

Chapter 14: Historical Role of the Prophet

Have the Prophets any positive or negative role in the movement of history? If they have, what is that? Is it positive or negative?

Even the anti-religious people admit that the Prophets have had an effective role in history. In the past they represented a great source of national power. In olden days the national power, was distinguished from blood relationships, tribal affinities and patriotic feelings or from religious tendencies and doctrinal bonds. The tribal heads and the national chiefs represented the first tendency and the Prophets and religious leaders the second. There are no two opinions about the fact that the Prophets constituted a force because of their religious influence. Anyhow, there are several views as to how this force worked:

(i) A section of people in their writings generally argue that as the Prophets had a spiritual and anti-temporal outlook, their role has been negative. These people hold that the central point of the teachings of the Prophets has been the renunciation of this world, concentration on the next, and introspection and escape from the external realities. That is why the force of religion and the Prophets, who have been a symbol of this force, have always discouraged people from taking interest in the worldly life and have applied a brake to progress. Thus the role of the Prophets has always been negative in history. This is the view which is expressed generally by those who claim to be broad-minded.

(ii) There is another section of people, who also maintain that the religious people have played a negative role, but the argument advanced by them is quite different. They maintain that the religious people are actually worldly-oriented and their spiritual orientation is merely a disguise to deceive the simple-minded. The efforts of the religious people have always been, directed toward securing the interests of the oppressors and, beguiling the oppressed. They have endeavoured to maintain the status quo, and opposed the evolution of society.

The supporters of this view say that history like any other phenomenon has a dialectical movement, which originates from its internal contradiction. With the emergence of proprietorship society was divided into two conflicting classes, one of them being the ruling and exploiting class and the other the deprived and exploited. With a view to protect its own special position the ruling class has always been anxious to

maintain the existing situation and in spite of the inevitable development of production implements has wanted to keep society as it is. But the subjugated class in consonance with the development of the production implements wants to change the existing situation and to replace it with a more developed one.

The ruling class has used various tactics, and to achieve its nefarious ends has employed the three factors of force, wealth and deceit. In this game the role of the man of religion has been to hoodwink the people in the interest of the tyrants and exploiters. The people of religion have not been seriously interested in the Hereafter. Their pretention of godliness is only a disguise to conceal their worldliness and is intended to divert the attention of the underprivileged and the revolutionaries.

Thus the role of the men of religion has always been negative for they have always supported the wealthy and the powerful people interested in maintaining the existing institutions. This is the theory put forward by the Marxists to explain historical development. According to Marxism the three factors of religion, government and wealth are coeval with private property and all over history have played a role against the interests of the masses.

(iii) Some other people interpret history in a way different from that of the Marxists. Anyhow they too consider the role of religion and the Prophets to be negative. They hold that the law of natural evolution and the law of the development of history are based on the domination of the strong and the elimination of the weak. The strong have contributed and are contributing to the progress of history, whereas the weak have been and are responsible for its stagnation and decline. Religion has been invented by the weak to apply a brake to the strong.

The proponents of religions have invented such slavish moral conceptions as justice, freedom, virtue, love, compassion, cooperation etc. They did so in the interest of the weak, that is the lower classes and to the disadvantage of the strong, that is the upper classes which bring about progress and development. The people of religion brought the psychological forces of the strong under their control and prevented the elimination of the weak. Thus they have hampered the improvement of human race and the birth of the heroes.

Therefore the role of religion and the Prophets who represent it has been negative, because they have supported the slavish mentality against the masterly qualities which contribute to the advancement of history and society. This is the view of the German philosopher, Nietzsche.

(iv) Besides the above mentioned three groups, there are others which also include some anti-religious people. They admit that the role of the Prophets in the past has been positive and fruitful and contributed to the progress of history. These groups give due consideration to the social and moral content of the teachings of the Prophets and to the historical events connected therewith. They admit that in the past the Prophets played the most fundamental role in the reform, welfare and progress of their society.

