

Renunciation of Worldliness in the Sayings of Imam Ali (A.S.)

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Of the frequent themes of the Nahj al-balaghah is strong warning against the dangers of worldliness. Our preceding discussion about zuhd (abstinence) and its aims also serves here to throw light on the meaning of worldliness; because, the zuhd which is strongly enjoined is the very opposite of the worldliness which is severely condemned.

To define and explain any one of them is to define and explain the other. However, in view of the tremendous emphasis laid in 'Ali's moral sermons upon the warning against the dangers of worldliness, we considered it appropriate to devote a separate chapter to this topic with a view to further explaining this concept so that all ambiguities are removed in this matter.

The first point to be investigated is why so much attention has been given to the concept of zuhd in the sayings and sermons of Amir al-Mu'minin, to the extent that no other issue has been so much emphasized by him, and neither the Holy Prophet (S) nor any of the other Imams (A) have spoken as recurringly about the deceptions of worldly life, its ephemeral and unenduring nature, the disloyalty of its slippery comforts, and the dangers of wealth, affluence, and immersion in and complete surrender to worldly pleasures and comforts.

The Danger Created by War Booty

This was not a matter of accident, rather it was something related to the conditions that came into existence during 'Ali's times, that is, during the days of the past caliphs and especially during the caliphate of 'Uthman. A series of serious dangers visited the world of Islam in the wake of the influx of huge quantities of wealth and riches. 'Ali (A) sensed its dangerous consequences and struggled against them.

This struggle is reflected in his practices and policies during the period of his caliphate, in the course of which he ultimately gave up his life. This struggle, at the ideological level, is also reflected in his sermons, letters, and sayings.

The Muslims were blessed with great victories in battles that diverted huge amounts of property and wealth into the Muslim world. However, instead of being utilized for public benefit or being distributed justly among the people, the wealth fell into the hands of a few individuals and an elite.

Especially during the days of 'Uthman, this imbalance became greatly pronounced. Persons who possessed nothing only a few years ago appropriated for their personal use fabulous amounts of wealth. This was the time when worldly tendencies gained strength in the Muslim society and the Muslim Ummah started on a course of moral decline and degeneration.

It was following the awareness of this great danger to society that 'Ali raised his cry of protest to warn the Ummah of Islam. Al-Mas'udi, writing about the days of 'Uthman, says: 'Uthman was a man of extraordinary generosity (of course, it was exercised at the cost of the public treasury). The government officials and the people followed his example. He was the first among the Caliphs to build a house made of stone and mortar with wooden doors made of teak and juniper, and amassed other properties, such as gardens, orchards, and springs, in al-Madinah.

When he died, there were 150,000 Dinars and a million Dirhams in cash with his treasurer and his property in Wadi al-Qura, Hunayn, and elsewhere was valued above 100,000 Dinars. His legacy consisted of a large number of horses and camels.

Then he writes: During his reign, a group of his associates also hoarded similar amounts of wealth. Al-Zubayr ibn al-'Awwam built a house in Basrah which still stands intact in the year 332 H. [al-Mas'udi's own time]. It is also well known that he built similar houses in Egypt, Kufah, and Alexandria.

When al-Zubayr died he left 50,000 Dinars in cash, a thousand horses and thousands of other things. The house which Talhah ibn 'Abd Allah built of brick, mortar and teak in Kufah still exists and is known as 'Dar al-Talhatayn.'

Talhah's daily income from his properties in Iraq was one thousand Dinars. He had one thousand horses in his stables. A one-thirty-second (1/32) part of the wealth that he left at his death was estimated at 84,000 Dinars ...

Al-Mas'udi mentions similar amounts of wealth in the possession of Zayd ibn Thabit, Ya'la ibn 'Umayyah and others. Evidently, such huge amounts of wealth do not emerge from under the ground nor fall from the sky. Such immense riches are never amassed except by the side of extreme and horrifying poverty. That is why 'Ali (A), in sermon 129, after warning the people of the dangers of worldliness, says: You live in a period when virtues recede and evils advance step by step, and the Satan becomes greedier in his eagerness to ruin human beings. Today his equipment has been reinforced, his traps are set in every place, and his prey comes easily.

Look around; you will see either a poor man hardly able to breathe in extreme poverty and penury, or a rich man who has transformed God's blessings into his own infidelity, or you will see a miser who makes stinginess in discharging the obligations imposed by God a means of increasing his own wealth, or you will find the rebellious whose unruly hearts are deaf to moral admonition.

Where are the virtuous, the righteous amongst you? Where are the free men and the magnanimous? Where are those who avoid every trace of deceit in their dealings and

pursue piety and honesty in their ways?

