



Al-Risala 1990

November

2 November 1990

The Message of Nature

One day last summer, during a short stay in Kashmir, I went for a walk with some Kashmiri friends. We eventually reached a part of the countryside which had wide open spaces all around. We had come to a broad, green valley, surrounded by snow-capped mountains. From various places beneath the snow line, rivulets of water gushed forth like fountains. Pure, clean water could be seen flowing all around us. The burbling, rushing sound of the water, whispered in our ears like the voice of nature itself.

I paused to stand near one such spring. Its water course was about two feet across. Then I noticed that there was a large round stone right in the centre of its onrushing waters, when the water reached the point where the stone bulged in its path, it did not attempt to break the stone in order to have a straight path for itself. It simply turned to the right and left of the stone, then flowed quietly onwards. Without any confrontation with the stone, it had carved out its own course.

I remarked to my Kashmiri friends how wonderful it was that such sights were to be seen all over Jammu and Kashmir. It is as if nature is sending out its message through these springs. These natural phenomena voicelessly tell us not to clash with the rock, but simply to flow on either side of it.

Such springs flow the whole year round in the valley of Kashmir. In this way, this constructive message of nature is ceaselessly relayed at thousands of different places. But the people who are living there, right in their midst, pay no heed to this message. They learn no lesson from it.

Success in this world is only for those who are careful to avoid confrontations whenever differences arise between people. Success is only for those who can go on their journey without clashing with the rocks which bar their way. Only such people can ultimately reach their destination in this world.

Considering that God gave the Kashmiris this lesson through nature's immutable language, and made them stand at a point from which they could lead constructive lives on the basis of this wisdom, they could have led the world simply by communicating this message to it. But if the Kashmiris themselves ignore, or reject this guidance, how are they to guide the rest of the world?

Revival of the Heart or Revival of Political Power

Whenever human beings suffer from moral decline, it can almost always be traced to perversion of the heart. From perversion of the heart comes perversion of whole lives. The Qur'an says:

Have they never journeyed through the land so that they may have hearts to reason with, or ears to hear with? It is not the eyes, but the hearts in the breasts, that are blind (22:46)

The same thing has been expressed in a *hadith* in these words:

Listen, there is a piece of flesh in the human body, if it is fine, the whole body remains fine. And when it is perverted, the whole body becomes perverted. And that is the heart.

Now when the source of all kinds of perversion is the heart, then the work of reformation too should be started from the heart. Here is a relevant verse from the Qur'an:

"It is not time for true believers to submit to Allah's warning and to the truth. He has revealed, so that they may not be like those who were given the scriptures before this, whose days were prolonged but whose hearts were hardened? Many of them were evil – doers.

Know that Allah restores the earth to life after its death. We have made plain to you our revelations that you may grow in wisdom (57:16-17)

This verse shows that over long periods the hearts of a people can become hardened. That is when they respond neither to advice nor to admonition. It is due to their loss of sensitivity that they fail to appreciate what is being said to them. When a people reach this stage of degradation, the only way to rehabilitate them is to follow the Qur'anic formula for dealing with barren soil.

When earth loses its fertility, the process of cultivating, can not start with the sowing of seed. The first thing to be done is to prepare the ground. To begin with, all undergrowth must be cleared and all hard objects such as stones, pebbles, etc. removed. Then the soil must be tilled, watered and manured to make it fertile.

Only after all this preparation does the earth become fertile enough to yield crops. Only then does the farmer cast his seed upon the ground. It is the farmer who omits nothing from this agricultural process who will receive the finest crop from his land. On the contrary, the farmer who throws seed on the ground without any preparation of the soil will reap either a very poor crop, or no crop at all.

The above mentioned verse of the Qur'an is the final word on the issue of the religious revival of a nation. People in decline have to be treated the same way as infertile earth is treated by a farmer. That is, the ground must be properly prepared before the sowing of the seed.

In the light of this Qur'anic principle we can understand the situation of present-day Muslims who have gone into a decline and who have lost political power. They no longer have any prestige in the eyes of other nations. A people who dominated in the past have now become subjugated in the present.

If the Qur'anic principle had been followed, the work of revival of Muslims should have commenced with the revival of hearts not with government.

But all of our present-day leaders, without exception, have begun their task with the slogan of the revival of government. They have made no attempt to revive the nation at the level of the heart. Each and every one of our leaders dreams of the renaissance of the nation at the level of government.

