

Selection of Ideal

Selection of inferior and low ideals often takes a religious colour. In order to make such an ideal permanently attractive, some religious value is attached to it and thus effort is made to accord it some sort of sanctity and an artificial reverence.

As we observed in the Qur'anic verses mentioned above, the societies which rejected the call of the Prophets in most cases tenaciously followed the religion and the ideals of their forefathers. In fact there is no low grade ideal which has not been clothed with a religious garb either explicitly or implicitly, for in the words of the Qur'an and according to the Islamic terminology ideals always take the place of a deity and the nations always adore their ideals to the extent of worshipping them, although in a concealed manner.

On the whole religion is nothing but a link between the worshipper and the worshipped. As people hold fast to their ideals, these ideals assume a religious colour either overtly or covertly. Even when they have some non-religious features or conceal themselves under some non-religious garb, virtually they imply the concept of religion and worship and involve the attachment of the worshipper to the worshipped.

In fact all man-made religions are nothing but low grade and inferior ideals, which artificially have been converted into absolute truths. Otherwise these false doctrines are either figments of imagination or some unbacked conceptions remotely concerned with human development. They may be relative truths which have been supposed to be absolute truths. Thus the limitations of inferior ideals creep into false religions.

In other words the false religions which man chooses for himself by adopting these ideals are the result of regarding these ideals as genuine and exalting them by the flight of imagination to the status of whole truths. These religions in fact put up a challenge to the divine religion of Monotheism, which with its various dimensions is the supreme ideal for the entire humanity. We shall further elucidate this subject subsequently.

These false religions and imaginary gods which man has been inventing for himself in every age are

mere names devoid of all truth. The Qur'an says:

They (false gods) are mere names which you and your fathers have coined, for which Allah had revealed no warrant. (Surah an-Najm, 53:23)

The gods which man conceives, the creed which he fabricates and the ideal which is a result of human imagination cannot form the basis of any sound religion. They cannot be the means of human progress, for man can never create his own God.

We have said that the societies and the nations adoring inferior ideals lead their lives in a circle. In other words the movement of history for them is monotonous and circular. A nation which draws by artificial means its past to its present condition and its present condition to its future, will not in fact have a future, because its future will be like its past.

That is why when we study and analyse the condition of the nations which have adopted inferior ideals, we find that they soon become tired of their ideals and lose interest in them. Society gradually ceases to take interest in such ideals when it realizes that they have no practical value, for they can do no good and as practical experience will show, they have been unable to push the caravan of humanity forward and have failed to help society make any long term progress. With the disappearance of these ideals the legal unity among the vast groups of masses based only on these common ideals is eroded and disappears soon.

When a nation loses its link with its ideal, it is afflicted soon with disunity, confusion and decay as the Qur'an says:

Their adversity among themselves is very great. You think of them as a whole, whereas their hearts are diverse. That is because they are people who have no sense. (Surah al Hashr, 59:14)

Their adversity among themselves is great because they have no common ground for unity. They are apparently close to each other, but they have no common ideal. Each one of them goes a different way. Their hearts are disunited and their inclinations diverse. Their spirits are incongruous, and their minds are stagnant.

In such circumstances national unity can no longer exist. All that remains is the apparition of a nation under the aegis of which each individual soon makes himself busy with his own personal affairs or some other petty affairs, for there exists no great ideal which may mobilize all forces and attract all talents and abilities for which sacrifice may be made.

When its ideal thus falls, the banner of the unity of the nation falls also. Everybody becomes busy with his limited affairs and personal interest and begins to think only of his limited problems, such as how to pass time, how to eat, how to drink and how to provide means of comfort to himself and to his family members.

He keeps himself engaged in establishing himself, in the cheap sense, that is short-term establishment which keeps man occupied with his material needs for ever and makes him a prisoner of his immediate needs and desires to the extent that he ceases to think of anything beyond them and all his efforts begin to revolve round them only, for he finds nothing else in his life.

When a nation loses its ideal, it may be said that virtually its ideal has fallen. As we have already said, such a nation on account of its not having a superior ideal becomes a mere apparition without having a real existence.

How History Behaves with the Nation Having No Ideal?

History shows that in such circumstances one or other of the following three historical developments takes place:

(i) A nation having no ideal may collapse in the face of an external military attack, as the result of being decayed from within and having no coherent existence, for such a nation consists of only disunited individuals gathered together. Each member of such a nation cares for his own food, clothing and shelter and does not think in nationalistic terms. In these circumstances such a nation collapses in the face of an external military invasion. Exactly this is the problem with which our Muslim ummah is confronted today.

In the past when the Muslims lost their supreme ideal and withdrew themselves from the favour of Allah, they fell a prey to the invasion of the infidel Mongols. The Islamic Civilization of that time was destroyed, and the Muslim world which was subjected to a foreign invasion, was disrupted internally also.