The Intoxication of Affluence

Amir al-Mu'minin (A), in his utterances, has used the phrase *sakarāt al-ni'mah*, meaning 'intoxication induced by comfort and affluence', which is inevitably followed by a vengeful disaster. In sermon 151 he warns them: You, O people of Arabia, would be victims of calamities which are drawing near. Beware of the intoxication induced by affluence and fear the vengeful disaster which will follow it.

Then he describes the misfortunes caused by such immoderations. In sermon 187 he foretells the calamities that were to befall the Muslim society in future. He says: This would happen when you would be intoxicated, not by drinking wine, but with wealth and affluence. Yes, the flow of immense amounts of wealth into the domain of Islam and the unjust distribution of this wealth together with nepotism and partiality, infected the Islamic society with the disease of worldliness and the race for affluence.

'Ali (A) struggled to save the Islamic world from this grave danger, and was severely critical of those who were responsible for the infection to set in. He set an example of an altogether different life style in his own personal living, and, on attaining caliphate, he gave the top priority to the campaign against these dangers in his revolutionary programme.

The General Aspect of 'Ali's Warnings

This prologue was intended to throw light upon the particular aspect of the warnings of Amir al-Mu'minin (A) about worldliness as a specific reaction to a particular social phenomenon of his times. Yet, aside from this particular feature, there is a general aspect to 'Ali's words that is not confined to his own time and applies to all times and all people as an essential part of Islamic teaching.

This specific logic emanates from the teaching of the Holy Qur'an which is followed up in the sayings of the Holy Prophet (S), Amir al-Mu'minin (A) and the rest of Imams (A), as well as in the writings of great Muslim sages. However, it is a logic which needs a detailed analysis. In the present discussion, our concern will be more with the general aspect of the discourses of Amir al-Mu'minin (A) in the sense that in them 'Ali (A) addresses himself to all human beings of all times.

The Terminology of Every School

Every school of thought has a terminology which is specific to it. In order to understand the concepts and issues of a certain school, it is essential to be familiar with its terms. On the other hand, in order to understand its particular terminology, it is necessary, in the first place, to understand its general view of the universe, life and man: that is its *weltanschauung*.

Islam has a clear view of being and creation, and has a particular way of looking at man and human life. One of the fundamental principles of the Islamic world-outlook is the notion that there is no duality of any kind whatsoever in being; that is, the world of creation is not divisible into two domains of 'good' and 'evil'.

That is, it is not true that some existents are good and beautiful and should have been created, whereas some are evil and ugly and should not have been created but nevertheless exist. Such a view is regarded as *kufr* in the Islamic world-outlook, and is considered contrary to the principle of *tawhid*. In the view of Islam, the creation of all things is based on goodness, wisdom, and beauty: Thou seest not in the creation of the All-merciful any imperfection ... (67:3)

He is the Knower of the unseen and the visible, the All-mighty, the All-compassionate, Who made good everything He created; ... (32:6-7)

Accordingly, Islam's condemnation of 'the world' does not apply to the world of creation. The Islamic world-outlook rests on the foundation of pure *tawhid* and lays great emphasis on the Unity of the Acting Principle; it does not admit the existence of any partner who would share God's sovereignty. Such a world-outlook can never be pessimistic. The idea of an evil world abounding in crookedness and wickedness is not an Islamic notion. Then why does it denounce 'the world'?

The 'World' that is Condemned

Commonly it is said that attachment to the 'world' is condemned and disapproved by Islam. This is both true and false. If what is implied is an emotional attachment, it cannot be true; because, man, in relation to the total system of creation, has been created with a series of congenital emotional attachments and inclinations.

In addition, he does not acquire these inclinations, nor are they superfluous or incongruous. Even as in the human body there is no superfluous organ-not even a single nerve ending-so also there are no redundant congenital tendencies of attachment in his nature.

All innate human tendencies, and aptitudes have a purpose which is wise and sagacious. The Holy Qur'an regards such tendencies as the 'signs' of Divine Wisdom and the Creator's consummate design: And of His signs is that He created for you, of yourselves, spouses, that you might repose in them, and He has set between you love and mercy ... (30:21)

These attachments and sentiments form a series of channels of communication between man and his world. Without them man would not be able to pursue the course of his development.

Consequently, it should be said that the Islamic world-outlook, even as it does not permit us to denounce and reject the world, it also does not allow us to regard the natural attachments and the channels of communication as superfluous, useless, and breakable, because such

sentiments and tendencies are a part of the general pattern of creation.

In fact, the prophets (A) and the awliya' were endowed with these sentiments and emotions to a high degree of exuberance.

The truth is that what is implied by 'attachment to the world' are not these natural and innate inclinations; instead, what is meant is bondage to material and worldly affairs and total surrender to them, which leads to spiritual stagnation and inertia, deprives the human spirit of its freedom of movement and buoyancy, and makes it immobile and dead.