Outstanding examples of this way of thinking are the Khilafat Movement, the freedom movement and partition. All other such movements fall, more or less, into the same category. There might appear to be some difference on the surface, but, in reality all these movements, directly or indirectly, aim at the revival of the glory of Islam through political power, and, as such, do not differ in any way from the above examples.

As a result of this error, Muslim leader can be likened to a mason who attempts to build a roof over pillars which are broken and walls which are old and crumbling. It is obvious that neither the roof nor the house can be lasting structures. Construction work in such a house can begin only after reinforcing the pillars and walls and not by first attaching a roof to shaky supports.

The only way to compensate for past blunders is, first, to admit them as such, and then to start such work today as could not be done in the past. That is, instead of setting their sights on the revival of political power, reformers should strive to the very utmost for the revival of the heart. Reformist activity aimed at any other objective is a sheer waste of time and energy.

The need of the hour is for Muslims to appreciate what is meant by result-oriented action. Objectives must be correctly defined and suitable action taken towards those and, only then can revivalists think in terms of achievements. It is plainly impossible to achieve the desired results in a very short space of time without having worked for them. This has never happened before, nor can it happen now just because of wishful thinking.

5 November 1990

When knowledge is reduced to an avenue towards personal prestige

'Ubayy ibn Ka'ab said: "Acquire knowledge, and practice it. Do not acquire it in order to beautify yourselves thereby, for there will come a time when learning will be used as an adornment, as people adorn themselves with clothes."

5 November 1990

One who lies is a hypocrite

The Prophet was asked whether a coward could be a believer, and he said yes. Then he was asked whether a miser could be a believer, and he said yes. When asked if a liar could be a believer, he said no. Khuzafa ibn'ul-Yaman remarked that in the time of the Prophet, one used to be counted as a hypocrite when one lied. "But nowadays I hear one of you uttering such lies at least ten times a day."

A Superior Solution

A Japan Airlines plane, a Boeing 747, which took off from Tokyo on August 12, 1985, was scheduled to reach Osaka in one hour's time. But just 10 minutes after taking off, the pilot felt that he had lost control of the plane. It was supposed to fly at an altitude, of 24 thousand feet, but it came down rapidly to 9,800 feet, then crashed into a mountain and was destroyed.

All the 520 people aboard were killed. Two of the casualties were an engineer, Mr. Kalyan Mukarjee, and his wife. He was just forty one year of age at the time of the accident. A short time before, he had arrived in Japan on a commercial venture. Just a few days before boarding the flight, he had written a letter to his 13 year old son, Niranjan Mukarjee, saying that he was going to Osaka with his wife on a pleasure trip on August 12. (*Hindustan Times*, August 14, 85)

One of the reasons for flying aeroplanes at such great heights is that this ensures that they do not collide with mountains or high rise buildings. For this particular aeroplane, twenty four thousand feet was a safe height. But because its engine had developed some defect, it could not maintain this altitude. It rapidly descended to 9,800 feet. Now that it was no longer at a safe level, it hit a mountain and was destroyed.

The journey of the average human being through life is similar to this in many ways. He has to make his way to his destination among a variety of other human beings whose paths may run counter to his own. Because he makes his journey, not on an elevated plane, but well below the level of the ideal, he repeatedly clashes with others. The solution lies in his betaking himself to such a level of thinking that the possibility of coming into collision with others is entirely obviated.

But to reach such a high level of thought and action, one needs to have a set of principles to act as guiding lights. And this is exactly what Islam offers to mankind: impeccable principles on which to base one's conduct. One of the most important of these is the principle of avoidance. While travelling among people on an equal level, there is always the fear of a collision: the best solution to such a common problem is, therefore, to put the principle of avoidance into action. To do this, the wise man will raise the level of his journey so that there can be no clashes with others. Adoption of this principle is a sign of superior wisdom.

Islamic *Da'wah* in a Changing World

The world we live in is changing from day to day. The Soviet empire is crumbling. The U.S. has abandoned its role as universal master. The Berlin wall has been demolished by the very people who built it. The Cold War has come to an end. The super powers have put their guns down, admitting that warfare is no solution to human problems.

Western thinkers have coined a new term – 'endism', which means that all 'isms', all ideologies, all systems, have exhausted their credibility as modern man's ideal.

