

The World Deserves to Know

This is a tribute to the brothers and sisters of ICNA-WhyIslam's NYC subway project whose tireless efforts in the path of education and dissemination of Islamic information, which is none other than the path of the Prophet, continues to be a ray of hope in this country.

One day in a lonely cave on a barren mountain in the outskirts of Makkah, the heavens and the earth collided for a moment that would change the course of history forever. The very first words of Heavenly revelation came down to a young man of Makkah who would become the saviour of the world.

The revelation that began to come down thereafter systematically laid down certain basic realities about the universe (i.e. Allah's complete Lordship and Dominion over all) and their logical necessitates (i.e. our obligation to worship Him in gratitude). The religion of Islam, as it came to be known, essentially consisted of this knowledge or information, which was designed to transform individuals, societies and eventually the world. The dissemination and propagation of that knowledge became the responsibility of those who heeded the call of revelation.

In time, Muhammad the beloved orphan of Makkah became the Messenger of Allah to humankind. The essence of his mission was captured in his two predominant titles- Prophet (*Nabiyy*) and Messenger (*Rasūl*). Leaving aside the long-standing debate over the exact distinction between these two terms, sufficient for us is that a Prophet is one to whom God gives information, while a Messenger is one who gives mankind information about God.

The Prophet soon took on this task of delivering the message and became a master educator of human beings. Two features stand out over the course of his Prophetic career- the fervent affirmation of freedom of religious thought, and his passionate commitment to his people and to humanity.

Fourteen centuries before the rest of the world, Islam firmly established freedom of belief as a basic human right, encapsulated in the following verse:

﴿ لَا إِكْرَاهَ فِي الدِّينِ ۗ قَدْ تَبَيَّنَ الرُّشْدُ مِنَ الْغَيِّ ۗ ﴾

There shall be no coercion in matters of faith, Truth stands out clearly from error.

[The Qur'an 2:256]

The adoption of one's faith and belief-system was made to be a purely personal matter, left to free and voluntary choice with no room for coercion. Truth in the Islamic worldview intrinsically and self-evidently stands out from falsehood, and the job of the believers is merely to educate others and point that out- nothing more. This freedom of faith became a hallmark of the Islamic civilization and was affirmed and applied centuries before it came

accepted by the rest of the world. This freedom is part of the great dignity and honor of the human being that Islam affirms. In the eloquent words of Syed Qutb, “Freedom of belief is the most basic right that identifies man as a human being. To deny anyone this right is to deny his or her humanity.”

According to the noted commentator Ibn Kathīr, the above verse means that absolutely no one is to be forced into Islam under any circumstances, for the simple reason that the truth and evidences of Islam are so clear and self-evident that it is far above any need for coercing people to accept them. Nearly all classical commentators of the Qur’an, including Ibn Kathīr, al-Qurtubī, al-Baydāwi and others, affirm the universal scope and application of this verse but also mention a number of historical accounts as the background and context to the revelation of this verse. Two are of note here.

The first involved a peculiar practice and custom of women in Madinan society to give up their children to Jewish tribes for adoption. Specifically, those women who would suffer from high rates of miscarriage and infant deaths would make a vow that if they bore a surviving child, they would give them up to the Jews to become part of their faith. This practice was likely related to their respect and admiration for the monotheistic faith of the Jewish tribes. Apparently, the practice was not uncommon, for when the Jewish tribe of Banu Nadīr was exiled, the Ansār (indigenous Muslims of Madinah) informed the Prophet that many of their children were among these Jews. They wanted to retake custody of their children and force them into Islam. Some of them expressed the sentiment:

والله لنكرهن أولادنا على الإسلام، فإننا إنما جعلناهم في دين اليهود إذ لم نعلم ديناً أفضل منه

“By Allah, we shall force our children into Islam, for we only placed them into the religion of the Jews when we didn’t know of a better religion than theirs.”

It was on this occasion that the verse of freedom was revealed, forbidding these parents from forcing their children, now adults, into any religion not of their choosing. Rather, the Prophet left it to these children of the Ansār to choose their own fates.

The second incident involves a Madinan man from the clan of Sālim bin ‘Awf by the name of Abu Husayn, or al-Husayn according to some reports, who had two sons that adopted Christianity under the influence of some traders from Syria prior to the advent of Islam. With the arrival of the Prophet in Madinah, Abu Husayn readily adopted Islam while his children refused and chose to remain as Christians. When one day his children made a decision to move to Syria to be with their coreligionists, the distraught Muslim parent of these Christian children pleaded with the Prophet, with all the emotion and pain of a parent with a troubled child, to intervene and do something:

يا رسول الله أيدخل بعضي النار وأنا انظر

“O Messenger of Allah, will some of my own family enter the Fire while I watch?”

According to this account, the verse of freedom was revealed on this occasion, and the Prophet of Islam refused to do anything about these children in terms of coercion or punishment. Some narrations indicate that Abu Husayn expressed some hesitation in accepting this decision, to which Allah revealed another verse:

﴿ فَلَا وَرَبِّكَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ حَتَّىٰ يُحَكِّمُوكَ فِيمَا شَجَرَ بَيْنَهُمْ ثُمَّ لَا يَجِدُوا فِي أَنفُسِهِمْ حَرَجًا مِّمَّا قَضَيْتَ
وَيُسَلِّمُوا تَسْلِيمًا ﴾

“But nay, by thy lord, they will not believe (in truth) until they make thee judge of what is in dispute between them and find within themselves no dislike of that which thou decidest, and submit with full submission.”

