a revival of the Abrahamic view and a recognition of the need to draw on the greater ethical values of the established religions when reshaping the world of today.

Even the secularists are now moving towards a recognition of religion-based ethics and the necessity of benefiting from them; at the same time, views are being exchanged on ideas for dialogue between the followers of the Abrahamic faiths and there is greater receptiveness to Asian religions. All these trends help promote a system of global ethical values that is shared by both religious and non-religious people on the basis of common interests and shared responsibilities. The greater values today (such as reason, justice and morality) transcend mere local and individual interests, as well as the old struggles for supremacy and petty squabbles of the past, and consensus is at the heart of the modern world.

Religion-based moral values (there can be no doubt about this) provide guidance for all mankind of every class, creed and colour, while European secular systems are also fundamentally opposed to discrimination in all its forms. On the other hand, the focus of the Asian religions is on individual and spiritual self-improvement and on raising man to a higher plane. If we look at all the different regions of the earth inhabited by the human race, we find that vast numbers of them follow either one religion or another and that they are not prepared to abandon their beliefs. Until recently it was the non-religious who had the greatest influence on the lives and destinies of humanity, but, as we have pointed out, with the revival of religion in public life a global ethical vision has appeared in which the Abrahamic faiths have played a major part.

Today, we see a return to religion-based morality, which, while not denying the existence of secular systems, aims to promote a sense of



community participation, mutual aid and justice, and imbue religion-based ethics with a new spirit for the twenty-first century. The sense of community sought by the followers of religions is a reflection of their values, and it means that they are prepared to bear and share responsibility and work together with other people.

Finally, I should like to comment briefly on the historians' report that Ching Zing (1371-1433) succeeded in reaching West Africa via the Cape of Good Hope before Vasco da Gama's voyage round the world in 1498. According to the historians Ching 'closed the door upon himself' when he announced that in the world at that time there was no power capable of competing with China's greatness; however, Vasco da Gama carried with him the message of contemporary European values, marking the start of Europe's Renaissance. Imposition of superiority and isolation requires coercion and force, and that is a situation that is not sustainable. China was unable to establish itself in the Indian Ocean in the fourteenth century because of its isolationist attitude, and Portugal was also unable to do so at a later date; in fact, it was never able to do so in more recent times either.

The subject of values, which we have chosen to examine in a new context, has preoccupied us for over a year. It is to be hoped that the substantial contributions made by academics and colleagues have succeeded in revealing the importance of this topic in the worlds of today and tomorrow.