Muslims generally see these changes as going against them, as a danger, in fact, to Islam. This kind of thinking, as I see it, is quite wrong and is no doubt against the teachings of Islam. The Qur'an says: "with every difficulty there is relief" (94:6). This means that difficulty and relief inevitably co-exist. They have been ordained inseparable.

Granted that modern changes have brought problems in their wake for Muslims, but these changes have also created new opportunities. And fortunately the opportunities far exceed the problem.

When we look at that matter from this angle we find many positive and hopeful aspects in the situation, for although the modern world is witnessing great changes. Those changes are going mostly in favour of Islam. This is the most important aspect of our new world.

There are many examples which clearly indicate that the present changes greatly favour Islam. Here, we shall give just two examples, the one, theoretical, and the other practical, which should suffice to make the point.

At the beginning of the present century, a British scientist once gave a public lecture on astronomy. He described how the earth orbits around the sun and the sun, in turn, orbits around the centre of a vast collection of stars called our galaxy. At the end of the lecture, a little old lady at the back of the room got up and said: What you have told us is rubbish. The world is really a flat plate supported on the back of a giant tortoise. The scientist gave a superior smile before countering with "What is the tortoise standing on?" "You're very clever, young man: very clever," said the old lady, "but it's turtles all the way down."

This picture of our world as an infinite tower of tortoises was seen by the scientists as ridiculous. But the alternative presented by them was also a kind of infinite tower with the difference that the tortoises were replaced by causes. The scientists' assumption was that there was always a cause behind every event, and so on. Thus the chain of causes is infinite in length.

Then came the theory of the big bang. With this, the theory of an "infinite tower of causes" lost its validity, as this theory suggested that a sudden explosion had marked the beginning of the universe rather than an infinitely continuing process of causes and effects,

Stephen W. Hawking, a well-known scientist of modern times, has calculated the rate of the expansion of the universe after the big bang. Providing details of this calculation, he writes:

“The initial rate of expansion would have had to be chosen very precisely for the rate of expansion still to be so close to the critical rate needed to avoid recollapse. This means that the initial state of the universe must have been very carefully chosen indeed if the hot big bang model was correct right back to the beginning of time. It would be very difficult to explain why the universe should have begun in just this way, except as the act of a God who intended to create beings like us” (p.134).

This means that the scientific study of the universe has strengthened religious belief rather than weaken it. Such discoveries have opened up opportunities for performing Islamic *da'wah* with far greater effectiveness.

Now take the practical aspect of the changes. Here also we find clear indications that the present changes are only paving the way for Islamic *da'wah* on an unprecedented scale.

Let us see for instance, what is happening in the socialist world. In one of his writings, Karl Marx had said that religion was the opium of the masses. But today, the socialist Russians are themselves saying that Marxism itself was the worst kind of opium of the mind created by Karl Marx.

Just a few years ago, it was well-nigh unthinkable to carry a copy of the Qur'an inside the Soviet Union. But, today, Aeroflot has been engaged to airlift one million copies of the Qur'an from Jeddah to Moscow.

In its March 1990 issue, *Time* magazine gave detailed report on the religious position in the Soviet Union. It said: “Some 55 million Soviet Muslims enjoy the fruits of new religious tolerance.” The strange but meaningful title of this report was “Karl Marx makes room for Mohammad.”

I do not feel the need to go into further details. I should only like to say that the present changes taking place in the world today have opened up for us great new scope for Islamic *da'wah*. But we must remain very alert in order not to miss these opportunities.

The foregoing arguments suffice to show that the changes taking place in the present world have opened up new vistas to Islamic *da'wah*. These changes have made it possible for Islam to be presented more forcefully and effectively to the world. The most important task ahead of us is to have a thorough understanding of these changes and then to avail of them in an organized and disciplined way.

I would propose for this purpose the formation of a committee of scholars who would be entrusted with going into the matter in depth, and then carving out a well-planned scheme. All possible resources should be utilized towards this end.

This is undoubtedly a historic task. History awaits the advance of certain dedicated individuals towards this goal so that it can give them resounding credit for having spread the message of Islam to mankind in this modern age. Those who can prove themselves worthy of such historic credit will be the most fortunate of men.

9 November 1990

Weighing up one's own actions before they are weighed up on the divine scales of justice

"Reckon with yourselves," 'Umer said, "before you are reckoned with in the next world; and weigh your own actions before they are weighed on the divine scales of justice; and prepare yourselves for the great appearance (before God)."

