

## **Islam and a civilized society**

*The truly religious don't hurt other people's feelings by their words*

**by Dr Basharat Ahmad**

**Translated by Dr Zahid Aziz**

(Note: Dr Basharat Ahmad (d. 1943) was a scholarly author of books and articles on Islam and the Ahmadiyya Movement, and was widely admired for his enlightening and inspiring interpretations of the Holy Quran.)

### **A Muslim's civilized behaviour**

The Holy Prophet Muhammad, may peace and the blessings of Allah be upon him, has given a definition of a 'Muslim' and that is that a Muslim is he from whose tongue and hands other Muslims are safe. In this age, which is considered an era of education and civilized society, there could be no better definition of civilization. Does not a civilized society mean that when one person has to deal with another, he should not hurt or harm the other by his tongue or by an action? This is the requirement of a civilized society. Islamic culture has not made any rule which is impossible to act upon. It has made it obligatory that not only should you refrain from hurting the feelings of another but you should not cause them any kind of harm, so that civilized behaviour is complete in both aspects, in the physical sense as well as the moral sense. Thus, according to the definition given by the Holy Prophet a Muslim is a perfect embodiment of civilized behaviour, not harming anyone either by his word or by his action.

### **So-called Islamic straight-forwardness**

Unfortunately, just as the Muslims have suffered a decline in all other spheres of life, their civilization has also deteriorated. I am not speaking of the coarse and crude sections of society, but of decent and respectable people. I exclude even those whose humour and frankness borders on obscenity and shamelessness. I take only those people who are of a serious mind and cultured. They too, in their conversations, speak in such a manner or behave in such a way as to hurt the feelings of others. This is termed by them as 'Islamic simplicity and frankness'. I am greatly pained by this, because they are using the name of Islam to shield their own weakness and thereby degrade the Islamic concept of civilization. The definition of a Muslim is one from whose words and actions other Muslims are safe. So when the

heart of another Muslim is made to feel hurt, it means that the standards of Islamic civilization have been breached.

I am deeply saddened when I see that cold and unfriendly treatment is given the name of Islamic simplicity, religious behaviour and purity. It is considered that a sign that a person is religious and God-fearing is that when he meets someone he is curt, irritable, bad-tempered and blunt-speaking, caring not in the least for the self-respect of others.

### **The Holy Prophet's example**

Was this the example set by our Holy Prophet Muhammad? Did he not behave as a most civilized and a most informal friend? Was it not his practice that he would mix freely with his friends, working with them, eating with them, laughing and talking with them? In any gathering he would be mixed in with the people, talking and smiling, so much so that you could not distinguish him from other people and could not pick him out as the one who was the messenger of God.

### **Present day religious scholars and spiritual leaders**

When I was a child and lacked knowledge, as one does in childhood, and I kept on seeing the grave and serious faces of our religious and spiritual leaders, and observed their fiery temperaments and displays of superiority, it became fixed in my mind that this was what being 'religious' meant. A religious person does not care for anyone's feelings, he tells you exactly what he thinks, no matter how insulting this may be to you. He can scold you in a humiliating way because he is a man of God and does not fear anyone else. Because he is not bothered by anything of this world, he can treat the people of this world as rudely as he likes. He can sneer at respectable people, call them bad names and scold them. To sum up, the concept which formed in my mind was that ill-tempered and rude behaviour was part and parcel of being religious. So whenever I heard that a certain man was a saint or a very religious person, I used to be terrified of him in case the saint attacked me or cursed me and I got punished for no good reason. This was the mental image of godly and holy men in my mind. If I came across any well-known religious personality, and I was fortunate enough to return unscathed and unharmed from my encounter with him, I would thank God that I had not displeased that *maulvi* or saint and had escaped being cursed by him.

### **Dr. Iqbal and his Christian teacher**

I was a student in the Scotch Mission High School in Sialkot. The Reverend Mr. Youngson, who was Scottish, used to teach us the Gospels. Dr. Sir Muhammad Iqbal was a fellow student in my class. One day Iqbal was arguing with the reverend teacher about the superb and incomparable eloquence of the language of the Holy Quran, and claimed that the Arabic of the Quran was so unique that he could tell, given any sentence of Arabic, whether it was from the Quran or not. But this claim was beyond his capability as he was a youngster like me and had only a superficial knowledge of Arabic. The reverend read out the words: *Idh qāl-allāh, Yā ʿĪsā innī mutawafika wa rāfiʿuka illaya*, and quoted the translation given by the Maulvis which was: “When Allah said, O Jesus, I will take you and will lift you to heaven toward Myself”, and he asked: Is this in the Quran or not? Now these words, as translated, proved so clearly that Jesus was sitting bodily in heaven besides God, and thus they showed his divinity, that Dr Iqbal became rattled and denied that these words could be in the Quran. The reverend laughed aloud and showed him the words in the Quran. All of us were acutely embarrassed. I was deeply pained as to why God caused us Muslims to be humiliated by raising Jesus alive to heaven. If anyone should have been kept alive and raised to heaven, it should have been our Holy Prophet, the Last Prophet who came with the perfect religion for all nations. However, God made him die and be buried in the earth, but He raised Jesus, a prophet of a particular nation for a particular time, to heaven in his living body. What could be the purpose behind this, except that Jesus has a special relationship with God?

### **Meeting the Promised Messiah**

A year passed. In 1891 a family elder showed me the book *Fath-i Islam* by Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad. Thank God, when the same verse came before me in this book and I saw that *mutawafika* meant “I will cause you to die” and *rāfiʿuka illaya* meant raising in honour, not bodily, I jumped with joy and cried out: this man is true, he has saved the honour of Islam, and made Islam triumph over Christianity! My elders were greatly displeased at my unbounded happiness and I was warned.