That is what Islam calls 'worldliness' and has severely campaigned against it as something contrary to the evolutionary system of creation. Not only this, Islam considers this struggle as being in tune with the laws of the evolutionary processes of creation. The expressions employed by the Qur'an in this regard are miraculous, as we shall explain in the following sections.

The Relation Between Man and the World

As made explicit in the last chapter, that which is regarded as disapprovable by the Qur'an and the Nahj al-balaighah is neither the world-in-itself, nor the natural and innate human urges and attachments. In the view of Islam, neither has the world been created without a purpose, nor has man strayed into it aimlessly.

There have been, and are, some schools of thought which view the world with pessimism. In their view, the existing order of the universe is far from being perfect. There have existed other schools which considered man's entry into the world of existence to be the result of some cosmic error, as if man had strayed into it.

According to them, man is a total stranger in this world with which he has no ties of consanguinity, and is a prisoner of existence. Like Joseph, he has been thrown into the black-hole of being by his evil brethren where he is confined and his every endeavour should be aimed at finding an exit from this abyss.

Obviously, when the relation of man to the world and nature is regarded as the one between a prison and its prisoner, and an abyss and one entrapped in it, his ultimate aim cannot be anything but seeking 'deliverance'.

The Logic of Islam

But from the viewpoint of Islam, the relation of man to the world is not that of a prisoner with his prison; or that of one entrapped in a well with the well; rather it is the kind of relation that exists between a peasant and his farm¹, or a horse and the racecourse², or a merchant and the marketplace³, or a devotee and his temple⁴. The world, from the Islamic point of view, is a school for man, his training ground, and the place where he can acquire perfection.

There is an anecdote related in the Nahj al-balaghah of a man who condemned the world in Amir al-Mu'minin's presence. 'Ali (A) rebuked him for his confusing 'the world' which is condemned by Islam with the actual physical world and informed him about his error⁵. Shaykh Farid al-Din 'Attar has rendered this incident into verse in his Musibat nameh: In the presence of the Tiger of Providence, A man denounced the world with vehemence.

"The world", exclaimed Hayder, "is not to be blamed".

Wretched are you, being far from wisdom.

The world, son, is a farm To be attended to day and night.

Whatsoever is of the honour and riches of faith, An in all it is to be acquired from this world.

Tomorrow's fruit is the blooming of today's seed; And one who is idle here, shall taste the bitter fruit of regret.

The world is the best place for you, Where in you can prepare provision for the Hereafter.

Go into the world, but don't get immersed in the ego.

And prepare yourself for the other world.

If you act thus, the world will suit you, Hence befriend the world just for this aim.

Nasir Khusrow 'Alawi, justifiably considered a philosopher among the poets (Hakim al-shu'ara'), is one of the most profound and truly religious amongst Persian poets.

He has composed a eulogy about the world, simultaneously highlighting both the good and evil qualities of it, which is as much in conformity with the Islamic outlook as it is extraordinarily beautiful from artistic viewpoint. This eulogy appears in his collected poetical works (diwan), and is included in his book Jami' al-hitmatayn. He says: O world, how apt and essential you are, Even though you haven't been loyal to any.

Sick and wretched you appear to the afflicted eye, Yet fine and healthy if one looks at your inside.

If sometimes you have broken a robust man or two, Many a broken one you have joined and restored.

You are filthy to the unclean, To the pure unstained.

If any one should blame you, say, "You know me not."

You have grown out of me.

If you are wise, Why blame the tree of which you are a branch?

The Lord made me a path for your ascending journey, And you have settled down on this lowly road.

God planted a tree from whose trunk you have grown; If you grow out straight, you will be saved, And if crooked, confined to the flames.

Yes, everyone burns crooked branches, And asks not "Is it teak or walnut?"

You are the arrow of God aimed at His enemy, Why have you hurt yourself with this weapon?

Now it is evident that man's relation to the world is similar to the one that exists between the farmer and his field of cultivation, between the merchant and the marketplace, between the

devotee and the temple. It is not possible for man to alienate himself from the world or sever his ties with it or to develop a kind of relationship which is wholly negative.

There exists a design and intelligent planning behind every natural urge. Man has neither come to this world by cheating or fraud, nor should he go from here as an accused.

There is a general force of attraction and gravitation that encompasses the whole universe. All the particles in it attract each other according to a set pattern. This pattern of mutual attraction and absorption is determined by a judicious design. Moreover, the force of attraction and love is not confined to man alone. No particle in the universe is devoid of this power.

The difference, however, is that man, contrary to other things, is aware of his own leanings and inclinations.

Wahshi Kirmani says: Every dancing particle is permeated with the same force of attraction That draws it towards a certain specific goal.