Real Happiness

By the age of 28, Elizabeth Taylor, one of the most dazzling stars of the silver screen, was already being treated in the USA. as if she were a princess. She was followed everywhere she went by photographers, and every single word that fell from her lips was given a prominent place in the newspapers. She got married - for the fourth time – to Eddie Fisher, in May 1959. But, somehow, happiness always seemed to elude her. Her ill-luck was most apparent during the production of her most famous film 'Cleopatra' – for which she was paid one million dollars – for right in the middle of the shooting, she fainted and had to be admitted to hospital.

Today, the maximum publicity is given to those who appear on the stage of politics, or in films. But the private lives of these heroes and heroines are far from happy. They appear, smiling radiantly, on the pages of newspapers, or on the television screen. But their real lives are so sad that they are often unable to have a good night's sleep. Most of them have to take sleeping pills. And when even sleeping pills fail, they try to find solace in alcohol and drugs.

It has been observed that "the most radiant faces are the faces of the grief-stricken". One who smiles from the heart gives a real smile. But political leaders and film heroes, who live and speak only to impress others, put on a smile which at best can be described as artificial.

Real happiness is for one who knows how to live in his own self, who finds the very secret of life within himself. Those who live to impress others can never find true happiness.

The same difference exists between real and artificial happiness as exists between a real child and a plastic doll. The source of true happiness exists within the man: whatever is external is artificial. A man can be truly happy only with that which he receives from within. Things received from without can never bestow on man the gift of real happiness.

Final Judgement

A judge of the Maharashtra High Court once used such language with reference to a lawyer as was considered highly objectionable by the latter. The other lawyers were in complete agreement with him. An emergency meeting of the Maharashtra and Goa Bar Council was, therefore, convened at which a resolution was unanimously passed to the effect that what the judge had said was beyond his jurisdiction and, as such, he was liable to be condemned.

On this occasion, the *Times of India* (April 28, 1990) published a commentary, meaningfully titled, "Judge Judged". Having read this, I began thinking that the same is going to happen in the Hereafter, but on a vaster scale, for the Hereafter is a world where the judges are judged, and where those who take decisions will no longer do the decision-making.

In the present world, we are pre-occupied with the offices we hold, with things like popularity and fame, and we attempt to gain control of the printed and electronic media in order to consolidate our positions and to make further gains. Very often this means taking undue advantage of privileges and undermining the positions of the others. One group will attempt to distort the image of another group, simply in order to discredit them publicly and reap all benefits for themselves.

But we do not realize that even if our machinations and our propaganda bear immediate fruit, it can only be of a temporary nature. All the good things of life, all the privileges, all the advantages will be ours only so long as we do not come face to face with our Creator, God Almighty. But that day is bound to come, sooner or later, and then we shall see our maker as the Judge of all Judges, the Giver of all verdicts. When God appears, He will pass sentence on all mankind on the basis of justice and fair play.

The Qur'an tells us that God has declared specifically what is right and what is wrong. And when He appears, He will give His verdict on each and every individual exactly according to what is right and just. On that day, all good people will be amply rewarded for their good deeds, while all bad people will be condemned to eternal perdition.

Suit the Action to the Words

A few months ago I happened to meet one of our regular readers of *Al-Risala*, a Mr. Kuldip Singh Gujral, who visited our centre with one of his friends, Mr. Rahat Hashmi. In the course of the conversation, the latter told me of how they had been out walking on a Delhi street one day when they saw a sikh boy begging. Mr. Gujral at once stopped, called the boy and asked him how he – a sikh boy – came to be begging. After hearing his tale of woe, he gave him his address and asked him to come there the following day so that he could take him to some office to get him a job.

It is generally accepted that Sikhs do not beg. But I did not know the reason until I heard this story. This incident has two distinct sides to it. One is Mr. Gujral's questioning of the boy as to why he begged. The other is Mr. Gujral's asking him to come to his place to secure him a job. Mr. Gujral did not stop at just asking the boy why he was begging. He did not just satisfy himself as to whether the boy's circumstances actually warranted such behaviour. He took the further, and more important step of actually trying to do something to improve the boy's condition.

