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Chapter 2: Knowledge and Faith

Relation Between Knowledge and Faith

We have studied the relation between man's humanity and his animality, in other words, the relation between man's cultural and spiritual life and his material life. It is now clear that man's humanity has an independent existence and is not a mere reflection of his animal life.

It is also clear that knowledge and faith are the two basic parts of the humanity of man. Now let us see what mutual relation these two facets of humanity have or can have.

Unfortunately certain parts of the Old Testament have in the Christian world created an idea of contradiction between knowledge and faith. This idea which has cost dearly to knowledge and faith both has its root in the Book of Genesis of the Old Testament.

Narrating the story of Adam and the Forbidden Tree, the Book of Genesis, Chapter II, verses 16 and 17 says:

"And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die".

In the Chapter III, verses 1 – 7 it says:

"Now the serpent was more subtile than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?"

And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden:

But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die. And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely for God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as

gods, knowing good and evil.

And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat.

And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons".

In the verse 22 – 23 of the same chapter it says:

"And the Lord God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever: "1

According to this conception of man, God, knowledge and disobedience, God wants that man should not be aware of good and evil. The Forbidden Tree is the tree of knowledge. Man attains knowledge only if he rebels against God's command (disobeys the teachings of religion and the Prophets), but for that very reason he is driven out of God's Heaven.

On the basis of this conception all evil insinuations are those of knowledge, and reason is the insinuating Devil.

In contrast, we learn from the Holy Qur'an that Allah taught all names (realities) to Adam and then ordered the angels to prostrate themselves before him. The Devil was condemned because he refused to prostrate himself before the vicegerent of Allah, who was aware of the realities. The Prophetic traditions have told us that the Forbidden Tree was that of avarice, greed and such like things, that is the things related to the animality of Adam, not to his humanity. The insinuating Devil always insinuates what is against reason and what answers the base desires. It is concupiscence and not reason that represents the Devil within man. Contrary to all this what we find in the Book of Genesis is really very amazing.

It is this conception which has divided the European history of culture during the past 1500 years into two distinct periods, namely the age of faith and the age of science, and has placed science and faith in opposition to each other.

In contrast the Islamic history of culture is divided into the period of advancement of knowledge and faith and the period in which both of them declined together. We Muslims should keep ourselves away from the wrong conception which has caused an irreparable loss to knowledge, faith and humanity, and must not blindly regard the contradiction between knowledge and faith as an indisputable fact.

We now propose to make an analytical study of this question and see whether each of these two facets of humanity exclusively belongs to a distinct period or age, and whether man in every age is condemned to be only a semi-man and always to suffer the evils ensuing either from ignorance or from infidelity.

As you will see every faith is inevitably based on a particular way of thinking and a special conception of cosmos. There is no doubt that many conceptions and interpretations of the world, though they may be the basis of a faith, are not acceptable because they are not in consonance with rational and scientific principles. Therefore the question is whether there exists any conception of the world and interpretation of life which is rational and at the same time fit to be the infrastructure of a felicitous faith.

If it is found that such a conception does exist, then there is no reason why man should be supposed to be condemned for ever to suffer the evils ensuing either from ignorance or infidelity. The relation between knowledge and faith can be discussed from two angles. One of them is to see whether there exists a faith, producing conception which arouses faith and is rational too, or all the ideas which are scientific are contrary to faith, give no hope and produce no optimism. We will discuss this question later under the heading, **Conception of Cosmos**.

The second angle from which we can discuss the relation between faith and knowledge is the question as to how each of these two affects man. Does knowledge draw us to one thing and faith to something contradictory to that? Does knowledge want to mould us in one way and faith in another? Or do faith and knowledge supplement each other, taking part in making harmonious whole of us? Let us see what knowledge gives us and what faith gives.

Knowledge gives us light and power; faith gives us love, hope and warmth. Knowledge helps make implements and appliances and accelerates progress; faith determines the purpose of human efforts and gives direction to them. Knowledge brings about outer revolution; faith causes inner revolution. Knowledge makes the world man's world; faith makes life the life of humanity. Knowledge expands the existence of man horizontally; faith lifts it up vertically. Knowledge trains man's temperament; faith reforms man. Both knowledge and faith give power to man; but the power given by faith is continuous, whereas the power given by knowledge is disjointed. Knowledge is beauty; faith is beauty too. But knowledge beautifies reason and thought; faith beautifies spirit and feeling. Both knowledge and faith give man security. But knowledge provides outer security, whereas faith provides inner security. Knowledge gives protection against diseases, floods, earthquakes and storms. Faith provides security against restlessness, loneliness, sense of insecurity and low thinking. Knowledge harmonizes the world with man, faith harmonizes man with himself.