However, only a few days later Hazrat Mirza sahib came to Sialkot, and I ran to see him. But I had that same fear in my heart, that if he is a saint and a *Mujaddid* he might find something wrong with me and curse me and attack me. However, an irresistible attraction took me there. When I caught a glimpse of him for the first time in the Hakim Hissam-ud-Din street, it was like seeing a bright flash of light which

came and passed away. After the *asr* prayer he sat in the mosque of the Hakim sahib. People asked him questions and he answered them. Watching him, my fear departed. Seeing his excellent etiquette and his simplicity I was overjoyed. I was thankful that he was not the kind of narrow-minded saint, as was the image of religious men in my mind. He was a human like us, but an embodiment of spiritual radiance and exalted morals.

### **The high qualities of the Promised Messiah**

Ten years passed. What transpired in that period I do not mention all that here. I come to the time when I started going to meet Hazrat Mirza sahib in Qadian. There was a force of attraction that pulled me towards Qadian again and again. Any leave that I had, or any joining time between transfers in my job, I would always go to Qadian for the privilege of meeting him. In the early days I was absolutely astonished that Hazrat Mirza sahib met me just as one man meets another, as a very courteous, loving friend meets you.

My conception was that he would be sitting in a haughty manner, with his eyes closed. Then he would cast a critical look on my behaviour, my appearance, my clothes, and find every kind of fault with me and thoroughly castigate me. But what I saw was that he arrived smiling cheerfully and made me sit besides him. He would ask how I was doing, how was my family, how my medical job was going, what was the news about the plague epidemic. While talking he would be laughing, he would call for tea and offer it to me with great affection. The first time this happened, I did not partake of the tea due to respect, and it became cold. Maulana Nur-ud-Din said to me, Why aren't you drinking your tea, do take it, you won't be doing anything wrong. Hazrat Mirza sahib noticed that the tea was cold and he called his servant to bring hot tea for me. The servant started to take my cup away but Hazrat Mirza sahib stopped him and said: Bring the hot tea first and then take this cup away.

To sum up, he was talking to me freely like a friend, being happy with me, encouraging me in every way. He would not initiate any preaching or religious talk unless someone asked a question and broached a religious topic.

### **A painful observation**

The gist of it is that the Promised Messiah would meet all people with such courtesy and hospitality that it was absolutely astonishing. A beautiful picture of Islamic civilization was seen in his morals and manners which was so pleasing to the mind; far be it that he would hurt someone. But when I see certain people among the

followers of this righteous man, whether they are at a meeting or a social occasion, not caring that what they are saying or doing is hurting another brother's feelings, I am deeply pained by this. This cannot be called a requirement of religious behaviour. They say: "We speak bluntly, we are like bare swords", so that they are entitled to speak to anyone in whatever way they want to. Even in preaching it is not necessary to use hurtful language. If saying the truth is going to injure someone's heart, what is the need to say it? If it is necessary to say it, it can be put in such a way that you make your point without causing offence. Of course, it is a different matter if you have to speak to correct false religious beliefs or refute un-Islamic ideas or expose hypocrisy.

A society cannot be called civilized and cannot remain united until its members follow the principle that everyone of them should be safe from being injured by the hands or tongue of another member. Humour, levity and the making of jokes is good only as long as it makes people jovial and cheerful. But when humour hurts someone or is directed at exposing a fault or weakness in them, then it does not remain humour and entertainment but falls in the category of bad behaviour. Joking of this kind leads to resentment and discord. To make sarcastic comments to hurt someone is not the way of a civilized society. Similarly, to disregard and to reject with contempt the opinion of a lowly and ordinary person cannot be called Islamic manners. To look down upon a person scornfully because of some flaw in him, is what constitutes the spiritual illness known as arrogance, which cannot be tolerated by Islamic civilized values.

### **Jewels from history of Islam**

In the history of Islam there are such lofty examples of superb Islamic manners that it completely astonishes and overwhelms the mind, and the present day civilization collapses into dust in comparison with those examples. Nasir-ud-Din Shah was a king in India who took no pay from the treasury but made his living by writing copies of the Quran. Once a man came to see him and, looking through his manuscripts, told him that there was a word which was copied inaccurately and needed correction. The king made the correction just as the man indicated. When the man left, the king changed the word back to what it had been before. Someone asked why he had done that. The king said: what I had written was right and the correction which the man pointed out was wrong, but I did not want to embarrass him by telling him that he was wrong, so I made the correction that he wanted and changed it back as soon as he left!

In the time of the caliphate of Hazrat Umar, once when he was leading the prayers a person broke wind. But Hazrat Umar considered it impolite and bad manners that he should say: The man whose *wuzu* has been voided should go and perform his *wuzu* again. Instead, Hazrat Umar said: Let us all perform *wuzu* again. These good manners and shielding someone from being exposed and singled out are so wonderful. He bore some trouble for himself but saved a man from embarrassment.

We saw the Promised Messiah, that when he would be going for a walk accompanied by people they would follow him very closely, and sometimes a man from behind would trip and push him so that his stick would fall out of his hand and roll forwards. But the Promised Messiah would never turn around and look to see who pushed him, so that the man who did it would not be embarrassed.

There are hundreds of such examples. How many can we keep on giving? Until we show the deepest concern for the feelings and the temperament of our brother, and for hiding his faults, we cannot be called civilized, or in other words, we cannot be called Muslims because according to the definition given by the Holy Prophet Muhammad Islam and civilization are exactly the same thing, and not opposite things.