There is no dearth of people to castigate begging and beggars. They speak against them, write against them, denounce them and their practices whenever they have the opportunity. But making speeches and writing pamphlets cannot put an end to begging. Beggary will only disappear, if those who can afford it take it upon themselves to eradicate it. For this to happen, the more affluent members of society must be ready to play a practical role.

It would be ideal if there were no beggars at all in the country. But this will be possible only when the peddlers of fine phrases begin to suit their actions to their words. Words without the follow-up of action are of benefit only to the speakers who are automatically hailed as the champions of the downtrodden, without their actually having done anything to help them.

The credit for reform will go only to those who are willing to put their ideas into practice.

A Futile Pursuit

When the champions of feminism in the western world began advocating that men and women should be treated as equals, because there was no difference between them – they were the same in all respects – they even objected to the use of the word ‘Mrs.’ To them it was an insult to a woman to have to attach her husband’s name to her own and then call herself ‘Mrs.’ because this suggested that a woman had no separate identity. They said that just as there was the permanent title to ‘Mr.’ for a man, there should also be a permanent title for a woman. For this purpose, they coined the word ‘Ms.’ which has come into general use, although not all women approve of it.

The advantage of feminism, however, were not satisfied with a mere change of title. They began saying that all the words which devoted feminine and masculine gender should be eliminated from the dictionary. This movement had such an influence on the American government that in 1979, the departments of Health, Education and Social Welfare issued instructions that any such words as expressed a difference in sex were not to be used. Any papers or forms which used special words to differentiate between the sexes were no longer acceptable to these departments. Here are some of those forbidden words: he, she, mother, father chairman, housewife, policeman, mankind. Even the ubiquitous milkman was not spared. In line with the new thinking on the subject, he was thence forward to be known as the ‘dairy products deliverer’. And so on.

The Times of India of November 1, 1979 comments: “Rather than abolish gender, why don’t they get busy with the abolition of hunger, unemployment and insecurity?”

No one engages himself in whatever work most urgently needs to be done. No one attends to the need of the hour. People prefer to occupy themselves with all manner of trivialities. This is why, in spite of the great number of activities being carried on in the name of reformation, no real reform is anywhere in sight.

A Suicide

Mrs. Padma Desai, daughter of the well-known industrialist, Raja Ram Kirloskar, was married to Mr. Kanti Lal Desai, son of Mr. Morarji Desai, a former Prime Minister of India. This gives us an idea of her economic status. Yet, at the age of 51, she committed suicide, on November 16, 1984, by throwing herself down from her fifty-storey flat. She was immediately taken to the hospital, but the doctors there declared that she had already died before reaching the hospital. According to the newspaper reports, Padma committed suicide after hearing that the family had lost their case in the Supreme Court to retain their flat. (*Times or India*, "November 17, 1984).

When the Janata Party was voted to power in 1977, Morarji Desai became Prime Minister. During his two and a half-year term in office, his son, Kanti Desai, made several deals, one of which involved this flat, located in a high-rise building called Oceana or Marine Drive in Bombay. At the end of the Janata rule, a case was filed in the court to the effect that Mr. Kanti Lal Desai had acquired this flat illegally. The court gave its verdict in favour of the plaintiff. The moment Mrs. Padma Desai received the news of this judgement, she committed suicide by throwing herself down from the flat.

The lady thought that by putting an end to her life, she was putting herself beyond the court's judgement forever. Had she known that this step would take her to a much higher court, where she would have no further opportunity to take any steps whatsoever, her decision would have been altogether different.

Man's greatest weakness is his impetuosity. He takes an extreme step in haste, but if he were to give any thought to the matter, he would never take any such step.

14 November 1990

Man will find himself standing on the verge of Hell

This was the first sermon the Prophet delivered on reaching Medina: "People, send forth for the future; you will surely reap the fruits of your actions."

The Secret of Successful Living

Bill Cosby, a black American, was born into a poor family in 1937. At the outset of his career, he was barely able to earn a thousand dollars a year. Today his annual income has reached several million dollars. With so much competition from American Whites, how has a black man been able to achieve such extraordinary success? The answer is through education, and wisely directed effort. While he was in the fifth grade in Philadelphia, he used to take part in various shows at school, with the result that he neglected his studies. One day his teacher, a Miss Nagle, told him that, even if he wanted to be a joker, he should receive higher education, for there was no field in which he could make progress without education. (*Span*, January, 1987)

Bill Cosby listened to this advice and decided to learn a lesson from it. He started working hard at his studies, did well enough to go to college, and finally received a doctorate in education. Later, he began working as an entertainer, ultimately making regular appearances on television. Today, with his own television programme – the costliest on American TV – he is the most famous comedian in the U.S.A. Unlike many other black comedians, he avoids racial nuances and draws his stories from the kind of universal occurrences that everyone can understand.