The need of man to both knowledge and faith has attracted the attention of religious as well as secular thinkers.

Dr Muhammad Iqbal says:

"Humanity needs three things today, a spiritual interpretation of the universe, spiritual emancipation of the individual, and basic principles of a universal import directing the evolution of human society on a spiritual basis.

Modern Europe has, no doubt, built a realistic system on these lines, but experience shows that truth

revealed through pure reason is incapable of bringing that fire of living conviction which personal revelation alone can bring. This is the reason why pure thought has so little influenced man while religion has always elevated individuals and transformed the societies. The idealism of Europe never became a living factor in her life and the result is a perverted ego seeking itself through mutually intolerant democracies whose sole function is to exploit the poor in the interest of the rich. Believe me, Europe today is the greatest hindrance in the way of man's ethical advancement. The Muslim, on the other hand, is in possession of these ultimate ideas on the basis of a revelation, which, speaking from the inmost depths of life, internalizes its own apparent externality. With him the spiritual basis of life is a matter of conviction, for which even the least enlightened man among us can lay down his life". (*Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*).

Will Durant, the well-known author of the History of Civilization, despite his being a non-religious man, says:

"The ancient world differed from the new machine world only in means, not in aims. What will you say if it is found that all our progress consists in the improvement of methods and means and not in the betterment of the aims and goals?"²

He also says, "Wealth is boring; reason and wisdom are only a cold dim light. It is only love which with indescribable tenderness warms the hearts".³

It is now more or less realized that scienticism or pure scientific training is not to make a full man. It can produce a semi-man not a full-fledged one. This training turns out raw material of man, not a finished man. It can produce a strong, healthy and the unilateral man but not a virtuous and multilateral being. It is now recognized by all that the period of pure science has now come to an end. Society is now threatened with an idealistic vacuum. Some people want to fill this vacuum with pure philosophy and some others are seeking the help of literature, art and humanitarian sciences for this purpose.

In our country also there is a suggestion to fill the gap with humanizing literature, especially the mystic literature as produced by Mowlawi, Sa'di and Hafiz. The proponents of this scheme forget that this literature itself has been inspired by religion and its humanizing spirit, which has made it attractive, is Islamic. Otherwise how is it that some modern literature in spite of its loud claim of being humanistic, is so insipid, and lacking in spirit and attractiveness. In fact the human content of our mystic literature is the result of its Islamic conception of the universe and man. If we take the Islamic spirit out of these masterpieces, nothing but a carcass of them will be left.

Will Durant is one of those who realizes the existence of vacuum. He suggests that literature, philosophy and art should fill the gap. He says: "The damage done to our schools and colleges is mostly due to the education theory of Spencer,⁴ who has defined education as bringing man in harmony with his environment. This definition is lifeless and mechanical, and it stems from the philosophy of the superiority of mechanics. Every creative spirit and brain is averse to it. The result is that our schools and

colleges have been filled with theoretical and mechanical sciences and have remained devoid of such subjects as literature, history, philosophy and art, which are being considered to be useless. An education which is purely scientific, can produce nothing except tools. It alienates man from beauty and estranges; him from wisdom. It would have been better for the world if Spencer had not written a book".

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It is very surprising that though Will Durant admits that this vacuum is in the first place an idealistic one, resulting from a sort, of wrong thinking and lack of faith in human aims and goals, he is still of the opinion that the problem can be solved by anything non-material though it may be merely imaginative. He thinks that occupation with history, art, beauty, poetry and music can fill a vacuum originating from the depths of man's instinct of looking for an ideal and seeking perfection.

Can Knowledge and Faith Take the Place of Each Other?

We have learnt that there is no contradiction between faith and knowledge. They rather supplement each other. Now there arises one more question: Is it possible that they fill the place of each other?

This question need not be answered elaborately for we already know the respective roles of faith and knowledge. It is evident that knowledge cannot take the place of faith which gives love and hope besides light and power. Faith elevates our desires, and in addition to helping us in realizing our aims and objects, removes the element of selfishness and individualism from our desires and ideals and puts them on the basis of love and spiritual and moral relations. Besides being a tool in our hands, it basically changes our essence. Similarly faith also cannot fill the place of knowledge, which makes us familiar with nature, reveals its laws to us and makes us aware of ourselves.

Historical experience has shown that separation between knowledge and faith has caused irreparable losses. Faith should be identified in the light of knowledge, which saves it from being mixed up with myths. Faith without knowledge ends in stagnation and blind prejudice, and can achieve no purpose. Where there is no knowledge, faith of the believer becomes a tool in the hands of the clever hypocrites. We saw an example, of this contingency in the case of the Khawarij (Kharijites) of the early Islamic era. Other examples in various forms we have seen in later periods and are still seeing.

