

ISLAMIC REVIEW

'ID-UL-FITR (1358 A.H.) SERMON

BY MAULVI ABDUL MAJID

To-day is a happy day for us Muslims and, I venture to say, for non-Muslims also. This day is happy for us Muslims, because we meet to-day in a prayer of thanksgiving to God the Beneficent, the Merciful, for having enabled us to perform our duty, which, to use the words of the Qur-án, was designed by God with the purpose "of fitting us to guard against evil." And, further to express our happiness at the completion of this moral duty of ours, each one of us is required to pay the sum of half-a-crown as *sadaqat-ul-fitr* or *fitrana*. This charity, be it noted, is obligatory on every Muslim whose paying capacity comes within the range of the specifications of the law of *Zakat*, or the Islamic poor-rate. It must be paid by every Muslim both for himself and for those dependent upon him.

This day, as already stated, closes the month of fasting—a course for self-purification, for seeking light and guidance from God, Who is the source of all that is good and the fountain-head of all that is noble and the Inspirer of every good desire bringing forth good conduct. I said that this day was a happy day for non-Muslims as well. For it is through the agency of this festival (there are two occasions of Muslim festival each year) that we Muslims by practical demonstration proclaim to the non-Islamic world the message of the spiritual equality of mankind. It is through the agency of this spiritual education of mankind in action that Islam and we Muslims have succeeded in breaking down the resistance offered to the peace of the world by the unconscionable barriers of racialism and the hatreds, which are the result of geographical limitations and linguistic and colour prejudices, from amongst

'ID-UL-FITR (1358 A.H.) SERMON

one-sixth of the human race. This is indeed a great moral achievement in itself. A non-Muslim writer, Dr. Maude Royden, in her monograph, "The Problem of Palestine," published this year, has the following remarks to make on this singular characteristic accomplishment of Islam :

"The religion of Mahomet proclaimed the first real democracy ever conceived in the mind of man. His God was of such transcendent greatness that before Him all worldly differences were nought, and even the deep and cruel cleavage of colour ceased to count.

"There are social ranks among Moslems, as elsewhere, but fundamentally (that is to say, spiritually) all believers are equal, and this fundamental spiritual democracy is not a fiction, as it so commonly is among Christians ; it is accepted, and real. This accounts for its extraordinary spread among different peoples. It accounts for its strength to-day in Africa, where the Christian missionary preaches an equality which everywhere is mocked by the arrogance of the white races and the existence of a colour bar. The Moslem, black, brown or white, alone finds himself accepted as a brother, not according to his colour but according to his creed.

"During the War in France, I was told of some Indian Moslem soldiers who created a disturbance on finding black troops from Senegal served in the same estaminet as themselves. They were about to proceed from protest to violence, when one of the better informed pointed out that these blacks were Moslems. Instantly the protests were silenced and an apology offered. White Christians do not

ISLAMIC REVIEW

always behave so, whether in London or in American hotels. It was on the strength of their religion that the Arabs conquered, and by its means they have made their great gift to civilisation.”

We Muslims are never proud of ourselves as being Chinese, Iranian or Indian. What we are proud of is our religious culture. And it may be said, in passing, that this pride is not begotten of hatred or haughtiness. We talk of it because it is a gift from God, and we are humbly thankful to Him for this. The Islamic nations, at the height of their culture and material glory, never thought of themselves as Arabs or Turks, but simply as Muslims. For them, the difference between themselves and others was spiritual. They were Muslims and others were non-Muslims. We are Muslims and the sole justification for our existence, other things being equal, lies in the propagation of an outlook on life which brushes aside, effectively, once and for all, those obstacles which stand in the way of bringing about harmonious relations in the first place between one individual and another and, for that matter, between one nation and another, thus eventually paving the way for a world brotherhood of mankind.