Americans usually do not like blacks, but they watch the Bill Cosby show on television with great interest. When Bill Cosby made concessions to Whites, Whites too began making concessions to Bill Cosby. If you want others to take an interest in you, you should also start taking an interest in others. Then you will have no cause for complaint against others.

15 November 1990

Hardness of heart comes from using religion for worldly ends

“The punishment of a learned man is for his heart to die,” said Hasan al-Basri. He was asked what was meant by the death of the heart, and he answered that it came from seeking the world by means of actions which should be gauged towards eternity.

(Jami' bayan al-'ilm wa fadhlihi)

Life After Death

October 2, 1968, marked the passage of one hundred years since the birth of Mahatma Gandhi. On this occasion, Gandhiji's birth centenary was celebrated with great enthusiasm. One of the many programmes laid on by the government and arranged by the Delhi Telephone Department was called "Dial 172 and listen to Gandhiji." His recorded voice could be heard by anyone who simply dialled 172. With this special service it became possible to "be in contact" with the Mahatma.

Man leaves this world, but his voice survives. Man dies but his voice lives on after him. This fact is indicative of the reality that man's personality is a continuum. It remains in the 'living' state long after he has expired.

This is what is apparently alluded to in this verse of the Qur'an which mentions the last Day and the life after death: that this is true, as true as you are speaking now (51:23).

In the form of the voice, a man's personality continues to survive in part. We directly witness this happening. Now, when it is known that the human personality continues to live in part after death, it is not difficult to understand that the human personality can also continue to exist in its entirety. The knowledge of the one makes the other more easily understandable.

Once the existence of a part is proved, the existence of the whole is proved of itself. The existence of the human voice after death makes the continuance of the whole human personality after death a more understandable concept.

Our being able to hear the voice today of a person who expired in 1948 shows that that man is still living today, even though he is not visible to us.

16 November 1990

One who will be saved from Doom on the Day of Judgement

“On the Day of Resurrection, God will save from Hell-fire one who has saved his brother from humiliation in this world;” these words were spoken by the Prophet Mohammad.

Learning and Islam

Ptolemy II, who became the ruler of Egypt after Alexander the Great in the 3rd century B.C., was a great patron of learning, and founded a library in Alexandria which contained about 500,000 books on different subjects. It is this collection which is known in history as the great library of Alexandria.

It has been alleged – wrongly, as it happens – that this library was burned down at the behest of the second caliph, 'Umar Farooq. It had, in fact, been destroyed much earlier, in the fourth century A.D. long before the advent of Islam. According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, “The Library survived the disintegration of Alexander’s empire (1st century BC) and continued to exist under Roman rule until the 3rd century A.D.”¹

The truth is that one half of this library was burnt by Julius Caesar in 47 B.C. In the third century, this place came under the domination of the Christians. With reference to the survival of existing institutions, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* states that ... the main museum and library were destroyed during the civil war of the 3rd century AD and a subsidiary library was burned by Christians in AD 391.”²

After making this point quite clearly, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, however, erroneously links the destruction of the library with the Muslim period. In its article on ‘censorship’, it has thus to say:

There are many accounts of the burning, in several stages, of part or all of the library at Alexandria, from the siege of Julius Caesar in 47 BC to its destruction by Christians in AD 391 and by Muslims in 642. In the latter two instances, it was alleged that pagan literature presented a danger to the old and New Testaments or the Quran.³

The above attribution of the destruction of the Alexandria library to Islam has no basis in fact. The first two extracts quoted above from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* clearly refute this. Islam by its very nature, encourages the acquisition of knowledge. It has never been its aim to suppress or discourage it.

1. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1984), vol. 1, p. 227

2. *Ibid*, vol. 1, p. 479.

3. *Ibid*, vol. 3, p. 1084.

