

## Suratul Baqarah: Verses 168 – 171

(١٦٨) يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ كُلُوا مِمَّا فِي الْأَرْضِ ضِحًا حَلَالًا طَيِّبًا وَلَا تَتَّبِعُوا خُطُوَاتِ الشَّيْطَانِ إِنَّهُ لَكُمْ عَدُوٌّ مُبِينٌ

(١٦٩) إِنَّمَا يَأْمُرُكُمْ بِالسُّوءِ وَالْفَحْشَاءِ وَأَنْ تَقُولُوا عَلَى اللَّهِ مَا لَا تَعْلَمُونَ

(١٧٠) وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمْ اتَّبِعُوا مَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ قَالُوا بَلْ نَتَّبِعُ مَا أَلْفَيْنَا عَلَيْهِ آبَاءَنَا أُولَئِكَ كَانَ آبَاؤُهُمْ لَا يَعْقِلُونَ شَيْئًا وَلَا يَهْتَدُونَ

(١٧١) وَمَثَلُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا كَمَثَلِ الَّذِي يَنْعِقُ بِمَا لَا يَسْمَعُ إِلَّا دُعَاءً وَنِدَاءً صُمٌّ بُكْمٌ عُمْى فَهُمْ لَا يَعْقِلُونَ

***O men! eat the lawful (and) good things out of what is in the earth, and do not follow the footsteps of the Satan, surely he is your open enemy (168).***

***He only enjoins you evil and indecency, and that you may speak against Allah what you do not know (169).***

***And when it is said to them: “Follow what Allah has revealed,” they say: “Nay! we follow what we found our fathers upon.” What! and though their fathers had no sense at all, nor did they follow***

*the right way* (170).

*And the parable of those who disbelieve is as the parable of one who calls out to that which hears no more than a call and cry; deaf, dumb* (and) *blind, so they do not understand* (171).

## Commentary

**Qur'an: O men! eat the lawful** (and) **good things out of what is in the earth... what you do not know:** *al-Halal* (أَلْحَلَّالُ) = lawful) is opposite of *al-haram* (أَلْحَرَامُ) = forbidden); *al-hill* (أَلْحِلُّ) is used as opposite of *al-hurmah* (أَلْحُرْمَةُ) = prohibition), *al-haram* (أَلْحَرَمُ) = sanctuary); while *al-hall* (أَلْحَلُّ) = to untie) is opposite of *al-'aqd* (أَلْعَقْدُ) = to tie).

All these usages of *al-hill* allude to freedom of a thing in its action and effect. *at-Tayyib* (أَلطَّيِّبُ) = good) is opposite of *al-khabith* (أَلْخَبِيثُ) = bad, evil), and basically means “agreeable”; a good speech is that which is agreeable to the hearing; a good perfume is agreeable to the sense of smelling; a good place or house is agreeable to the people residing therein.

*al-Khutuwat* (أَلْخَطَوَاتُ) is plural of *al-khutwah* (أَلْخَطْوَةُ) = step, pace, stride). Some reciters have read it as *al-khatawat* (أَلْخَطَوَاتُ) which is plural of *al-khatwah* (أَلْخَطْوَةُ) = one step).

The phrase, “the footsteps of the Satan” refers to things leading to the Satanic aim, as footsteps lead to the walker's aim and destination. The Satan's aim is to mislead with polytheism; therefore, his footsteps are the things which lead to polytheism, and take the walker away from Allah.

*al-Amr* (أَلْأَمْرُ) = to enjoin); the enjoiner imposes his own will on the enjoined, so that the latter does what the former wants. The Satan enjoins and orders by devilish insinuations and temptations encouraging man to do what the Satan wants. *as-Su* (أَلْسُوءُ) = evil) refers to the thing or action which is repugnant and repulsive to society.

When it exceeds that limit, it becomes *al-fahsha* (أَلْفَحْشَاءُ) = indecency); it is a *masdar* like *as-sarra* (أَلْسَرَاءُ) = prosperity; happiness) and *ad-Darra* (أَلضَّرَاءُ) = adversity; distress).

Allah has addressed these verses to all the men in general, because the order promulgated therein concerns all. As for the polytheists, they followed some self-imposed taboo, and falsely ascribed its promulgation to Allah.

It is reported, for example, that the tribes of Thaqif, Khuza'ah, Banu 'Amir ibn Sa'sa'ah and Banu Madlaj had forbidden themselves certain things of tilth and cattle, as well as some categories of camels, forging a lie against Allah. Similar baseless taboos are found in other countries and societies too.