It is with these noble aims in view that the Muslim festivals are held. I wish to emphasise that Muslim festivals are not mere festivities degenerating into mere frivolities. This is because Islam knows that all social functions, if dissociated from the remembrance of God, are liable to get out of hand and to degenerate into a reckless indulgence of the lower self. Islam has, therefore, enjoined, before everything else, the saying of prayers at these festivals. Those who have witnessed Muslim festivals will bear out the statement that the manner of them is in sharp contrast with the way in which the festivals of other religions are cele-

'ID-UL-FITR (1358 A.H.) SERMON

brated. By way of illustration, I may refer you to the depths of degeneracy into which the European carnival has fallen. The carnival, as you know, was originally a feast which preceded the Christian period of fasting—Lent. But nowadays the Christian feast has lost its original significance and denotes nothing but riotous revelry and unfettered licence. On the occasion of carnivals in Europe, both men and women wear fancy dress and mob each other with confetti. They set at naught all social codes of morality. In a word, all that is sacred in normal life is suspended, and its place is taken by licence. And all this is at its height in Roman Catholic countries, more particularly in France and Italy !

The aim of Muslim festivals is to educate the world to realise the eventual destiny of mankind, which is the “fellowship of mankind.” Thus those friends, who see fit to object to the celebrating of this festival of ours to-day on the ground that all festivities should have been suspended for the duration of the present war, would perhaps be able to discriminate between the nature of Muslim festivals and the usual kind of festivities to which one is accustomed in Europe. All Muslim festivals are controlled and guided by spiritual values, which are superimposed upon, and dominate, the biological values which play such a prominent part in non-Muslim festivals. The whole world is at present passing through a very crucial period.

Each one of us, at least, likes to believe that, at the end of this war, a new order will emerge from the present chaos ; that a new humanity will be born out of the present turmoil. I think it is meet that I said a few words on the attitude of Islam towards wars and the position to be taken up by us Muslims in the present war in particular.

ISLAMIC REVIEW

As a rule, plain truths are not liked by us. There are things which we like, and their result is bad for us; and there are things which we hate, and their outcome is good for us. Thus our liking or disliking a thing does not make it either good or bad for us. We Muslims believe that all that comes from God is good, even though we may not understand it. We Muslims, for that reason, are neither panderers to nor danglers in, cheap sentimentalism. But that does not mean that Islam is devoid of idealistic teachings. ✓ The merit of the teaching of Islam lies in its capacity to be practical and yet idealistic. The religion of Islam is dynamic in its outlook on life and has no time for any talk or outlook which lacks courage to look things in the face. We Muslims never like to take refuge behind the stockade of such philosophies and religious outlooks on life as place a fantastic estimate on the worth of an individual, his powers and importance, but refuse to take due notice of the baser side of human nature of men and women who, for a number of reasons, may not be so elevated and advanced as ourselves, and may even be bent upon annihilating us outright. We Muslims like to call a spade a spade and seek remedies accordingly for those mental and moral aberrations, from which some people and nations may be suffering. Naturally, religions and philosophies which are oblivious of this phase of the life of mankind not only fail to see eye to eye with us, but they also decry us by styling us as gross, harsh and materialistic. But it passes my understanding when I see their prominent exponents exhorting their co-religionists to take up arms and be up and doing and fighting. The only conclusion to which I can come is that cheap sentimentalism and empty talk are employed by these exponents to keep people under their hold. Because of this dynamic and fearless outlook on life and our readiness and

'ID-UL-FITR (1358 A.H.) SERMON

preparedness to look facts in the face, we have been branded, since our appearance on the world stage, as warlike people and as people whose history reeks of bloodshed and cruelties. It would indeed be a stroke of luck if anyone of us came across a book or a lecture by a non-Muslim in which, in one form or another, we Muslims were not described as loving war for the sake of war. I hope that my assurance will be accepted, when I tell you that we Muslims are the greatest pacifists the world has ever known. The very word Islam means pacifism, and the word "Muslim," its active participle form, means a pacifist; or, to use the words of the Prophet Muhammad, a Muslim is one from whose hands, tongue and limbs, everyone is safe. But as for men and women who are nothing but armchair philosophers, who indulge in nebulous talk and who would like to solve the problems of the world by mere thought force, or who, in other words, have not the courage to face the stern realities of life, it will be natural enough, if such people cannot understand us. Whenever such people read of the Prophet Muhammad and learn something of the war conducted by him in self-defence (Muhammad who counts amongst his followers to-day over 400 millions of people) it will be natural enough if they seek consolation in stigmatising us, his followers, as people who literally believe in the use of the sword for securing their ends. Calumnies have been heaped upon the fair name of Islam simply because its fault, if any, is that it refuses to play the ostrich policy. Nothing, of course, would convince such people of the necessity of unsheathing the sword. At all costs they would go on eulogising pacificism to the skies. Islam and the Holy Prophet will appeal to them to a certain extent, but, at a given point, they would part company with them. It is this particular point that I wish to discuss in the next few words of