(ii) The second situation which such a nation may face is its absorption in a foreign and imported ideal. A nation which loses its natural ideal that sprouted from within it, tries to fill the vacuum by an ideal which is imposed on it from outside and which henceforward guides its destiny. This is the second possible historical development.

(iii) The third historical development is the return of the nation concerned to its original ideal, the gradual implementation of this ideal in its life and its march on the route of progress anew.

The Muslim ummah is at present standing on the cross-roads of the second and the third possibilities. With the advent of the colonial age of Muslim ummah finds two ways open in front of it. One of them invites it to its dissolution in some foreign ideology. This is the way which has been chosen by some Muslim leaders in some Islamic countries.

Reza Khan in Iran and Ataturk in Turkey wanted to apply the ideology of the advanced countries of Europe to the Muslim ummah. They asked the Muslims to give up their own ideology and accept the Western ideology instead of it. 1

In contrast the pioneers of Muslim awakening in the beginning of colonial age and immediately before that tried to put the third possibility into effect by infusing a new life into the Muslim ummah through the dissemination of the supreme ideal. They wanted the Muslims to return to the Islamic way of life, and for that purpose presented Islam in modern language in conformity with the needs of the present day Muslims.²

A nation which has been bereft of its ideology and has been converted into a mere apparition has no alternative but to accept one of the three above-mentioned possibilities, and act accordingly.

So far we have been talking about the nation which chooses for itself inferior ideals or false gods, and for that reason is deprived of the quality of marching forward and has to move in a circular way. The repetitions of ideals tear society asunder and finally destroy it. A nation cut off from its genuine ideal is converted into a mere apparition and is confronted with one of the three above-mentioned historical developments.

Now we go a step backward to discuss the second kind of the ideals. They also are nothing but virtually false gods. As we said in the beginning the ideals portray three outlooks, and hence there are three kinds of them.

Second Kind of Ideals

So far we have talked about the first kind of the ideals. Now let us take up the second kind of them. The second kind of the ideals represent the aspirations of a nation for the future. They are not repetitions because they do not represent the daily needs. They are forward looking.

One of their characteristics is that they show a desire for something new. These ideals represent a step forward, but only a step. In other words they are not high enough. They are useful, but their range is limited. Nations cannot traverse a very long distance with their help, but can be benefited by their forward-looking feature in a limited way.

These so called superior ideals have a sound aspect, but do not fully accord with great human potentialities, and from this point of view they are trivial. Still they have a sound aspect because man cannot visualize the whole way he has to traverse nor can he comprehend the absolute, his mental faculties being limited. With his limited mind all he can do is to have a glimpse of the Absolute, with which he can illuminate his way and thus have the good luck of seeking the Absolute.

It is an indisputable fact that man's acquirement in this respect is very limited. The dangerous part of it is that what man gets from the Absolute is not absolute, but is only a ray of light from the Absolute. But man very often imagines this insignificant ray of light to be the light of the heaven and the earth and mixes it up within the Absolute. Here lies the danger. When man wants to acquire his supreme ideal, he creates it out of his limited mental concept of future.

It is this relative concept which man converts into the absolute through his imagination. This type of superior concept may serve man for the time being, may provide him ground for development as far as it can embody the future and may activate him to the extent of the possibilities this future can provide.

But very soon a limit is reached and further progress is stopped, for the ideal which has been converted into a religion and a god, becomes the existing condition and as such hinders man's effort to attain his perfection, for it is a big mistake to generalize a limited ideal and raise it to the status of the Absolute. This generalization is sometimes horizontal and sometimes temporal, but in both the cases generalization of the ideal is absolutely wrong.

The vertical generalization is wrong when the concept of his ideal deprives man from conceiving the next step and he considers his ideal all that he should strive for, although this ideal in spite of its soundness forms only a part of the values he holds dear. Such generalization is wrong, for we should not concentrate all our effort on that which is only a part of that for which we should strive.

For example let us consider the case of the modern European man who in the beginning of the Renaissance period chose freedom as his supreme ideal. At that time man in the West was badly downtrodden. The Church had put chains round his hands and feet in all walks of life, and he was under most severe restrictions in respect of religious and scientific matters. Even for the supply of his food he depended on the feudal lords.

At that time the European of the pre-renaissance period decided to release himself from the shackles of the Church and feudalism. He decided that man should be made free to do whatever he wished, to use his own mind to think, not the mind of others, and to judge things personally without depending on others. This was a sound idea, but it was wrong to take it too far and generalize it.

Freedom, that is the unchaining of man's hands and feet, is no doubt one of the frameworks of values, but it alone is not enough to build man. You cannot break all bonds and tell man to do whatever he likes. At the same time you cannot find a single feudal lord, a king, a priest or a dictator who is powerful enough to force you to adopt an ideology or to give it up.

