

THE CREED OF PROGRESS

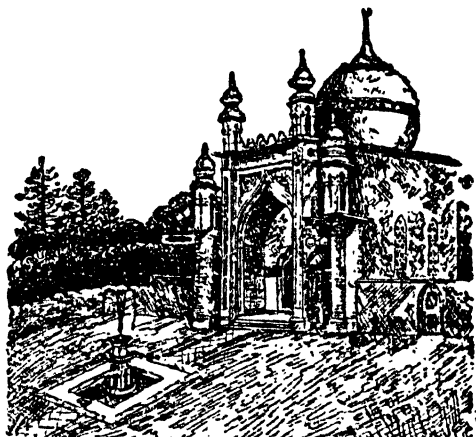
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THE CREED OF PROGRESS

The Opening Chapter of the Holy Qur-an *Al Fatiha* sums up the principles of progress in its first four verses. The fifth supplies us the basis of our creed. By repeating it we make a sort of declaration in which we affirm that which we have to do in this matter. The verse goes thus :

Thee do we worship, and Thee do we ask for help.

In the popular sense, worship may mean a combination of certain gestures with the recitation of sacred words, but Islam deprecates these if unaccompanied by good actions, as being mere ritualism. The literal meanings of the word which in the Qur-anic text corresponds to worship, explain the real object of prayer. The word is *Ibadat*, worship, which primarily means to get a thing powdered. Secondly, it means

to destroy one's ego or entity by assuming the colour of another, which cannot be done unless the thing that has to be cast in the mould is reduced to fine powder. The more it is pulverized, the more it becomes capable of being moulded in the other cast. Remembering the Holy Names of Allah, we affirm in these words, that we imbue ourselves with the Divine colour. But the declaration consists of two parts; and in the second we pray for Divine help. The Arabic word *Istianat*—help, used in the verse, is very expressive. Though there are various words which convey the idea of help, no one can ask for *Istianat* in doing a thing, unless he himself has already done all that lies in his power to achieve that object. So in this declaration we say that we do our utmost to work out the Divine Attributes in our life, and we ask for Divine aid to make up the deficiency. The spirit of self-independence has nowhere been better preached than here. It is, in fact, the key-note of the Qur-anic teaching. On several occasions the Book places the burden of all responsibility upon our own shoulders.

Says the Holy Qur-an :

Verily, God would not change the condition of any community unless the community itself changes its condition.

Elsewhere it tells us that if we do good it is for our own benefit and if we commit sin, we are responsible for it. And again it says, all that you earn is for you, and if you lose a thing, you do it yourself. No other book of religion has laid such stress on this responsibility. On the other hand, the principle of Atonement destroys the very idea of responsibility, for if our belief in the 'Blood' relieves us from it altogether, it also authorizes us to do just as we like. In fact, it is consistent both with justice and righteousness, that God should ask us to act in a responsible way. He has, in His mercy, provided us with abundance of all that we need ; any further provision would but add to our laziness and lassitude. A Muslim, therefore, should remain active and true to his duty. He should not look for any external help in performing his task unless and until he has done his part to the utmost of his power. One thing, without doubt, he

does need. He must have knowledge so that he may make a proper use of the Divine blessings. He does not possess such knowledge at his birth and therefore he must acquire it subsequently. If God created all that man needed, he must look to God for guidance in order to use rightly the God-given gifts. The sixth and seventh verses of the Chapter are to the same effect :

Show us the straight path, the path of those whom Thou hast blessed, and not the path of those who being wrath-ridden are under Thy wrath, nor of those who are misled.

The only thing we need is enlightenment. Therefore, the verses give us the very core of prayer. We cannot, and we should not, ask God to add to what He has already, of His own goodness, given us,—it is more than enough. We are in the dark,—we have to beseech Him for light—for guidance on the right path. There may be many ways of reaching the goal, some crooked, some very long. We want the shortest way ; hence the word in the text is *straight*, which must be the short way, seeing that the shortest line between two points is the straight one. The

same has been said elsewhere in the Qur-an, where the Book speaks of our praying to the Lord :

And when My servants ask you concerning Me then surely I am very near, I answer the prayer of the suppliant when he calls on Me, so they should answer My call and believe in Me that they may walk in the right way.¹