Knowledge without faith is a sharp sword in the hand of a drunken brute. It is a lamp in the hand of a thief to help him pick up the best articles at midnight. That is why there is not the least difference in the nature and conduct of the faithless man of today who has knowledge and the faithless man of yesterday who had no knowledge. After all what is the difference between the Churchills, Johnsons, Nixons and Stalins of today and the Pharaohs, Genghis Khans and Attilas of yore?

It may be said that as knowledge is light as well as power, it has no special and exclusive application to the external world. It illuminates our internal world also and consequently gives us power to change it. Therefore knowledge can make the world and man both. It can perform its own task, that is world-

making as well as the task of belief, that is man making. The answer is that all this is true, but the basic point is that knowledge is a sort of implement and its use depends on the will of man. Whatever man does, he can do that in a better way with the help of knowledge. That is why we say that knowledge is helpful in securing objectives and traversing the path man chooses for himself.

It is obvious that implements are used for achieving a predetermined goal. Now the question is on what basis the goal should be determined?

As we know, by nature man is an animal. Humanity is his acquired quality. In other words, human talents of man are to be nurtured and promoted gradually in the light of faith. By his nature man moves towards his animal and selfish objectives which are material and individualistic. He employs the implements available to him for this purpose. Hence he is in need of a separate driving force which may neither be his objective nor his tool. He needs a force which may explode him from within and put his hidden talents into action. He requires a force which may bring about a revolution in his conscience and give him a new orientation.

This task cannot be performed by discovery and knowledge of the laws governing man and nature. The performance of this task is possible only if the sanctity and importance of certain values are embedded in the soul of man. For this purpose man must have a number of noble tendencies ensuing from a particular way of thinking and certain conceptions of the universe and man. These conceptions and the contents of their dimensions and proofs cannot be made available in any laboratory, and, as we shall explain, are out of the reach of science.

The past and present history has shown what evil consequences the dissociation of knowledge and faith from each other has produced. Where there was faith but no knowledge, the efforts of the humanitarian people were directed to the matters which either were not much fruitful or did not produce good results. These efforts were often the source of prejudices and obscurantism, and occasionally resulted in harmful conflicts.

Where there has been knowledge but faith has been lacking, as in the case of some modern societies, the entire force of knowledge has been used to serve the cause of self-aggrandizement, amassing wealth, and satisfying the lust of power, exploitation, subjugation and craftiness.

The past two or three centuries may be regarded as the period of attaching too much importance to scientific knowledge and ignoring faith. Many intellectuals thought that all human problems would be solved by science, but experience has proved the contrary. Today there is no intellectual denying that man needs some sort of faith. Even if that faith is not religious, it is bound to be ultra-scientific. Bertrand Russell has materialistic outlook, yet he admits that: "The work that merely aims at earning income shall not produce good results. For this purpose one should adopt a profession that implants in the individual a faith, a purpose and a goal".⁶

Today the materialists feel compelled to claim that they are philosophically materialists and morally

idealists. In other words they say that they are materialists from theoretical point of view and spiritualists from practical and idealistic point of view. Anyhow, the problem remains as to how it is possible that a man should be a materialist theoretically and a spiritualist practically? The materialists themselves should answer this question.

George Sarton, the world famous scientist and the author of the well-known book, *History of Science*, describing the inability of science to humanize the mutual relations of mankind and underlining man's urgent need of the force of faith, says: "In certain fields science has made wonderful progress. But in other fields related to the mutual relations of human beings, for example the fields of national and international politics, we are still laughing at ourselves".

George Sarton admits that the faith man needs is a religious faith. He says this of man's need for the triad of art, religion, and science: "Art reveals beauty; it is the joy of life. Religion means love; it is the music of life. Science means truth and reason; it is the conscience of mankind. We need all of them art and religion as well as science. Science is absolutely necessary but it is never sufficient". (George Sarton, *Six Wings: Men of Science in the Renaissance*, p. 218. (London, 1958).

1. Extracts from The Holy Bible, AD 1611. The British and Foreign Bible Society London.

2. *The Pleasures of Philosophy* pp. 240

3. *The Pleasures of Philosophy* pp. 114 (New York, 1953).

4. Celebrated English philosopher of the 19th century.

5. *The Pleasures of Philosophy*, pp. 168, 169 (New York, 1953)

6. Bertrand Russell, *Marriage and Morals*, p. 102. (London 1929)

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