Coming to the believers, there was a possibility that even after accepting Islam, some myths and superstitions might continue in their society, because of hereditary influence and national tradition. As a

matter of fact, every new spiritual or temporal system concentrates in the beginning on eradicating and destroying the roots of the old system.

After it is done, and if by that time it is left with some vitality and vigour – by good training and learning – then it starts mopping up operation by obliterating and erasing the remnants of that old system.

Otherwise, the residue of that system is mixed with the new one, and the resulting mixture becomes a hybrid – neither this nor that.

Allah ordered the people to eat from what is in the earth. To eat is to swallow after chewing. Sometimes the word “eating” is allegorically used for general usufruct of a property, for unrestricted right of its disposal, because eating is the basic activity of man, the main pillar of his life. For example, Allah says:

***... do not swallow up your property among yourselves by wrongful means, except that it be trading by your mutual consent...*** (4:29).

The verse under discussion may easily be interpreted in this wider sense, because it is general, not restricted. It would therefore mean:

Eat, make use of, and enjoy the usufruct of the bounties of Allah that are in the earth, and which the earth has prepared and kept in store for you by permission of Allah; and it should be in a lawful and proper way. But you should see that there is no snag or hindrance in eating or using it, either from your own nature or from the nature of the earth.

For example, there are some things which by their nature cannot be eaten; there are others which man by his nature does not want to eat; and lastly there are things which are eatable and useable, but your own nature rejects them and does not want to touch them at all, for example, a food that was obtained by unlawful means.

Thus, the words of Allah, “eat the lawful (and) good things out of what is in the earth”, promulgate general permission of eating all the lawful and good things of the earth, without any condition, without any restriction.

But the next sentence, “and do not follow the footsteps of the Satan”, shows that there are some things (related to this lawful and good eating) which are called “the footsteps of the Satan”.

They are of two categories: either refraining from some food as a result of following the Satan, or eating it for the same reason. Thereafter, Allah mentions a general principle applicable to all that is done for following the Satan, that it is evil and indecency, as well as speaking against Allah what one does not know.

Desisting from a food is not allowed except when Allah is pleased with such abstaining; like-wise one should not audaciously use any thing without the per-mission of Allah. Eating out of what is in the earth is not lawful and good unless Allah permits and allows it.

And He has allowed it in this and similar verses. Also, one should ascertain that a particular thing is not forbidden or prohibited by Allah, as He says after a few verses:

***He has only forbidden you what dies of itself, and blood, and flesh of swine...*** (2:173).

The meaning of the verse then would be as follows, and Allah knows better: Eat out of what is in the earth, from the bounties of Allah which He has created for you, as He has made them lawful and good for you; and do not leave some of them abstaining from them, because that would be evil and indecency, and you would be guilty of speaking against Allah what you do not know; it would be tantamount to making your own law against the law of Allah; and you would thus be following the footsteps of the Satan.

The verse thus shows that:

First: Man has been given a general permission for unrestricted use of all that is in the earth – except the things excluded from this general rule by other proofs. Allah may forbid a thing as easily as He permits it.

Second: One who abstains, without any reasonable proof, from that which Allah has made lawful, in fact promulgates his own law – which he is forbidden to do.

**Third:** Following the footsteps of the Satan means worshipping Allah in a way Allah has not allowed, by a method He has not approved. Allah has not forbidden any walking except that in which man puts his foot in the footsteps of the Satan, making his walk conform with that of the Satan; thus he would be following the Satan's footsteps.

It may be inferred from above that, although the reason given of this prohibition (***He only enjoins you evil and indecency...***) demands that man should neither proceed to do any thing without knowledge, nor refrain from any thing without knowledge; but this is not what this verse is meant for; because it is not following the footsteps of the Satan, though it is following the Satan.

**Qur'an: *He only enjoins you evil and indecency, and that you may speak against Allah what you do not know:*** Evil and indecency are attributes of action, *vis-à-vis*, speech. It shows that what the Satan enjoins is confined to the action that is evil and indecency, and the word that is spoken without knowledge.

**Qur'an: *And when it is said to them, "Follow what Allah has revealed," they say: "Nay! we follow what we found our fathers upon":*** *al-Ilfa'* (الْإِنْفَاءُ) = to find). The verse supports what we have inferred from the preceding verse, regarding the footsteps of the Satan.

**Qur'an: *What! and though their fathers had no sense at all, nor did they follow the right way:*** It is rebuttal of their saying; it shows that they speak without knowledge and without ascertaining the truth; and it is a thing which reason rejects.