It is not enough to break the chains. Freedom from them only provides a framework for the progress and development of humanity, but proper development of individuals requires an inner basis in the light of which progress may be made. Mere freedom to do whatever one wants and to go wherever one wishes is not enough. Man must know how and why he should take a particular step. The Europeans have missed this point.

The European has made freedom his goal. No doubt freedom is good, but not good enough to be an ideal. Freedom is only a frame. It requires some content. We must know why we want to be free. In case we do not know what is the purpose of freedom, its consequences may be very dangerous and unfortunate.

Today the Western Civilization has acquired the means of total destruction of humanity. The West is groaning under the impact of them, because Western freedom is devoid of any content. This is an example of vertical generalization and expansion of the ideals. When ideals are expanded vertically, they create all this trouble.

The same is the case with the-temporal generalization and expansion. All over history we come across the examples of noteworthy actions, some successful, but we must not give them too much significance beyond what they originally aimed at. They may serve as a stepping-stone for proceeding towards the Absolute, but they cannot be looked at as an ideal.

History says that several families form a tribe; several tribes form a clan and several clans form a community or a nation. Should these formations be found helpful for the progress of society and unity of the nations, there is no harm in recognizing them, but they should not be converted into an absolute ideal for which man may fight and even wage a war.

The absolute for the sake of which a war should be waged is only the true Absolute, that is Allah. As such the above mentioned arrangement is nothing but a method and a frame, not an absolute ideal.

This was an example of incorrect temporal generalization and expansion. If we stretch too far a thing which is of limited significance and is only a first step, make an ideal of it and try to defend it as such over all times, we certainly do something very wrong.

A man who converts a limited view into an absolute view valid for all times is exactly like him who looks at the unlimited horizon with his eyes, and although his faculty of vision does not allow him to see beyond a limited distance, yet he thinks that the world ends at the point up to which he has seen and believes that at that point the sky and the earth actually meet.

A man may see a mirage and believes that water is available at a short distance, but in fact this wrong notion is due to the inability of his eyes to discern clearly the strapping stretch of dry land, from a long distance.

Similarly because of the inadequacy of human mind and the limitation of human faculty of thinking, a man who from a long distance of human history wants to determine its course, sees a horizon exactly like the geographical horizon. He should treat it simply as a horizon, not as an absolute. We see the geographical horizon at a distance of 20 or 200 meters, but we never say that the earth ends there. We only say that the horizon is there.

In the case of historical horizon also man should think in the terms of horizon only and should not make the supreme ideal of it. Otherwise he will be like him who goes after a mirage instead of water. How beautifully has Allah described this similitude!

As for those who disbelieve, their deeds are as a mirage in a desert. The thirsty one supposes it

to be water till he comes to it and finds it nothing and finds in the place thereof Allah, who pays him his due; and Allah is swift at reckoning. (Surah an Nur, 24:39)

At another place the Qur'an compares the fabricated and polytheistic ideals to the spider's cobweb. It says:

The likeness of those who choose other patrons than Allah is as the likeness of the spider when she takes to herself a house. Surely the frailest of all houses is the spider's house, if they but knew. (Surah al Ankabut, 29:41)

If we compare between these two kinds of ideals, one of which is inspired by the concrete existing condition and the other by the limited human aspiration about the future, we find that an ideal inspired by the present condition is largely a stage or a continuation of some other ideal inspired by the limited human aspiration about the future.

When an ambitious man chooses and attains an inferior ideal which can be achieved in a short time, this ideal assumes the form of a limited ideal moving in a circle. That is why we said earlier that if we take a few steps backward from one type of gods (deities), the other type of gods would appear to us. The position in this respect may be summarized as under:

In the beginning a community chooses its aspiration about the future as its ideal. Soon this ideal begins to move in a circle, and gradually it reduces the whole nation to a mere apparition. During this process the nation passes through four stages detailed as under:

(i) Active Stage of the Ideal – The ideal begins as an aspiration about the future. The Qur'an describes the activity of this ideal and the service which it may render as "quick". The advantage which ensues from it is quick but does not last long. Such an ideal is short-lived and its benefits are insignificant.

Before long it turns into a force that destroys all that had been achieved. That is why this kind of ideal has been described by the Qur'an as quick and immediate. See what the Qur'an says:

For him who desires a short term benefit, We hasten in this fleeting world whatever We will and to whom We please. Then We assign to him Hell in which he shall burn despised and rejected. As for him who desires the Hereafter and strives for it as he should, his efforts shall be rewarded by Allah. We bestow your Lord's favours both on these and those and none is deprived of them.
(Surah Bani Isra'il, 17:18–20)

Allah, the Glorious is absolute good, absolute blessing and absolute existence. He extends His favour to man in consonance with the capacity of the ideal he chooses. Allah also favours him who chooses an inferior ideal, but in his case His favour is of short duration, for in the Hereafter such a man will get nothing.