[The Qur’an 4:65]

This is how firmly Islam safeguarded the freedom of faith, even when it opposed the interests of its own followers! There is not a single incident from the annals of the Prophet’s life that shows any individual being forced to enter into Islam.

﴿ وَقُلِ الْحَقُّ مِن رَّبِّكُمْ ۖ فَمَن شَاءَ فَلْيُؤْمِن وَمَن شَاءَ فَلْيُكْفُرْ ۗ ﴾

It is the truth from your Lord. Whoever wishes should believe and whoever wishes disbelieve.

[The Qur’an 18:29]

But despite this fierce freedom of faith, the Prophet of mercy did his absolute best, from the beginning of his Prophetic ministry until his last breath, to teach, to educate, to influence, to present Islamic information and knowledge to his people with all the love and compassion of a parent for his children, or a prophet for his people. Why? He possessed nothing but the truth, and his people deserved to know it.

The Prophet began with a primitive society of warring tribes steeped in anarchy, lawlessness, injustice, clan warfare, female infanticide and idol-worship. For thirteen years, he faithfully delivered the message to his native town of Makkah. Family members and strangers, natives and foreigners, the free and the slaves, the rich and poor, the leaders and the laymen, he reached out to all because they deserved better.

In return, Makkah largely rejected its Prophet. Forced to endure constant ridicule, abuse and eventually, physical persecution and torture at their hands, the Prophet and his small band of followers were forced to go into hiding. Yet the mission had to continue, and the Prophet began to look elsewhere.

At this time, about five years into his prophethood, he turned his focus on the neighboring land of Abyssinia in northeast Africa. One of his foster mothers from his early childhood was an Abyssinian by the name of Umm Ayman. It is likely that he learned something of Abyssinian society during his early days being nursed by her, and he must have longed to spread his message there. So he suggested to a group of his Companions that they migrate there to spread the word and at the same time, escape the difficult times in Arabia. About fourteen brave men and women undertook the journey, followed by a second wave of migrants some time later. Abyssinia deserved to know. The mission continued.

Some years later the Prophet personally undertook a difficult journey 60 miles southeast of Makkah to a region known as Tā'if, in order to bring his education to those people. For ten days and nights he was relentless, preaching publicly and privately, knocking on doors, attending gatherings, calling on the leaders and the commoners. He left no stone unturned. The trip was a disaster. Not a single person heeded his call. In fact, they drove him out in the most cruel way. In the Prophet's own words, as he later recalled to Aisha, it was the most difficult day in his entire life.

Wounded and bleeding from head to toe, accompanied by his faithful Companion Zayd bin Harith, he fell to the ground at a region called Qarn al-Manāzil, also known as Qarn al-Tha'alabah. The traditions teach us that the angel Jibreel and the Angel of the Mountains descended from a cloud and called upon the Prophet to allow them to crush the towns of Tā'if as well as Makkah for their rejection. The Prophet, in mercy, though still freshly wounded by these very people, called out in mercy to spare them and remarked, "I still have hope that from their progeny will be those that worship Allah!" [Bukhari, Muslim]

بل أرجوا أن يكون من أصلابهم من يعبد الله

Despite more than a decade of rejection, despite physical torture and psychological abuse, the Prophet spared his people and remained optimistic. The people of Makkah and the people of Tā'if still deserved to know the truth.

A short time thereafter, the tides began to turn. The Prophet of Islam eventually found acceptance outside of Makkah, in the fertile oasis of Yathrib. With a heavy heart and teary eyes, he eventually left his beloved homeland of Makkah forever to settle in the newfound capitol of the Islamic state, renamed Madīnah al-Nabiyy- "the City of the Prophet." It was indeed a difficult day, for thirteen years of education had failed to achieve results. For the rest of his life, approximately one decade, he lived among the people of Madīnah and continued his mission of education there. The people of Madinah took him in and he never abandoned them thereafter, even after the entire Arabian peninsula had been brought under the fold of Islam. Madīnah had sheltered the Messenger of Allah and they deserved to be the recipients of the message.

By the end of his life, after 23 years of Prophetic mission, his mission of education had come full circle. The entire Arabian peninsula had been transformed from the darkness of idolatry

to the enlightened worship of One God, from perpetual warfare and factionalism to national solidarity and unity, from social and political anarchy to a highly disciplined legal system.

In the words of a contemporary historian: "Philosopher, orator, apostle, legislator, warrior, conqueror of ideas, restorer of rational dogmas, of a cult without images, the founder of twenty terrestrial empires and of one spiritual empire, that is MUHAMMAD. As regards all the standards by which Human Greatness may be measured, we may well ask, **IS THERE ANY MAN GREATER THAN HE?**" (Lamartine, HISTOIRE DE LA TURQUIE)

In his last public address, with the greatest audience of his entire Prophetic career, he began by reminding the masses that the mission would now be theirs- "O humanity, there indeed will be no Prophet after me, and no nation after you . . ." and ended with the formal transfer of his mission of education- "Let those who are present convey this message to those who are absent."

أيها الناس إنه لا نبيَّ بعدي و لا أمة بعدكم

فليبلغ الشاهدُ الغائبَ

The Prophet gave his blood because the world deserved to know. Today's world suffers still, in dire need of something better. The Prophetic mission of education needs to be rekindled. The world deserves to know Islam. America deserves to know.

Abu Zayd