This verse gives us the best explanation of prayer. It deals, first, with its essentials—the things that must be possessed by the suppliant before he approaches the Lord for help, and then lays down clearly the things which God is prepared to grant. The Arabic word used in the text for servant comes from the same root as *Ibadat*, upon which I have already commented. No one should call on the Lord unless he be a worshipper in the true sense of the word. The verse further explains the position. It consists in our doing all that the Lord requires us to do, and for this, we have to believe in Him. Belief, in Arabic, does not mean ordinary conviction. Rather does it refer to such conviction of certain truths as will urge us to work them out. So a suppliant must accept all the Divine truths and

1. 2:186.

try his utmost to work them out before he comes to the Lord in prayer. The Lord will then be pleased to show him the right path which he must tread in order to find God. It is the only way to attain the object that God will show—nothing else. If we go into the realities of things, it will appear that the right path is the only thing which we *do* want ; apart from that we have all the material necessary for success and prosperity.

Some people deprecate prayer as a practice partaking of laziness. They say that by praying to the Lord we are seeking to shift our responsibility to His shoulders. We are overwhelmed by some sudden adversity. Prayerfully we hasten to our Lord. We pour out our hearts before Him and then are satisfied, thinking that we have done all we can. This objection is valid enough in many cases, but let the fault-finders consider the prayer laid down in the Holy Qur-an. We pray only for the path to be shown to us, which we have to tread for ourselves. We do not ask the Lord, to give us this day our daily bread, but we beseech Him to show

us the way by which we must earn it ourselves.

Apart from the fact that moral culture is absolutely necessary to secure the proper distribution of wealth, which alone can guarantee freedom from misery and poverty, such culture is in itself a necessity. For our perfection, we need the cultivation of humanity in all its aspects. We belong to moral order, and how are we to attain its objects without moral culture? As our physical nature is inseparably bound up with its moral side, we need a system which may bring the two together. It must unite them in such a manner that a person interested in the cultivation of one side of humanity may, by following certain tenets, bring the other side also to real advancement. The mere reading of homilies on morals, or the collecting of some of their principles in an undigested form, would not educate us to any useful purpose. There must be an amalgamation of the two in the tenets inculcated in us.

There are any number of books on morality by the most eminent of the moralists and other reformers in every

language. Every country has produced such a literature, but it has all availed but little. We want a book which, like a beautiful rosary, unites beads of different colours in such an artistic way that the combination presents no incongruity. In short, the book should weld its physical, moral and spiritual precepts into one harmonious whole. It is the Holy Qur-an alone, in the literature of the whole world, that supplies this need to perfection, and in this Chapter we find its message epitomized. I have briefly shown how the Book has combined its teaching on physical progress with moral culture in such a way as to work for material civilization, but this Chapter is also the surest guide for further moral advancement. It goes to the root of the matter, and refers to those passions that are not only the backbone of our consciousness, but provide a bed-rock foundation for further moral building. Those passions are Wrath and Lust—the parents of all other passions,—which make their first appearance in animals, where they act as a life tendency. If lust moves them to provide for their

subsistence, the other passion furnish them with weapons of defence for their own safety, wherewith they may protect the fruits of their labour. But every animal is concerned with the procreation and protection of its offsprings. In this respect the parent passions assume the form of *Love* and *Anger*. They, in their turn, branch off in different animals, into various forms such as fear, enmity, malice, miserliness, vengeance, jealousy, stubbornness, fellow-feeling, love, expectation, and so forth. These passions serve a good purpose among the animals. They are for them the secret of life. *Anger*, for instance, in the camel, and envy or vengeance in the monkey, act as life tendencies. All these faculties in different measure and manner become necessary qualities of animals, but the same lust and anger, when found in human consciousness, mostly become evil to begin with. For this reason the seventh verse speaks of them in an abrogatory manner. In the end we pray the Lord to keep us away from those who are anger-ridden or given to lust.