It carries one Rower to the side of another, And urges one spark to pursue the company of its likes, From fire to wind, from water to dust, From underneath the moon to the top of the heavens, From flock to flock and from horde to horde, You will observe this attraction in every moving thing From heavenly spheres to the terrestrial bodies.

Accordingly, from the viewpoint of Islam the world is neither without a purpose nor is human being created by any error, nor are man's innate tendencies undesirable and evil. Then what is meant by "the world" that the Qur'an and the Nahj al-balaghah regard as undesirable and condemnable?

Before embarking on the issue, a few preliminary principles need to be clarified. It is characteristic of man that he is inherently an idealist and a lover of perfection. He is in the search of something with which he wants to develop a relationship closer than an ordinary attachment. In other words, he is by nature a devotee and a worshipper in search of something which is the ultimate object of his desire and the end of his entire being.

However, if he is not rightly guided, or not on his guard, his relation with things and inclination towards them is transformed into a relation of reliance and attachment, changing means into end and an association into bondage. As a result his spirit of mobility, freedom and capacity to quest are transformed into inertia, complacency and captivity.

This is what is undesirable and contrary to the perfection-seeking order of the world. It is a defect and a kind of non-being, not a merit or a positive mode of being. It is a dangerous malady and a disaster for man, and this is against which the Qur'an and the Nahj al-balaghah warn.

Without any doubt, Islam does not regard the material world and life in it-even if it involves the greatest material achievements-as a fitting goal of man's highest aspirations. This is because, firstly, in the Islamic world-outlook, this world is followed by the eternal and everlasting world of the Hereafter where conditions of life would be determined by the deeds, good or evil, of a person in this world. Secondly, the worth of a human being is too great to warrant his surrender to the slavery of and servitude to the material aspects of life.

That is why 'Ali (A) so often points out that the world is a good place, but only for him who knows that it is not a permanent abode, but only a road or a caravanserai.

What a good abode it is for him who would not want to make it a home. 6

This world indeed is a transit camp, whereas the Hereafter is a place of permanent abode. So take from the transit what you need for your destination. 7

From the viewpoint of humanistic philosophies there is no doubt that everything which binds man to itself and immerses him completely within itself violates his human identity by making it inert and frozen. The process of human perfection knows no limit or end, and every halt, delay and bondage is injurious to it. As we find no reason to controvert this view, we accept it without any argument. However, there are two other points that need to be discussed here.

Firstly, does the Qur'an and following it the Nahj al-balaghah confirm such a relation between man and his world? Is it true that what the Qur'an condemns is attachment and bondage to the world when taken as the ultimate end of life, an attitude which retards man's movement towards perfection and represents inertness, stagnation, and non-being?

Does the Qur'an abstain from absolutely condemning worldly ties and sentiments so long as they do not become man's ultimate goal of life and stall his progress?

Secondly, if it is admitted that human attachment to beings other than himself causes bondage and servitude, and retards the development of human personality, does it make any difference if that being is God or something else?

The Qur'an negates every form of bondage and servitude and calls man to welcome every kind of spiritual and human freedom. It does not, however, condemn servitude to God; it does not invite man to liberate himself from God in order to acquire absolute freedom.

Instead, the invitation of the Qur'an is based on liberation from everything besides God and complete surrender to Him. It is based on the rejection of obedience to anything except Him and the acceptance of submission to Him.

The expression 'La ilaha illa Allah' (There is no god except Allah) is the foundation of the Islamic faith. It implies simultaneously a negation and an affirmation, a rejection and an acceptance, and kufr and iman.

It signifies the negation, the rejection, the renunciation, and the kufr in relation to the non-God, and the affirmation, the acceptance, the submission, and the iman in relation to God. The essential testimony required by Islam is neither just a 'Yes' nor merely a 'No'; it is a combination of both a 'Yes' and a 'No'.

If the needs of the growth of the human personality demand that man should liberate himself

from every kind of bondage, servitude, and submissiveness to anything whatsoever, that he should revolt against everything that compromises his absolute freedom, that he ought to say 'No' to everything-as the Existentialists say-what difference does it make whether that thing is God or something else?

And if it is to be decided that man should renounce his freedom and adopt slavery, servitude and submission to something, what difference does it make, after all, whether it is God or something else?

Is there a difference between accepting God as the supreme ideal and accepting some other thing as the Summum Bonum? Does it mean that only God is such that servitude to Him is freedom in itself, and that losing oneself in Him is identical with the realization of one's self and the recovery of one's true identity and personality? And if this is true, what is the basis of this claim? How can it be justified?

In our opinion, here we arrive at one of the subtlest, most profound, and progressive teachings of Islam and one of the most glorious of human ideas. It is here that the sublimity of the logic of Islam and the insignificance and pettiness of other ideologies becomes evident. We shall answer these queries in the following sections.