Dr. Philip K Hitti writes in his book, *History of the Arabs*:

The story that by the caliph’s order Amr for six long months fed the numerous bath furnaces of the city with the volumes of the Alexandrian library is one of those tales that make good fiction but bad history. The great Ptolemaic library was burnt as early as 48 B.C. by Julius Caesar. A later one, referred to as the Daughter library, was destroyed about A.D. 389 as a result of an edict by the Emperor Theodoius. At the time of the Arab conquest, therefore, no

library of importance existed in Alexandria and no contemporary writer ever brought the charge against Amr or Umar. Abd-al-Latif al-Baghdadi, who died as late as A.H. 629 (1231), seems to have been the first to relate the tale. Why he did it we do not know; however, his version was copied and amplified by later authors.⁴

Islamic civilization is based on monotheism and, as such, is quite distinct from other ancient civilizations. It gave man freedom of thought – a freedom which was totally lacking in all previous civilizations. Thanks to this freedom, learning had every opportunity to flourish under Islamic civilization. Under other older civilizations, learning and learned people were commonly subjected to oppression. It follows that the attempt to place Islamic civilization on a parallel with other civilizations is a clear historical injustice.

This is not all that there is to the matter. The truth is that it was actually Islam, not Europe, which heralded the age of modern science. This is an undeniable historical event. During the Islamic period, learning was actively encouraged, and all fields of learning produced scholars and researchers of repute. This has been generally acknowledged by historians.

In an exhaustive book on the history of Islam, *The Cambridge History of Islam*, produced by Professor P.M. Holt and other orientalists, there is an article in volume 2-B, entitled “The Literary Impact of Islam in the Modern West” which shows the far-reaching influence exerted by Islam in the past on the learning and civilization, of the western world. The chapter concludes with these words: “... during the Middle Ages the trend was almost entirely from East to West (when Islam acted as the teacher of the West)”.⁵

Another orientalist, the French Baron Carra de Vaux, underlines the achievements of the Arabs by stating that “the Arabs have really achieved great things in science.”⁶ However he goes on to say that we must not expect to find among the Arabs the same powerful genius, the same gift of scientific imagination, the same enthusiasm, the same originality of thought that we have among the Greeks. The Arabs are before all else the pupils of the Greeks, their science is a continuation of Greek science which it preserves, cultivates, and on a number of points develops and perfects.”⁷

Montgomery Watt, however; in his book entitled *The Majesty That Was Islam*, states that there is a tendency to belittle the work of the Arabs and regard them as no more than transmitters of Greek ideas. He says that Arabs were much more than transmitters and that Arab science and philosophy ... contributed greatly to developments in Europe.⁸

4. Philip K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, p. 166

5. *The Cambridge History of Islam*, pp. 888-89.

6. Baron Carra de Vaux, *The Legacy of Islam* (1931).

7. *Ibid.*

8. Montgomery Watt, *The Majesty That Was Islam*, p. 232.

This same author, however, makes another point which is more open to objection than the remark that Arabs were mere transmitters. He writes: "Science and philosophy in Arabic came into existence through the stimulus of translations from Greek"⁹.

This statement that the Greek science provided the stimulus to Arabs, so far as scientific ideas are concerned, is simply not true. It is not true to say that the Arabs read Greek translations which resulted in their beginning to think scientifically. The truth is that scientific thinking came to them through the Quran and the concept of monotheism. Later, they began studying translations of books from Greek and other languages, from which point they went on to the study of science and philosophy by carrying out their own research.

Historians have said that there is, of course, no denying the fact that the Arabs were the pupils of the Greeks in science and philosophy, but it is also true that once they had assimilated what was to be learnt from the Greeks, they went on to make important advances.¹⁰

Medicine was probably the first Greek science to attract the Arabs because of its obvious practical importance. Then they developed it to the extent of establishing medical colleges and hospitals, which did not exist in Greece. Not merely was it taught in the colleges of Iraq, but the teaching was accompanied by a flourishing medical service. The first hospital in Baghdad was founded about 800 on the initiative of the caliph Harun-al-Rashid, and records have been preserved of the founding of four other hospitals there in the first quarter of the tenth century. A thirteenth century hospital in Cairo is said to have had accommodation for 8,000 persons. It had separate wards for male and female patients, as well as for different categories of ailment. The staff included physicians and surgeons, pharmacists, attendants of both sexes and administrative officers, and besides store-rooms and a chapel, there were facilities for lecturing and a library.¹¹

The Arabs thus made extraordinary advances in medicine through their research. The first important physician was Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Zakariyya ar Razi (d.923) known in Europe as *Rhazes*. He wrote voluminously on many scientific and philosophic subjects, and over fifty of his works are extant. His greatest work, *Al-Havi*, was translated into Latin as the *Continents*, 'the comprehensive (book)'; It was the first encyclopaedia of all medical science up to that time, and had to be completed by his disciples after his death. For each disease he gave the views of Greek, Syrian, Indian, Persian and Arabic authors, and then added notes on his clinical observations and expressed a final opinion.