ISLAMIC REVIEW

mine. Islam not only deals with the problem of war, but it has also laid down a detailed system of ethics, governing and controlling war. The only difference, according to me, between us Muslims and non-Muslims, especially the Christians, is that we Muslims freely admit the presence and necessity of wars and humanise them by laying down ethical restrictions, whereas our Christian friends, though they act exactly in the same manner as we do, will not admit the presence and necessity of wars. Our Christian friends have no support for their conduct either in the words or example of the Holy Prophet Jesus (upon whom be the peace and blessings of God !) nor in any ethics having for their basis the words of the Master.

In order to understand this fundamental difference between the approach to the problems of life by the two great religions of the world, Christianity and Islam, I quote at some length the words of Dr. Sir Muhammad Iqbal from his book, "The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam" :

"The main purpose of the Qur-án is to awaken in man the higher consciousness of his manifold relations with God and the universe. It is in view of this essential aspect of the Qur-ánic teaching that Goethe, while making a general review of Islam as an educational force, said to Eckermann : ' You see, this teaching never fails ; with all our systems we cannot go, and generally speaking no man can go, farther than that.' The problem of Islam was suggested by the mutual conflict and at the same time mutual attraction, presented by the forces of religion and civilisation. The same problem confronted early Christianity. The great point in Christianity is the search for an independent

'ID-UL-FITR (1358 A.H.) SERMON

content for spiritual life which, according to the insight of its Founder, could be elevated not by the forces of a world external to the soul of man, but by the revelation of a new world within his soul. Islam fully agrees with this insight and supplements it by the further insight that the illumination of the new world thus revealed is not something foreign to the world of matter but permeates it through and through.

“ Thus the affirmation of the spirit sought by Christianity would come, not by the renunciation of external forces, which are already permeated by the illumination of spirit, but by a proper adjustment of man's relation to these forces in view of the light received from the world within. It is the mysterious touch of the ideal that animates and sustains the real, and through it alone we can discover and affirm the ideal. With Islam, the ideal and the real are not two opposing forces which cannot be reconciled. The life of the ideal consists, not in total breach with the real, which would tend to shatter the organic wholeness of life into painful oppositions, but in the perpetual endeavour of the ideal to appropriate the real with a view eventually to absorb it, to convert it into itself and to illuminate its whole being. It is the sharp opposition between the subject and the object, the mathematical without and the biological within, that impressed Christianity. Islam, however, faces the opposition with a view to overcome it. This essential difference in looking at a fundamental relation determines the respective attitudes of these great religions towards the problem of

ISLAMIC REVIEW

human life in its present surroundings. Both demand the affirmation of the spiritual self in man, with this difference only, that Islam, recognising the contact of the ideal with the real, says 'yes' to the world of matter and points out the way to master it with a view to discover a basis for a realistic regulation of life."

We Muslims believe in pacifism in the sense that we abhor war but, if circumstances are such that war becomes unavoidable, then the religion of Islam, unlike its sister religions, has got an ethic of war. It does not shut its eyes to the stern realities of life. It has courage enough to tell the world that war is one of the ways of God to cleanse it of a vitiated atmosphere ; it says that war is a biological necessity. We read in the Qur-án, " And if God had not repelled some men by others the earth would have been corrupted. But God is a Lord of kindness to His creatures." (2 : 251.) In this verse, for the first time in the religious history of mankind, I believe, it is stated that wars sometimes become inevitable, and that their purpose is to purge mankind of the vicious elements that come to get the upper hand and trample under their feet justice, liberty, freedom of speech, freedom of conscience and religious conviction. It is under such circumstances that wars become a source of blessing to mankind, as a result of which justice and freedom of conscience are restored.