'The World' in the Qur'an and the Nahj al-balaghah

In the last chapter we said that that which is execrable from the viewpoint of Islam in regard to man's relation with the world is that it should grow to the extent of becoming a malady and an affliction of the human soul.

It is the bondage and the enslaving attachment to the world against which Islam has waged an unrelenting struggle considering it as undesirable, not the mere relation and attachment with it. It is the life of captivity that is condemnable, not the life of freedom. The world is rejected as a goal and objective and not as a way or a means.

If the relation of man to the world develops into his servitude and subjugation, it leads to the negation and obliteration of all higher human values; man's worth lies in the greatness of his pursued ends and objectives.

Obviously, if, for instance, his ultimate objectives do not go beyond filling his belly to satisfaction, and if all his efforts and aspirations were to revolve around his stomach, his worth will not surpass that of his stomach. That is why 'Ali (A) says: "The worth of a man whose only aim is to stuff his belly is equal to that which is excreted from it."

The question is what kind of relation is appropriate between the human being and the world and what form should it have.

In one kind of relation, his personality is effaced and sacrificed to things, and since the worth of anyone in pursuit of an objective is lower than the objective itself, he is, to use a Qur'anic expression, bound to sink to the level of 'the lowest of the low' (asfal al-safilin), becoming thereby the most abject, degenerate and the most contemptible creature in the world.

He, then, loses not only his higher values but also his human identity. In the other kind of relation the world and worldly things are sacrificed at the altar of his humanity and are used to serve man while he reclaims his higher ideals. That is why it has been said in a hadith-e qudsi: O man of Adam! I have created everything for thy sake, but I have created thee for My Own Self.

We have already cited two passages from the Nahj al-balaghah indicating its position in denouncing the degenerate and distorted kind of relationship between man and the world of nature that leads to man's servitude and bondage. Here we shall quote a few verses from the Qur'an to endorse this viewpoint, and return to the Nahj al-balaghah for further relevant references.

The Qur'anic verses relating to man and the world are of two kinds: the first group of verses is of an introductory nature; that is, it lays the ground for the second group of verses. In truth, the first group can be regarded as representing the major and the minor premises of a syllogism of which the second group constitutes the conclusion.

The first set of verses consists of those which emphasize the changeability, the inconstancy and the ephemeral nature of this world. In these verses the reality of material objects is depicted as being changeable, fleeting, and transitory. For instance, the world is compared to the vegetation that sprouts from the ground.

In the beginning it is green and flourishing but little by little turns yellow, shrivels, and ultimately dries up. Then the elements break it into bits and scatter it into the wind. Such is life in the present world.

Obviously, whether man should like it or not his physical life is not much more durable than that of the reed, and is subject to a similar fate. If man must base his outlook on reality and not on fancy and if it is only through the discovery of truth and not by flight of imagination and hallucinations that he can hope to attain felicity and true happiness, then he should not forget this truth.

This set of verses constitutes a kind of a background argument for denying the importance of material things as ultimate ideals worthy of man's adoration. These verses are followed immediately by the reminder that man should know that there exists another world which is eternal and everlasting.

Don't imagine that the present life is everything that there is; and since it is not worthy of man, do not conclude that life is futile and meaningless, they remind.

The second set of verses illuminates the solution to the problem of man's relation to the world. It can be clearly seen from these verses that the execrable form of relation is one that grows to the extent of becoming a bondage, requiring man's submission, willing surrender

and servitude to the transitory things of the world. It is in these verses that the crux of the Qur'an's logic comes to light:

1. "Wealth and sons are the adornment of the worldly life; but the abiding things, the deeds of righteousness (which survive one's death and continue to benefit other people), are better with God in reward and better in hope." (18:46)

This verse, as can be seen, speaks of the ultimate aspiration of man. His ultimate aspiration is the thing for which he lives and without which life has no meaning in his eyes.

2. "Surely those who look not to encounter Us and are well-pleased with the present life and are at rest in it, and those who are heedless of Our signs, those-their refuge is the Fire, for that they have been earning." (10:7-8)

In this verse, that which is considered execrable is the absence of hope in the next life and the satisfaction and contentment with material things.

3. "So turn thou from him who turns away from Our remembrance, and desires only the present life. That is their attainment of knowledge ..." (53:29-30)

4. "And they rejoice in this world's life; and this world's life is nothing compared with the Hereafter but a temporary enjoyment." (13:26)

5. "They know an outward part of the present life, but of the Hereafter they are heedless." (30:7)

There are many other verses which have a similar meaning. In all of them the same theme recurs, that is the negation of the world as the goal and ideal of man's highest aspirations and the ultimate object of his desire, and the only source of his happiness and delight.

It is held that this form of relation between man and the world, instead of putting the world at man's disposal, sacrifices man to it and dispossesses him of his humanity.