In the beginning an ideal inspired by the existing conditions appears to be powerful, superior and

creative. As the whole nation or community participates in choosing and implementing it, it becomes a guiding force and produces some positive results.

But in the opinion of the Qur'an, which always makes a long term planning, these immediate results are followed by Hell and punishment. In this world and the next world woeful is the fate of those who choose inferior ideals. This first stage may be called the stage of renovation.

(ii) The 2nd stage comes when this ideal becomes inert and its power and force are exhausted. At this stage the ideal stands like a statue. The leaders who were guiding the nation on the basis of this ideal, cease to be the leaders and become an object of reverence. The common people instead of being their comrades in reconstruction and development, become their obedient servants. This is the stage which has been described by the Qur'an as the obedience of the chiefs and the elders:

And they say: Our Lord! We surely obeyed our chiefs and elders and they misled us from the way. (Surah al Ahzab, 33:67)

(iii) The 3rd stage comes, which is a continuation of the preceding two stages. At this stage the power gets concentrated in the hands of a particular group or class on the basis of its family and class position and is transferred hereditarily. In these circumstances a class comes into being, which has no goal and no value in life. It is always occupied with its own petty interests. The Qur'an says:

Similarly We sent not a warner before you into any township but its luxurious ones said: 'We surely found our fathers following a religion, and we are following their footprints.' (Surah az Zukhruf, 43:23)

Such people are a historical continuation of their forefathers who made history. Similarly others will be their historical continuation. Their historical affinity exceeds the limits of an ideal and instead of being a constructive force, culminates in the creation of a hereditary class of the luxurious ones.

This was the third stage of the choice of inferior ideals. As the relation of these ideals is ultimately severed from the nation concerned, the nation enters the fourth stage.

(iv) This 4th stage is the most dangerous one, for at this stage the tyrants and the dirty elements come to the helm of the affairs of the nation. They do not abide by any covenant or undertaking given by them. In this respect the Qur'an says:

And thus We set in every township its biggest criminals to make intrigues. They do not intrigue but against themselves. (Surah al An'am, 6: 123)

In such circumstances some worst criminals come to power, as Hitler and his Nazis subdued an important part of Europe and tried to destroy all the fruits of culture, industrial inventions and the sciences of Europe with a view to annihilate the ideal which the modern European man raised with his own hands to the extent that it began to move in a circle, and consequently got largely corrupted and

rotten. Anyhow, some of its accomplishments had continued to exist in European society, when Hitler appeared and tried to annihilate it totally. Now the time has come to mention the third kind of ideals.

Third Kind of Ideals

The only ideal of the third kind of the ideals is Allah. In the case of this ideal the contradiction we mentioned earlier is easily resolved. The gist of the contradiction was that any thing that exists in man's mind is limited, but an ideal must be limitless. Then how can we arrive at something limitless by means of something limited?

In the case of the ideal, that is Allah, this contradiction does not exist, for this ideal is not a product of man's mind. Allah is not a mental idea picked out by man's mind from a number of ideas. He has a concrete existence. He is an Absolute Being actually existing. He is All-powerful, All-knowing and All just.

This Actually Existing Being is fit to be the ideal because He is absolute. Yet there is one thing to be noted. When man wants to acquire some light from this limitless source of light, obviously he can acquire it only in a limited and measurable quantity. Whatever he acquires has definite limits, whereas the absolute ideal has no such limits. He is neither perceptible nor imaginable.

Yet the light which man acquires from Him is definitely restricted within exact limits, though the ideal is not restricted within any limits. That is why Islam insists that one must always distinguish Allah, the ideal from all that exists in one's mind. One must make difference even between Allah and His Divine Names. Islam emphasizes that the Divine Name is not to be worshipped. Only the named is to be worshipped, for the name has mental existence only.

Its relation with Allah is only mental. Therefore the named is to be worshipped, not the name, for while the named is absolute, the name is limited like all mental ideas. Allah is Self-existing and does not depend on any one or any thing. He is far from having any characteristic qualities attributable to the creation.

1. (It was due to the limitations of the time of these lectures that the late Ayatullah mentioned only the names of the Reza Khan and Ataturk as an example of borrowing the foreign ideology. Otherwise there are several other countries of the region which even now are trying to run their affairs with imported ideology and to introduce a foreign culture)

2. (The third world idea which has already matured with the Islamic revolution, led by revolutionary Iran, is the selection of the third possibility, which now has become the movement of the down-trodden under the leadership of Imam Khomeini. Unfortunately the late Ayatullah Sadr was not in a position to say that in clear terms)