I wish to make it clear that Islam, like St. Paul, could have said in the words of Jesus, " Bless your persecutors." We Muslims feed our persecutors and enemies when they are hungry, and, if they are thirsty, we would give them to drink ; for, to use the words of St. Paul, that is the way to make them burn with shame. This is idealistic without doubt, if idealistic and fantastic are synonymous. But is it always practical ? Islam knew that it should take into due consideration

'ID-UL-FITR (1358 A.H.) SERMON

the demands of human nature and that idealism has limitations, and that the showing of an absolute undiluted leniency to the enemy might do more harm than good. Thus, instead, the Qur-án laid down a guiding principle of life for us, which reads, "Repel evil by what is best." (23 : 96.) Thus it improved immeasurably upon such ideas as are couched in the phrase, "Bless your persecutors." The doing of good in return for evil is the common teaching of all religions, and is by no means a monopoly nor a peculiar distinctive element of Christian ethics. But nowhere is the principle put in such a beautiful and practical form as in the Qur-án in the verse read by me ; and, what is more, the whole change has been brought about by the mere use of a single word, *i.e.*, by what is *best*. To return good for evil is only possible under certain circumstances ; and, notwithstanding all the sentimentalism of the Gospel doctrine, no individual or community that has ever taken that teaching for a guide, has found it possible in practice to return good for evil in all cases. Some of the later disciples of Jesus have, perhaps, because of the impracticability of the original doctrine, taken rather the opposite course. The Qur-án, however, says, "*repel* evil by what is best." Evil is not a thing that must be encouraged. It must be repelled. But, in repelling, the rule according to the Qur-án is that it must be repelled by what is best. If you can *repel* evil by doing good for it, that is the course recommended ; but if punishment is necessary, and the meekest follower of Jesus must admit that in some circumstances this is so, then punishment is recommended. The aim is to repel evil, and the method of repelling evil is to be the best that is possible in the circumstances. The rule laid down here was the guiding rule of the Prophet Muhammad and is that of Muslim ethics. I am afraid

ISLAMIC REVIEW

that the above explanation with regard to the repelling of evil may be misunderstood by some, especially by those who wish to live in a world of delusions. So I hasten to add that, as far as idealistic teachings go, Islam is abreast of all and is second to none in the loftiness of its ethics. Let me give just a short comparison between the teachings of Christianity and those of Islam to show that they run on parallel lines and that, in mere idealism, there is nothing to choose between them, while the characteristic which distinguishes Islam from other religions is its genius in conforming its idealism with practicability. In Christianity, as is clear from Thessalonians, 1, 5 : 15 and Galatians, 6 : 10 and Romans, 12 : 17, one is asked not only to refrain from offending or shocking one's pagan neighbours, but also to endeavour positively to do them good. Christianity does not admit any reprisals, even if the injury has been done to ourselves. (Romans, 12 : 17.) Now, if you ask how Christianity repels evil, we are told that the moral order will look after itself ; for the principle of retribution is inherent in a moral universe and that we need make no effort " to get even with " people who have done us wrong. Evidently this fantastic idealism is sure to do more harm than good. But now I give to you the parallel teachings in the words of the Qur-án. We read :

“ O you who believe, be upright for God, bearers of witness with justice, and let not hatred of a people incite you to act inequitably ; act equitably, that is nearer to piety ; and be careful of your duty to God ; God is aware of what you do.” (5 : 81.)

We read also :

“ And the recompense of evil is punishment like it, but, whosoever forgives and amends, he shall have his reward from God ; surely God does not love the unjust.” (42 : 40.)

'ID-UL-FITR (1358 A.H.) SERMON

To ensure peace we have often to disturb peace, and then it is that the martial spirit, that has been implanted in us by God for our safety, comes into play. The protection of life and property is a common instinct, but it has often served as a pretext for oppression and tyranny. We, it must be admitted, are not free from inordinacy ; and, if we need something to put us on the right path, war is indispensable in order to restrain those who would otherwise be beyond our control. In other words, we need an ethic of war. We fail to find any healthy principle of war in the Bible.

No man can be bound by another's injunction, if that is at all likely to be detrimental to his own interests. But if he finds himself so bound, he tries to find some means to get rid of the obligation. Treaties in Europe are meant for the waste-paper basket. They are honoured more in the breach than in the observance. We need a word from God Himself on this subject to serve as our article of faith. This is not mere theory. The history of warring peoples has proved it. Those who were once the embodiment of oppression and a curse to humanity on account of their prowess, became as gentle as lambs under the salubrious influence of Divine Revelation, and won for themselves the title of "Gentlemen Soldiers" from the world. They were once reckless in the matter of life and wielded their swords ruthlessly, but these unscrupulous people became clean fighters under the teachings of God.