They say, “We follow what we found our fathers upon.” It is an unconditional declaration – they intend to follow their fathers in all conditions, without looking at their qualifications and credentials.

They are determined to follow their fathers even if they had no sense, even if they had gone astray. They claimed that whatever their fathers did was correct. But such claim, such declaration, is just a talk without knowing; it leads one to say what no sensible person would ever say – if his attention was drawn to its absurdity.

There would be no blame on them if they followed their fathers only in those things which they (the fathers) had knowledge of, and concerning which they followed the right way; if they followed them in such things knowing well that their fathers had their knowledge and had been on right way, it would not be counted as following without knowledge.

It shows that the phrase, “What! and though their fathers had no sense at all, nor did they follow the right way,” is not intended as an exaggeration, although one may think that negation of all sense and knowledge from their fathers – who certainly knew many things concerning their life and livelihood – was intended as an exaggeration.

But it is not so. Actually, the verse exposes the absurdity of their unconditional declaration by pointing out a situation in which no one would allow the following.

**Qur’an: And the parable of those who disbelieve is as the parable of one who calls out to that which hears no more than a call and cry: *al-Mathal* (الْمَثَلُ) = proverb; parable, adage); also it is used for attribute and comparison, as Allah says:**

***See how they coin comparisons for thee. So they have gone astray, therefore they shall not be able to find a way* (25:9).**

*an-Na’iq* (النَّعِيقُ) = admonishing cry of a shepherd to his sheep); *an-nida’* (النِّدَاءُ) = to call) is *masdar* of *nada*, *yunadi*, *munadatan* (مُنَادَاةٌ، يُنَادِي، نَادَى = he called, he calls, to call); it is more particular than *ad-du’a’* (الدُّعَاءُ) = to call), because *an-nida’* is reserved for calling in a loud voice, while *ad-du’a’* is general.

The meaning of the verse is as follows, and Allah knows better: And O Prophet! your parable, when you call the unbelievers to the truth, is like a man who calls out to the animals while the animals do not understand what he says, except that they hear a call and cry, and stop in their tracks as soon as they hear it without understanding any thing spoken.

The unbelievers are, therefore, deaf, they do not hear any talk which would benefit them; dumb, not speaking any sensible word; blind, not seeing any worthwhile thing. Thus they do not understand any thing, because their windows of understanding are closed shut.

It appears that there is a sort of reversal in this parable. Although it begins as a parable of those who disbelieve, it changes to describe the shepherd, the caller to guidance; it is in fact the likeness of the

Prophet not of those who were being called by him to the right path.

But as the three adjectives deducted from it (**deaf, dumb [and] blind, so they do not understand,**) were attributes of the disbelievers – not of him who was calling them to the truth – it was highly appropriate to ascribe the parable to the disbelievers, and not to the Messenger of Allah (S). Thus, there appears to be a reversal in the parable.

## Traditions

'Abdu 'r-Rahman says: "I asked Abu 'Abdillah about a man who vowed to slaughter his child. He said: 'That is from the footsteps of the Satan.' " (*at-Tahdhib*)

Mansur ibn Hazim said: "Abu Abdillah (a.s.) said to me: 'Have not you heard about Tariq? Verily, Tariq was a cattle-dealer in Medina. He came to Abu Ja'far and said: "O Abu Ja'far! I have taken an oath by divorce (of my wives), emancipation (of my slaves) and vow." Thereupon, (Abu Ja'far, a.s.) said to Him: "O Tariq! verily this is from the footsteps of the Satan." ' "

Abu Ja'far (a.s.) said: "Every oath taken in the name of other than Allah, is from the footsteps of the Satan." (*al-'Ayyashi*)

Imam as-Sadiq (a.s.) said: "When a man takes oath for not doing a thing – while what he has sworn against, its doing is better than its leaving – then he should do that which is better; and there is no penalty on him; surely it (i.e., such oath) is only from the footsteps of the Satan." (*al-Kafi*)

**The author says:** The traditions, as you see, interpret the footsteps of the Satan as the deeds supposed to bring one nearer to Allah, while in fact they are not so, because the *shari'ah* does not recognize them – as we have explained above.

Of course, as for the divorce, etc. (mentioned in the second tradition), there is an additional reason for the invalidity of such oaths; and that is making it conditional on some contingency in future; and it is against the principle of immediate and unconditional effecting of such transactions.