In the Nahj al-balaghah as in the Qur'an we encounter a similar twofold argument. In the first set of statements the transitory nature of the world is depicted in profound, forceful metaphors, allegories and parables put in precise and elegant phrases which follow one another in an absorbing rhythm. In the second category, conclusions are drawn which are exactly the same as those derived by the Qur'an.

In Khutbah 32, people are at first divided into two categories: the worldly and the otherworldly. The worldly people are again divided into four groups.

In the first group are put those who are meek and tractable like sheep. They are the most innocuous of creatures, never seen to commit any overt injustice or aggression, or covert deceit or subversion. Not that they detest such things but because they lack the power and daring to carry them out.

To the second category belong those who possess both the power and the daring to carry out such ambitions. They muster their will to amass money and wealth, to acquire power and authority, or to occupy important posts and offices and do not stop short of any degree of perverseness.

Those belonging to the third group are wolves in the skins of sheep. They are slaves of the world in the garb of the otherworldly and the pious. They, sanctimoniously, hang their heads in affected humility, walk with the slow steps of a sage and dress like the devout. Through their hypocrisy they win the confidence of the people and become their most confident trustees.

To the fourth group belong those whose hearts burn regretfully with the fire of ambition but their feeling of inferiority has forced them to retire to seclusion. They put on the dress of piety and zuhd in order to conceal their deep sense of inferiority and dejection.

All the four kinds of people, regardless of the diverse degrees of their success and failure, are regarded by 'Ali (A) to constitute, spiritually, a single class on account of their commonly shared attitude: worldliness.

Why? Because all of them have one common characteristic: they are like the unfortunate birds whom the world has made its prey one way or another. Captured, they enjoy no longer the freedom of flight. They are slaves and prisoners of the world.

In the same sermon, 'Ali (A) describes the qualities of the other-worldly, the opposite group, and says: Evil is the barter of those who purchase this world at the cost of their souls.

In the eyes of 'Ali (A) the whole world with everything in it is too inferior to be the price of a man's humanity; hence it ends in the great loss of one who exchanges it for his human identity. Nasir Khusrow has the same theme in mind, when he says: Never shall I fall an easy prey to the world, For no more do its woes burden my heart.

In fact, I am the hunter and the world my prey, Though once it did pursue me on its hunt.

Though many a man has fallen pierced by its arrows, The world could not make me a target.

My soul flies over the world's tides, And no more do I worry about its waves and tides.

This theme that one should never sacrifice one's humanity for anything in the world is a theme that recurs a lot in the sayings of the leaders of the Islamic faith. Amir al-Mu'minin 'Ali (A) in his famous will to al-Imam al-Hasan (A) which is included in the section of Kutub (letters) in the Nahj al-balaghah, says: Keep your self above every contemptible thing, because, whatever it should be, it is not worth the compromise of your self.

In the account of his life given in the Bihar al-anwar, al-Imam Ja'far al Sadiq (A) is reported to have said: The price of my soul is (the good-pleasure of) its Lord The whole of creation doesn't equal its worth.

In the Tuhaf al-uqul, the following tradition is recorded: Al-Imam al-Sajjad (A) was asked, 'Who is the most important among people?' He replied, 'The one who does not regard the whole world to be equal to his worth.'

There are many traditions which deal with a similar theme, but we shall abstain from quoting more for the sake of brevity.

A close study of the Qur'an, the Nahj al-balaghah, and the sayings of other religious leaders, will reveal that Islam has not depreciated the world; rather it has elevated the station and worth of the human being as compared to it. For Islam, the world is for the sake of man and not the other way round. It aims to revive human values, not to disparage the world.

Freedom and Bondage

Our discussion about the meaning of 'worldliness' in the Nahj al-balaghah has become somewhat drawn out. However, one issue, which cannot be omitted, remains unanswered. We raised it earlier in the form of a question which we had promised to answer later.

The question was this: If attachment and bondage to anything is a kind of unhealthy condition that leads to abandonment of human values and cause stagnation, inertness, and inertia of the human personality, what difference does it make whether that thing is something material or spiritual, this worldly or otherworldly, or, as goes the saying, 'the Lord or the apple'?

It may be said that if the aim of Islam by prohibiting attachment and warning against bondage to temporal things is to safeguard the human being's identity and to rescue him from servitude and to protect him from stagnating and vegetating in life, it should have encouraged man to acquire absolute freedom and to consider every thing that compromises and confines it as kufr; for such is the standpoint of some modern schools of philosophy which consider freedom to be the essence of man's human identity.

These schools of thought equate man's human identity with his capacity to rebel and disobey every form of servitude and to assert his absolute freedom. Accordingly, every manner of bondage, confinement, and submission is, according to them, inconsistent with man's real identity and leads to self alienation.