The question of war has always been a most difficult and intricate problem. War could neither be dispensed with in the interests of peace, nor could it be pursued on the lines laid down in bygone days. The world had urgent need of true reform in this respect, and Islam fulfilled that need. I will now give the essentials of Islamic teachings in this matter. Fighting to satisfy the hankering after land or property belonging to

ISLAMIC REVIEW

others has been repeatedly condemned in the Qur-án. But, from the very beginning, these motives have always given rise to fighting in the world ; even to-day the same hankering makes civilised nations covetous of the possessions of others. They have engineered various schemes and have come with plausible pretexts, but cupidity and usurpation is at the bottom of all their movements. Islam, however, forbids all fighting for such objects. It allows war only under those conditions for which the Creator has purposely endowed us with a martial spirit. Islam permits fighting for three reasons :

- (i) To restrain disturbances and to keep every land free from the incursions of others.
- (ii) To defend life and property from the hands of others.
- (iii) To enable every person to follow his religious convictions, to whatever persuasion he may belong.

I need not emphasise the first two points ; they are self-evident. I will merely quote the following verses from the Holy Qur-án concerning them.

With regard to No. 1, the Qur-án says : “ If you, O Muslims, will not fight, there will be in the land persecution and great mischief.” (8 : 73.) With regard to No. 2, the Qur-án says :

“Permission (to fight) is given to those upon whom war is made, because they are oppressed ; and most surely God is well able to assist them ; and those who have been expelled from their homes without a just cause.” (22 : 39, 40.)

The third object of war is, however, a vexed question. It has furnished the enemies of Islam with a pretext for carping against the faith, though the Holy Qur-án has given the most desirable and humane teachings on the subject.

'ID-UL-FITR (1358 A.H.) SERMON

“No compulsion in religion” is the universal immunity given by the Qur-án to an adherent of any faith no matter what its form. Islam came to establish freedom of conscience and action in general but particularly in religion. A Muslim is bound to wage war against any person, whether of his own kith and kin and religion or not, who interferes with the beliefs of a non-Muslim. This state of things has been called “Faith for God” in the Qur-án; that is to say, everyone must be allowed to choose his own faith and to worship his God in the manner he thinks best. It is a disturbance of this state of things, that makes a Muslim draw the sword against any person, Muslim or otherwise, who violates the Islamic ideal of peace. Liberty of conscience was unknown before Islam. The feeling in Islam for religious freedom is so strong that a Muslim is enjoined to act as a policeman, as it were, in the protection of all religious houses. For example, a Muslim is ordered to protect a Christian church from a Muslim attack. The Qur-án is too clear on the point to allow any other conduct.

We read in the Qur-án, “And had there not been God’s repelling some people by others, certainly there would have been pulled down cloisters and churches and synagogues and mosques in which God’s name is much remembered; and surely God will help him who helps His cause.” (22 : 40.)

In this verse the Qur-án identifies the maintenance of religious houses of every faith with the “cause of God.” It is to be noted that Muslims are ordered to sacrifice their lives not only to save their own mosques but the religious houses of other peoples as well. The civilised world, with Christian notions lurking in its breast, is still far from holding the noble principle thus enunciated in the Qur-án. Even in time of war a Muslim soldier is forbidden to touch an alien’s house

ISLAMIC REVIEW

of worship. He has to spare the life of religious teachers. One more consideration, and I shall have finished. What should be the attitude of us Muslims towards the present war? In view of the above remarks, our duty as Muslims is quite clear. I do not hold a brief for any political ideology. I am just trying to place before you our duty in the present circumstances. We Muslims have suffered much at the hands of the French and the British. Fate had thrown us into the arms of one another. Clashes and injustices were perhaps only natural. The Zionist policy in Palestine has done us great harm. Untold miseries has it brought upon our brethren in the faith in that country. But the very fact that synagogues have been pulled down in Germany upon the slightest pretext makes it obligatory upon us Muslims to throw our weight into the cause of the Allies. The Allies may be fighting for the defence of democracy and we Muslims possibly may not agree with the definition or the signification attached to that word by European diplomats. Nevertheless, in the present circumstances, our attitude is quite clear. Unless and until religious liberty is restored, no Muslim should think that he has done his duty.