But we have to possess these very passions in their elevated form when we rise from animality, and have been given power to convert this wild material into something tractable. It is wisdom which, with the help of knowledge and guidance, makes lust and anger take the form of beneficence, compassion, liberality, broad-mindedness, mercy, generosity, kindness, justice, defence, courage, bravery, perseverance, strength of character, emulation, help, co-operation, fellow-feeling and the like. But inasmuch as our consciousness is very extensive, the same root passions assume also diverse forms of wickedness if they remain unrefined for want of time and education. Then they will appear as stubbornness, vengefulness, rancour, avarice, cowardice, degradation, jealousy, backbiting, lying, flattery and so forth.

Thus it appears that Anger and Love may take the shape of good or evil. The two passions, Anger and Love, will assume different forms under different circumstances. Good guidance beautifies them into nobility ; wrong guidance makes them a curse. In their

natural form, they are good so far as animals are concerned, but when transferred into the human frame, they tend to become evil.

The hundred Excellent Names of God, in the Qur-an, give us all the noble forms which these passions will assume, when refined, and these have been summarized in the four Attributes mentioned in this Chapter. Some theologians speak of love as the most excellent attribute of God. The Western Church calls its God the God of Love. But some of its theologians have begun to realize that love is not without its ignoble side. Noble aspects it has, without doubt,—aspects which may rightly be ascribed to God, but, in its commoner forms, it is not without danger. For instance, the condonation of, or connivance at, wrongs committed by others, though actuated by love, is not desirable in every case. Euphemism may call it forgiveness, but if it does not serve to check evil, or if it creates stubbornness in the culprit, it is of no service to humanity. Let the Church examine the doctrine of Atonement. It is said that God so loved man

that He gave His only begotten son to pay the penalty for man's sins. This might be regarded as a piece of Divine Love and a good way of being cleansed from sin, but if the doctrine has, in practice, produced evil results, encouraging the sinner to commit yet more sin, how should the Lord be adored for the display of such a love, which has proved to be most pernicious to our moral sense? The Church is the only institution which can boast of having more criminals among its ministers than any other creed or cult, as has been proved by criminal statistics, and this is nothing but the natural outcome of such teaching and belief. A clergyman is but demonstrating the strength of his belief in the Atonement when he indulges in sin, for, indeed, even the sins, which he has not yet committed, have, according to his belief, already been pardoned. I am speaking not of theories, but of hard facts. If Christendom has shown such a laxity of morals, it is simply and solely on account of her belief in the Atonement. The principle is, admittedly, an outcome of the so-called Divine Love. But love in the

abstract should not be a Divine attribute. Now, we read of *Al-Wadud* as one of the Names of God set forth in the Holy Qur-an. It refers to that intensity of attachment which would induce its possessor to do anything and everything for his beloved. It means love in its general significance. But the four Attributes that represent all the other Names do not include *Al-Wadud*. They name the Lord *Rahman* and *Rahim*, the second and third Attributes of God, and these are the highest forms in which Divine Love exhibits itself. They stand for Beneficence and Benevolence.

The Islamic God, therefore, is the God of Love, but Love in its highest form. Even His fourth Attribute—The Owner of the Day of Requital—speaking as it does of forgiveness as well as punishment, is again an indication of Love though in a harsh form so far as it has to do with punishment.

It also solves another difficult problem—the problem of good and evil. There is no kind of good and evil in human society in which lust and wrath do not appear in one form or another.

The two passions are at the root of everything. Though they serve a good purpose among animals, yet they tend to assume an evil character when they appear in us, which shows how a thing that was originally created for good, becomes evil under a change of circumstances. Evil, therefore, has not been created by the Lord—it is a subsequent growth promoted by circumstances—an after acquisition of man, who, through his inordinacy and ignorance, has made wrong use of the Divine Gift. These animal passions are a curse if they remain unrefined, but they become blessings when we bring them under control. We have good material in abundance to work upon. The only thing we want is guidance. How rightly it has been said that this Chapter represents the highest outpouring of the human soul. Having all the material necessary, we should be insulting Providence if we approached Him with further demands. The only prayer that we can rightly utter is: "Show us the right path"—the path of those who have been blessed, and who know the way to make the right use of the