They say that man realizes his true humanity only by refusing to submit and surrender. It is characteristic of attachment that the object of love absorbs man's attention and compromises his self-awareness.

This results in his forgetting his own self and, subsequently, this aware and free being called man, whose identity is summarized in his awareness and freedom, becomes a slavish creature devoid of freedom and self-awareness.

In forgetting his own identity, man also becomes oblivious of his human values. In this state of bondage and servitude he ceases to progress and edify his self and becomes stagnant and frozen at some point.

If Islam's philosophy of struggle against worldliness aims at the resurrection of human identity and personality, it should oppose every form of servitude and liberate man from every form of bondage. This, however, is not the case, for Islam, undeniably, advocates liberation from material for the sake of spiritual servitude. Freedom from the world is acquired for the sake of the fetters of the Hereafter and the apple is renounced for the sake of the Lord.

The 'urafa' who advise absolute freedom from attachments, however, do allow an exception.

Hafiz says: I am the slave of the magnanimity of him Who is free of the taint of attachment to anything under the blue sky Except the love of the moon-cheeked one, The joy of whose love redeems all sorrows and woes.

Openly do I declare, and am delighted to proclaim, I am the slave of Love and free from both the worlds.

Except for the Beloved's Name inscribed on the slate of my heart, The teacher did not teach me another word.

From the viewpoint of 'irfan, one must be free of both the worlds but should surrender totally to love. As Hafiz says, the tablet of the heart must be clean of every name except that of the Beloved. The heart should be cleansed of every attachment except the love of 'the moon-cheeked one', that is God, whose love brings redemption from all sorrows and woes.

However, from the viewpoint of the so-called humanistic philosophy freedom of the 'arif, being only relative, does not take us anywhere, because it is freedom from everything for total surrender and servitude to one being, whatever that may be. Servitude is after all servitude and bondage is bondage, regardless of the agent towards which it is directed.

This is the objection raised by the followers of modern humanistic philosophies. In order that the issues involved may be further illuminated, we are compelled to refer to certain philosophical issues.

First of all, one may point out that to assume that there exists a kind of human selfhood and identity and to insist that this identity should be safeguarded, in itself amounts to the negation of movement, progress and development of this selfhood, because, motion and change necessarily result in alienation from this selfhood.

This is because movement means becoming: that is, becoming something one is not; it implies continuous transcendence of selfhood and embracing of otherness. Obviously, if we accept this view, it is only by the means of immobility and stagnation that one can preserve his identity; for development necessitates self-alienation.

For this reason, some ancient philosophers defined motion in terms of otherness and self-estrangement. Accordingly, to assume that there exists a certain kind of human 'self' and to insist that this self should be safeguarded and protected from becoming 'non-self', and to speak of movement, progress, and evolution in the same breath, involves an unresolvable contradiction. Some, in order to free themselves from this contradiction, have said that man's identity lies in being devoid of any kind of 'self' whatsoever. Man, they say, is a creature absolutely undefined in his essence and free from any kind of limit, form, or essence.

His essence lies in his being without any defined essence. Man is a creature devoid of a fixed nature and essential necessity. Any attempt to define, limit and confine him amounts to depriving him of his real self and identity.

Such a view may be aptly considered poetry and flight of imagination rather than a philosophy. The absolute absence of a fixed form and essence is possible in one of the two cases: Firstly, such a being should possess infinite perfection and pure and unlimited actuality; that is, it should be a being unlimited and unconfined, encompassing all times and places and predominant over all existents, such as the Being of the Creator.

For such a being, movement and growth are impossible; because motion and development involve overcoming of defects and imperfections, whereas such a being cannot possibly be supposed to possess any imperfection. Secondly, it may apply to a being devoid of every kind of actuality and merit. That is, it should be pure possibility and sheer potentiality, a neighbour of nothingness, existing only on the remotest frontiers of existence.

It should be devoid of any innate reality and essence though capable of assuming any form or essence. Such a being, which itself absolutely undefined, is always associated with a definite being; though shapeless and colourless in itself, it exists in the protective shadow of a being possessing form, shape and colour. Such a being is what the philosophers call 'the primal matter'.

It occupies the lowest status in the hierarchy of existence and stands on the extremity of being, even as the Divine Essence, being absolute perfection, stands on the other extremity of existence-with the difference that the extremity occupied by the Divine Essence circumscribes all the contents of being. Man, like all other creatures, is situated somewhere between these two extremes and so cannot possibly lack any defined essence.

Admittedly, he is different from other creatures, but, unlike them, there is no limit to his movement towards perfection. Whereas other creatures remain confined to certain definite limits which they cannot transcend, there is no end to the possibilities of human development.