9. *Ibid*, p.226

10. *Ibid*, p. 226

11. *Ibid*, p. 227

The greatest writer on medicine was Ibn Sina or Avicenna. He was also one of the two greatest Arabic philosophers. His eminence in medicine was due to his ability to combine extensive theoretical knowledge and systematic thought with acute clinical observation. His vast canon of medicine (*Al-Qanun fit Tib*) was translated into Latin in the twelfth century and was used much more than the works of Galen and Hippocrates. It dominated the teaching of medicine in Europe until at least the end of the sixteenth century. There were sixteen printed editions of it in the fifteenth century, one being in Hebrew, twenty editions in the sixteenth and several more in the seventeenth. Roughly contemporary with Avicenna was the chief Arabic writer on surgery and surgical instruments, Abul Qasim az-Zohrawi (d. after 1009), usually known in Latin as Abulcasis.

While Arabic medicine thus reached its highest point in the early eleventh century, it continued for many more centuries. The gift of careful observation did not disappear and some fourteenth century Arab doctors in Spain wrote about the plague as they had experienced it in Granada and Almeria.¹²

Abdullah ibn Baytar (d. 1248) was the best known botanist and pharmacist of Spain, in fact, of the Muslim world. He travelled as a herbalist in Spain and throughout North Africa, and later entered the service of the Ayyubid al-Malik al-Kamil in Cairo as chief herbalist. From Egypt he made extensive trips throughout Syria and Asia Minor. One of his two celebrated works, *Al-Mughni fi al-Adwiyah al-Mufradah*, is on materia medica, the other, *Al-Jami fi al-Adwiya al-Mufradah*, is a collection of "simple remedies" from the animal, vegetable and mineral worlds, embodying Greek and Arabic data supplemented by the author's own experiments and researches. It stands out as the foremost medieval treatise of its kind. Some 1400 items are considered, of which 300, including about 200 plants, were novelties. The number of authors quoted is about one hundred and fifty, of whom twenty were Greek. Part of the Latin version of ibn al Baytar's *Simplicia* were printed as late as 1758 at Cremona.¹³

After materia medica, astronomy and mathematics, the Arabs made their greatest scientific contribution in chemistry. The Muslim scientists brought chemistry out of the sphere of alchemy and gave it the status of a regular science based on observation. It was through them that the world was first introduced to the scientific method. In the study of chemistry and other physical sciences the Arabs introduced the objective experiment, a decided improvement over the hazy speculations of the Greeks. For the first time the scientific method was introduced by them.

After al-Razi, Jabir ibn Hayyan (721-815) is ranked greatest in the field of medieval chemical science. He more clearly recognized and stated the importance of experimentation than any other early alchemist and made noteworthy advances in both the theory and practice of chemistry.¹⁴

12. *Ibid*, p. 228

13. Philip K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, pp. 575-76.

14. *Ibid*, p. 380

Jabir's books were held as the final authority on chemistry in Europe up till the fifteenth century. The initial ladder to the modern western chemistry of the eighteenth century was produced by Jabir. It is believed that Jabir wrote two thousand books on different sciences: No writer before the Muslims had written so many scholarly books.

These are only some scattered and incomplete references. They are, however, enough to show that Islam is not hostile to learning but rather patronizes it. In ancient times the anti-learning tradition was laid down by those religions which were based on polytheism and superstition. Islam ended polytheism and superstition and established religion on the basis of pure monotheism. There is therefore no question of Islam becoming an enemy to knowledge and research.

The progress of learning is anathema to polytheism. Polytheistic religions therefore attempt to block the path of learning. Monotheism on the contrary takes a very different stand, for the progress of learning verifies monotheism, thus establishing it all the more soundly. That is why monotheistic religion gives every encouragement to the progress of learning. Maurice Bucaille's book, *The Bible, the Quran and Science*, illustrates this point with great pertinence.