materials given to them. It shows the necessity for revelations, to set us on that right path. We get some guidance through experience, or through the troubles and trials of life, but our rude passions, which are the least of gifts, cannot, simply by such experience, become advanced morals. This is where we need guidance from above. It has always proved a most difficult task to sublimate animality into true humanity. History has seen a succession of civilizations. They possessed everything, but if one nation gained supreme power at any time, it trampled down the rest, and reduced them to nothing. So it was with the Egyptians, and the Persians, the Greeks and the Aryans. A large portion of humanity,—namely the “Untouchables” of India—is still groaning under the tyranny of the last-named civilization, but the combined evil of all has reached its height in European civilization, whereof the guiding principle is selfishness, seeing the strength of the powerful only in the weakness of the subject races. All these evils are the undesirable forms of Wrath and Lust. They

need true refinement if they are to be converted into high morality. Had the Holy Qur-an ruled these nations, the case would have been very different. They possess good materials which we Muslims have lost through our own laxity and self-indulgence, but lack of moral guidance has cankered their very idea of civilization. This shows again that we need guidance from the Lord,—guidance which the world can never find unless it has revealed through God's Messengers.

This also defines the real qualifications of a prophet. No man can claim to be a prophet unless he brings teachings to reform these passions. Wrath and Lust are the motive power of all human actions. They will develop into the highest civilization if they are properly trained. For such teachings we need a prophet. He must give proofs of his having communication with the Lord, but the mere Divine communication is in itself no proof of his messengership until he can show that he has received some principle of guidance at a time of special need. This is the only criterion of messengership.

We find it partially in the teachings of Krishna, Ramchandra, Confucius, Buddha, Moses and other Hebrew Patriarchs including Jesus, but the Messengership becomes complete in Muhammad. There have been various persons of a saintly character in Islam, who were honoured with revelations from God. They were in communication with him ; but though we do not find even this spiritual progress in any other religion, they could not claim prophethood, as their teachings do not show any tenet that may curb the animal passions and transform them into high morality.

The Chapter is only a preface of the whole Book. If this Chapter teaches us to pray to the Lord for guidance, the rest of the Book brings us the answer to our prayer. In this respect the Book appears to me to be nothing short of a miracle. The Chapter was revealed to the Holy Prophet very early. It was either the second or the third revelation, and came within a year of the first Revelation at Mount Hira. Can the History of Literature throughout the world show us a

single other instance of one who could give us in advance a true summary, as it were, of the work he was to compose during his coming life? All that the Holy Qur-an had to say concerning the physical, intellectual, economical, moral and spiritual progress of man, under varying conditions, was eloquently but briefly expressed in these seven verses. If no other man could do the same, the Holy Book must have come from God. Again, the language in which this early Chapter has been couched is the same as that used in the last. The rest of the Holy Qur-an does not show any improvement in this respect. But this is not the case with any other author, whose diction and style always tends to become polished by the passing years. There seems to be no development of mind in this respect.

Spirituality comes after morality, but it does not lie in the cultivation of occult powers within us. Doubtless these are a sort of accretion to the spiritual life, but they may be acquired by unspiritually-minded persons as well. Real spirituality arises only from good

morality, which in fact is morality in its advanced form.

Sacrifice is the distinctive feature of spirituality, seeing that it is the backbone of all morals. Bravery and generosity, for example, cannot appear in their best form apart from sacrifice. True spirituality lies in preferring others' need to our own. We must part with the means of comfort in our possession for the benefit of those who possess none, and no one can claim any spirituality without such sacrifice. If leading a life in accordance with Divine morals brings men to spirituality, the Holy Qur-an compresses, as it were, the whole list of Divine Names into the four which require us to look to the needs of others even to our own detriment. God does not stand in need of making any sacrifice. If He may be said to need anything it is but to give it to others, for blessings exist in abundance in His Creation, where, indeed, they are ever on the increase. The Lord of all is very bountiful, but our imitation of Him in this respect needs sacrifice, since we have to part with that which we have acquired

through our own exertion. I can hardly imagine any form of spirituality which is not an advanced form of morality, but all our morality in its initial stages comes into being only when our physical nature is developed on proper lines.

Therefore we need a revelation that is extensive enough in its teachings to regulate these various cravings of our nature. The Holy Qur-an in this Chapter furnishes the basis of our creed and lays down principles of progress by which alone we can achieve salvation in its truest sense.

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