Man possesses a special kind of being. But contrary to the view of the philosophers who believe in the precedence of essence and reduce the being of every thing to its quiddity, and who deny the possibility of transcendence and essential change as being self-contradictory, and consider all changes to occur at the level of accidents, the existential nature of man, like that of any other material thing, is fluid, with the difference that its movement and fluidity know no final limits.

Some commentators of the Qur'an, in their explanations of the verse: "O people of Yathrib, there is no abiding here for you" (33:13), have generalized it to cover all humanity. They hold that man is a creature which does not move to certain and definite stage or halt; the further he moves the greater are the possibilities open to him.

Here we do not wish to indulge in discussing the legitimacy of imposing such interpretations on Qur'anic verses; we only intend to show that Muslim scholars have thought about man in such terms.

In the hadith about the Prophet's Ascension (al-mi'raj), Gabriel who accompanies the Prophet (S), at a certain point, gives up his journey declaring: "I will get burnt if I move an inch further", while the Prophet (S) leaves him behind and moves further. This is an allusion to the truth mentioned above.

Also, as we know, there is a debate among Muslim scholars about the salawat (Benedictions) upon the Holy Prophet (S) and the Ahl al-Bayt, which we make as a prayer to God to shower greater blessings upon them.

Now the debate is whether the salawat is of any benefit to the Holy Prophet (S), who is the most perfect man. In other words, is there any possibility of ascension in the Prophet's station? Or does the salawat benefit only the person who pronounces it and beseeches God to bless the Prophet (S), a favour that has already been granted?

The late Sayyid 'Ali Khan opened this debate in his commentary on al-Sahifat al-kamilah. A group of theologians believe that the Holy Prophet (S) is always ascending and climbing higher in his station, and this movement is never halted.

Yes, such is the station of man. That which makes man such is not the absolute absence of a defined essence but a certain kind of essence which is ordinarily referred to as 'human nature' and other similar expressions.

Man does not have any ultimate limits but he has a path. The Qur'an lays great emphasis on what it calls the Straight Path, which is an unambiguous path before man. Man is not constrained by stages so as to be forced to stop at every stage in his journey. Instead there is an orbit in which he should move. This is the orbit of human perfection which is different from those of the animals. This means the movement in a specified orbit, a movement which is orderly not haphazard.

The Existentialist Viewpoint

Existentialism has been rightly criticized for its refusal to acknowledge any kind of determination or definition of the human nature, for its considering every determination (even in the form of path or orbit) as contrary to his humanity, and for its emphasis on his absolute freedom and capacity for rebellion; for this philosophy necessarily leads to the breakdown of social morality and the negation of the individual's commitments and responsibilities.

Does Evolution Involve Self-Alienation?

Now returning to what we said earlier, does movement and evolution necessitate alienation from one's self? Should every being, in order to remain itself, abstain from change and

evolution? Does it mean that either man should retain his human identity or, if he chooses an evolutionary course, become something alien to his essence?

The answer is that the true evolution of anything is a movement towards the perfect state which conforms to its nature. In other words, the transformations during movement on the straight path of nature by no means necessitate any loss of specific identity.

That which constitutes the real self of a being is its existence, not its essence. Accordingly, any change in essence does not imply mutation of the 'self' into a 'non-self'. Mulla Sadra, who is the champion of this philosophy, holds that man does not have any definite essence; rather every developing being passing through the stages of its evolution is not a single species but a plurality of species.

The relation of an imperfect being with its ultimate stage of perfection is not a relation of otherness; rather it is a relation of the thing to itself. It is the relation of an imperfect self to the perfect self. A thing while evolving toward its perfect state is in movement from its self to its self. In a sense, it can be said to be in movement from the non-self towards its true self.

A seed that breaks the ground and sprouts leaves, and sends out branches and flowers, does not move from the self to the non-self. If it were aware of itself and aware of its ultimate evolution, it would not feel self alienated.

That is why the love of true self perfection is the love of a higher self, and a praiseworthy love is in itself a desirable and praiseworthy egotism or self-love. Shaykh al-'Ishraq Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi has an elegant ruba'i on this subject: Beware lest you lose the wisdom 's thread, And lose your self for the sake of water and bread.

You are the traveller, the way, the destination, Beware lest you lose the path from the self to the self.

On the basis of what has been said it can be surmised that there is a great difference between desiring God, the movement towards God, the love of God, the attachment and the servitude to God and submission to Him, and the love, the submission, and the servitude to other things. The servitude to God is freedom itself.

It is the only relation and tie which does not stagnate the human personality or make it inert and immobile. It is the only kind of worship which does not imply self-forgetfulness and self-alienation. **Why? Because He is the Absolute Perfection and the Ultimate Goal and the Destination of all existents: 'And unto thy Lord will be the end of all things' (53:42).**

Now we have reached a point from where we can proceed to explain the position of the Qur'an that forgetting God is forgetting one's own self and the separation from God is absolute annihilation.