(It is a topic of jurisprudence.) Oath in the name of other than Allah refers to an oath which has no validity in the *shari'ah*, and to swearing by what Allah has not sworn by and to which He has given no excellence.

al-Baqir (a.s.) said about the words of Allah, **And the parable of those who disbelieve is as the parable of one who calls out...**: "That is, their likeness when you call them to the faith is like the caller who calls out to the cattle which understands nothing other than hearing a voice."

# A Moral and Sociological Discourse on Blind Imitation

Opinions and beliefs are of two kinds, which we shall call theoretical and practical knowledges. The theoretical knowledge is the one not directly related to action, for example, theorems of geometry, propositions of physics and issues of metaphysics.

Practical knowledge, on the other hand, is directly related to action, for example, the moral teachings concerned with what to do and what not to do.

The only way to acquire the theoretical knowledge is through rational proofs or the senses. The only way to get the practical knowledge is to follow that which leads to man's felicity, and to refrain from that which leads to infelicity or hinders the felicity.

Apart from that, it is merely a superstition to believe in what is not known to be the truth and fact (in theoretical knowledge) and what is not known to be good or evil (in practical knowledge).

Man, when left to his pristine nature, does not accept superstitious ideas based on blindness and ignorance. His opinions are based on the demands of nature which wants him to find out the causes of the things, and exhorts him to strive for real perfection.

But sometimes his sentiments and feelings aroused by imagination – and especially the fear and the hope – make him to believe in myths and superstitions. What happens is this: Imagination creates some images in his mind which produce fear or hope.

That feeling of fear or hope then preserves that image and does not let the psyche forget it. Let us say, a man finds himself in a valley; he is alone and the moonless night is pitch-dark; he cannot see his own hands.

He has no light to illuminate his surroundings, no companion to share his thoughts with. Then his imagination takes hold of him. Every formless figure appears to him as a fearful ugly ghost intent on putting him to death.

Then he sees the ghouls moving, coming and going ascending to the skies and descending to the earth. The imagination keeps producing these figures and he remains awake, frightened out of his wits.

Later on, he describes that horrifying experience to someone, graphically describing the devilish antics of those ghosts and ghouls, and the hearer stands aghast, his eye askance. In this way the 'belief' in these things spreads – while in fact it is just an imaginary "thing" having no reality at all.

Sometimes this superstition reawakens the instinct of self-defence in man, and he devises some rites to ward off the harmful effects of this imaginary "being"; and exhorts others to do like-wise, so that they too would be safe. Thus, a superstitious rite takes root in the society and grows.

Man, from the earliest days of his existence, has remained in the tight grip of myths and superstitions; and the situation is not different even today. And it is not confined to the eastern nations – as many people think. It is prevalent among westerners in equal, if not greater, degree.

The elite group, that is, the scholars, have been trying, since time immemorial, to eradicate the rites and ceremonials arising from deep-rooted superstitions which have kept the common people enthralled. They try to awaken the public to the reality – but to no avail.

It is because man has never been able to free himself from following the others in theoretical views and real knowledge on one side, and sentiments and feelings on the other. We can see that the treatment has not been successful, and the situation goes from bad to worse.

The most astonishing is the myth prevalent today among the scientists and sociologists. They say that the foundation of modern science is laid on the senses and experiment; it rejects every thing that is not perceivable through the senses and which cannot be experimented upon.

Also, according to them, the civilization is based on the urge of perfection; it seeks perfection in every possible direction, as much as it can.

But strangely enough, this view itself is a myth which they are following. The natural sciences look only at the factors and faculties of the nature. In other words, these material sciences search only for the hitherto unknown peculiarities of the matter.

So far as the things beyond matter are concerned, these material sciences have no way to reject or refute them – as they are beyond their scope, outside their jurisdiction. As such it is a clear superstition and myth to reject metaphysical and immaterial things – just because the material sciences (which admittedly cannot see beyond matter) have not been able to see those things which are admittedly beyond the reach of matter.

Likewise, it is another myth to base the civilization on the above-mentioned urge of perfection of the society. This perfection of society, this felicity of civilization, often demands sacrifices from its members.

It becomes necessary for some people to offer their individual happiness on the altar of the society; they lose their all, including the lives, in defence of their country or their cause; an individual is thus deprived of his happiness and his life in order that the society may be saved.

Obviously, no man will voluntarily accept these personal privations unless he believes in this pursuit of society's perfection, and unless he looks at that sacrifice itself as a personal perfection. But that sacrifice is not a perfection for himself – it is a nullity, a deprivation.

Of course, it may be a perfection – if we accept it as such – for the society, *per se*, not for himself. But man had invented society as an instrument for his own benefit; he had not bargained that the role would be reversed and he would be used as a tool for the society's benefit.