Human culture has two aspects: Material and Spiritual. The material aspect of culture is its technical and

industrial aspect which has continued to develop in every age till today. Its spiritual aspect concerns the mutual relations of the human beings, for the correct determination of which humanity is indebted to the teachings of the Prophets. As it is under the shadow of the spiritual aspect of culture that its material aspect gets an opportunity to grow and develop on correct lines, the role of the Prophets in the development of the spiritual aspect of civilization is direct and in the development of its material aspect indirect. According to these groups there can be no doubt about the positive role of the teachings of the Prophets in the past.

Anyhow some of these groups are of the opinion that the time of the positive role of the teachings of the Prophets is now over. They assert that with the advancement of science the religious teachings have lost their validity a great deal and in future also they will continue to lose their vitality. In contrast certain other groups hold that the role of faith and religious ideology can never be replaced by science, howsoever progress it may make. Science will always be as unable to replace religion as philosophical schools have been.

The Prophets have had various roles in the past. It is true that there are certain cases in which the collective human conscience is no longer in need of a religious support. But the most fundamental roles performed by the Prophets are those which will be as much required in future as they were in the past. Here are some instances in which the teachings of the Prophets have influenced historical development

(i) Education:

In the past education had a religious motive, and it was this motive which encouraged the teachers and the parents. With the development of social conscience the need of religious motive has been eliminated in this field.

(ii) Affirmation of Agreements and Covenants:

Social life of man stands on the respect of the treaties, covenants and agreements and on abiding by the promises and undertakings. Respect of the agreements and promises is one of the mainstays of the human aspects of culture. To ensure this respect is a role which religion has always shouldered and for which no replacement has been found till today. Will Durant, an atheist, as he is, admits this fact in his book, *Lessons from History*. He says: "Religion with the help of its rituals has conferred the reverence of man-God relations on human compacts and in this way has brought about constancy and firmness to them".

On the whole religion has provided a strong support to the moral and human values. Moral values minus religion are like currency notes having no financial backing. Such notes soon lose their value.

(iii) Emancipation from Social Bondage:

The role of the Prophets in the fight against despotism, tyranny and all aspects of oppression and persecution is the most basic. The Holy Qur'an lays stress on this role of the Prophets. It describes the establishment of justice as the main object of their being raised. The Holy Qur'an again and again recounts the stories of the conflict between the Prophets and the representatives of despotism. In a number of verses it has expressly mentioned that those who constantly opposed the Prophets belonged to this class.

The view expressed by Marx and his followers to the effect that religion, government and wealth are the three facts of the coercion of the ruling class against the underprivileged and the oppressed, is nothing but humbug. It is contrary to the indisputable historical facts. Explaining the view of Marx, Dr Arani says: "Religion has always been a tool in the hands of the dominating ruling class of society. In order to overpower the suppressed classes the rosary and cross always move side by side with the bayonet".

To be able to accept such an interpretation of history one will have to shut his eyes and overlook the historical facts. Imam Ali is the champion of the sword and the rosary both. He is a swordsman as well as a man of rosary. But he did not use them to suppress the underprivileged. His motto was: *"Oppose the oppressor and help the oppressed"*.

Throughout his life Imam Ali was a votary of the sword against those who possessed pelf and power. As Dr Ali al-Wardi has pointed out in his book, Comedy of Human Intellect, Imam Ali with his personality has refuted the philosophy of Marx.

The view of Nietzsche, which is diametrically opposed to that of Marx, is even more absurd. According to him, religion is a factor of stagnation and decline because it supports the weak while it is the powerful who form the most progressive class responsible for the development of society. It appears that in the opinion of Nietzsche human society makes speedy progress only when it is governed by the law of jungle. According to Marx the underprivileged people are the factor of development and the Prophets were against this class. But Nietzsche thinks that powerful are the factor of development and the Prophets opposed them. Marx says that religion is an invention of the powerful and the wealthy.

Nietzsche, on the other hand maintains that it is an invention of the weak and the underprivileged. Evidently Marx was wrong on several counts. Firstly he interpreted history merely on the basis of the contradiction of class interests, and overlooked its human aspect. Secondly he regarded the underprivileged alone as the factor of development. Thirdly he considered the Prophets to be the supporters of the ruling class. As for Nietzsche, he has made the mistake of regarding the factor of force as the factor of the development of history in the sense that he has equated the more powerful man with the superior man and has believed that the more powerful man alone is the factor that carried history forward.

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