It is to overcome this basic difficulty that the societies have invented some myths. They say to their members that man by sacrificing himself in the way of the society earns eternity because his good name is always remembered with reverence and affection – and man should strive for that eternal life. But evidently it is nothing but a story, a myth.

Where is this supposed life once the man is dead? There is nothing for him except death and oblivion. But the society says, it is life – merely a name without any substance!

Also, they say: It is necessary for man to obey the laws even if they are tough and irksome to him. He should patiently bear the loss of some of his happiness, some of the things he earnestly desires, in order that the society may prosper, the civilization may attain its perfection.

In this way, that partial deprivation will lead to his own perfection – through the perfection of the society. He is thus made to believe that the perfection of the society is his own perfection. But it is merely a myth.

The perfection of the society may be the man's perfection, when both perfections go hand in hand, when both are one and the same. Otherwise, not.

Why should a man look at society's perfection as his own perfection, and to good remembrance as his lasting glory; and especially so if he can easily attain to his aims and goals – even if through injustice and oppression – and when his strength and power surpasses that of his competitors?

The same question may be asked in respect of a powerful nation, *vis-à-vis*, the others. And it is not just a theoretical question. We see every day how the powerful nations go on exploiting the weaker ones.

These super powers tread on the prone bodies of the weaker peoples, crush their dignity and self-respect, expropriate their natural resources, and put the whole populace under their yoke. (Once it was called imperialism and colonialism, now it is neo-colonialism.

Result in both cases is the same: weaker people are subjugated and enslaved. (They say they are there to help these people in their difficulties – and in this process they rob them of their freedom and dignity.) They cure a disease by putting the patient to death.

What is the guidance given by the Qur'an in this respect? In theoretical field, it tells man to follow the commandments of Allah and not to speak without knowledge. In practical affairs, it directs him to seek only what is pleasing to Allah: if it tallies with his own desires, then he shall get happiness of both worlds; if it does not agree with it, if he has to sacrifice his own wish for the pleasure of Allah, then he shall get great reward from Allah; and what is with Allah is better and everlasting.

Also, the materialist say: Belief in religion is a blind following which the science does not allow. Such belief is a remnant of the superstitions of the second of the four periods through which mankind has passed.

There was first the period of mythology, followed by that of religion. Then came the era of philosophy which was replaced by that of science. Presently, we are living in this era, and it follows the knowledge and rejects myths and superstitions.

Comment: This in itself is a myth. These people talk without knowledge.

They have said: "Belief in religion is a blind following." The fact is otherwise. Religion is a composite entity; it consists of the gnosis of the beginning and final destination of man, the laws regulating the rites of worship and social dealings (which are based on revelations brought by the prophets whose truth was definitely proved by rational proofs), and some information given by the same truthful prophets.

Evidently, when one follows the religion he follows the knowledge, because the truth of the prophet concerned was fully established by proofs.

We have written something on the topic of "following", under the verse:

***Surely Allah commands you that you should sacrifice a cow*** (2:67).

There is another amusing aspect of this objection. This disparaging condemnation comes from those who have got nothing in their hands except blind imitation and who uncritically follow their desire, without ascertaining its value.

This aping encompasses their whole being, right from their principles of life to the social customs – be it food or drink, dress or residence, marriage or other social relations. Of course, they have given a new name to this imitation: They say, they have adopted the ways of the developed nations.

Thus the blind following remains firmly-rooted in society, but the name is discarded; the bottle is the same, the label has been changed. The result: "Do as the Romans do" becomes a scientific adage, a sign of social advancement; and:

***do not follow desire, lest it should lead you astray...*** (38:26)

is treated as a blind religious following, a superstitious view!!

They have divided the progress of human species into four stages. But what we definitely know concerning the history of philosophy and religions refutes this division. It is wrong to say that philosophy came after religion. Ibrahim (a.s.) brought his religion long after the rise of philosophy in India, Egypt and Chaldea; and the religion of 'Isa (a.s.) came after the Greek philosophy.

Likewise, the religion of Muhammad (S), that is, Islam, was promulgated after the philosophy of Greece and Alexandria. In short, philosophy reached its zenith long before the rise of religion. We have also mentioned earlier that the religion of monotheism was the first and earliest of all religions and systems.

The Qur'an divides the path of human progress in a different way. There were two periods only: First, the

period of simplicity when all were of one nation, and then the period when materialism and revolt took its hold. We shall describe it in detail under the verse:

***Mankind was but one nation; so Allah sent the prophets...*** (2:213).

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