

THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD AND THE SPIRIT OF COMPROMISE

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THE other day I was reading an article on the Utopians and how most of them, living as they did in disappointment and despair, indulged in day-dreams and wishful thinking. The society which they contemplated had very little to do with the existing society at the time. It was meant to be a society free from evil, injustice and, sometimes, from worldly enjoyments. In this, most of the Utopians went to the other extreme. They did not want to make a compromise with their society, maintaining, perhaps, that all institutions in their society should be swept off and replaced by totally or mostly new ones. Rousseau, and other French thinkers, thought that even education would corrupt human society and, therefore, they urged that men should live a natural life like Émile. By insisting on root-and-branch social reforms, most of these Utopians were perhaps going against the course of history according to Hegel, who maintained that historical changes were always a compromise between an old situation and a new one. But this is not what I want to emphasize here. The article I was reading concluded by urging that the wisest thing for those Utopians was to follow a middle course between two extremes, and the writer, to reinforce his idea, quoted a maxim by Vauvenargues, a French moralist of the eighteenth century, which runs as follows: 'Plan as if you were going to live for ever; act as if you were going to die tomorrow.' Now this maxim by Vauvenargues is nothing other than a well-known tradition of the Prophet, stated many hundreds of years earlier. The important point to remember here is that the Prophet was not a Utopian in the traditional sense, but a realist who, while urging people to live a virtuous life in preparation for the hereafter, advised them not to forget the world in which they lived. It was a compromise between the new religion and the already existing situation.

Now, to be able to steer a middle course between a religious, virtuous life and a worldly life calls for a great deal of discrimination and good sense. Otherwise, how could a Muslim live his worldly life and, at the same time, live virtuously and renounce the world? This is a problem, among many others, which faced the Muslims in the early days of Islam, and is still facing them. Islam expected Muslims to solve it by themselves

through reason, because Islam regards human beings as endowed with reason, which should be their own supreme guide.

In contradistinction with Judaism, which regarded human beings as evil and deserving of severe punishment in order to curb their anti-social tendencies, and Christianity, which regarded them as weak and liable to succumb to temptations, Islam maintains that, while human beings may be evil and weak, they have reason, and therefore they should be able, with the use of this faculty, to find their way out and to work their own salvation without intercession on the part of anybody. The Muslim is bound to make a compromise, and the greatest compromise is between his religion and the world. In other words, and according to the philosophy of existentialism, man is free to choose and be responsible.

The Prophet went further than that. He enjoined his followers on certain occasions to be accommodating in matters of religion and not to be over-zealous in following the letter of the commandments. When he sent two missions to the Yemenites, he enjoined the leaders of each mission to be reasonable. He said: 'Make it easy and do not make it too difficult. Be the carriers of good tidings, and do not cause disaffection.' The Prophet sometimes warned against slavish obedience to religious rules without thinking. You will, I think, remember the story of the bedouin who came to the Prophet and left his camel loose and untended. The Prophet turned to him and asked him what he had done with his camel. The bedouin said that he had left it loose, trusting that God would look after it and guard it. The Prophet could have been pleased with this trustful attitude of the bedouin, but he knew better, and told the bedouin to go and tether his camel and then trust. Here is another story. The Prophet had forbidden the wearing of silken clothes. But one day one of his followers came to him and complained that he was suffering from a skin disease and that coarse clothes would irritate his skin. The Prophet, without hesitation, allowed him to wear a silken shirt. There is still another story which is more important. One day a man came to the Prophet and complained that a woman had hit his wife and broken her tooth. The Prophet said that the woman should lose a tooth in return, but Anas intervened and pleaded with the Prophet and the Prophet conceded.

More stories could be given, but the idea is clear. The Prophet was always prepared to compromise, provided the compromise would not have the effect of invalidating the dogma or harming the fundamental cause of Islam. The Prophet gave concrete examples of how one could compromise without helping to destroy himself and his basic ideology. His reason was the guide. Some Western writers thought that this was expediency.

In dealing with people and with worldly matters, he used to admit that they were better informed than he about them. But in political matters in which he was directly involved, he showed the spirit of compromise to a conspicuous degree. He dealt successfully with the jealousies of the emigrants and the supporters and he won over the Qurashites by reconciliation, and he humoured the hypocrites.

On one occasion a quantity of golden ore was sent to the Prophet, and he divided it among four of the reconciled tribesmen. One of the Muslims objected strongly to the Prophet, and accused him of injustice. Khalid ibn al-Walid offered to strike his head off. The Prophet refused and said that the man might be devout and a true Muslim. To which Khalid replied that there were many who said things contrary to what they had in their hearts. The Prophet said: 'I was not ordered to look into the hearts of people.' A similar situation arose after the battle of Hunain, and the Prophet did not punish those who had accused him of injustice, but treated the whole thing philosophically.

He treated the hypocrites in the same spirit of tolerance and forbearance. The hypocrites used to stay behind when there was a rally of fighters, and the Prophet used to wink at the excuses of the hypocrites. The story of Abdul-lah ibn Ubei ibn Salul, before the battle of Badr, is an example of the Prophet's forbearance. The Prophet's behaviour towards the idolaters, unbelievers and pantheists was the same. He was very forgiving. Once the Prophet was asked whether he would forgive an unbeliever who, while engaged in a fight with a Muslim, struck off the hand of the Muslim with the sword and then shielded himself behind a tree and proclaimed his belief in Islam. The Prophet replied that he would forgive him. The Prophet used always to enjoin his followers not to believe or disbelieve the people of the book, but only to say that they believed in the Qur'ān and in the Prophet.

But the outstanding example of the spirit of compromise was shown at Hudaibiya where a treaty was drawn up between the Muslims and the Qurashites. This treaty could be a shining guide in all international differences and a supreme admonition to all peoples, Muslim and otherwise, to make use of it to accommodate their quarrels and disagreements.

After the Battle of the Ditch and the defeat of the Confederates, the Prophet ordered his people to prepare for making the Lesser Pilgrimage, Al-Umra, and go round the Ka'ba. But he told them that they were going in peace and, therefore, there should be no show of strength against the Meccans. Now the Meccans, according to well-established institutions, should not prevent the Muslims from going round the Ka'ba. This was the right of every Arab. Nevertheless, when the Meccans heard that the

Prophet had come with about 1,500 of his followers with the intention of entering Mecca, they decided to prevent him from doing so, and sent out an army to bar his way. In this situation the Muslims were put into a difficult position. If the Meccans insisted on preventing the Muslims from entering Mecca in peace, should the Muslims fight their way through? This was the question. The Prophet decided on peace, and ordered his men to change route to avoid a clash with the Meccans. He took another route and came to a spot called Al-Hudaibiya, where he stopped and ordered his men to camp there. Soon the Meccans knew of the move, and they sent one of their men, Budail, to talk with the Prophet. He was told that the Muslims only wanted to perform the circuit of the Ka'aba in peace, but that, if the Meccans wanted war, the Muslims were prepared for it. The Meccan envoys behaved most discourteously towards the Prophet, and made it clear that the Muslims would not enter Mecca that year under any circumstances. They might enter the following year. Uthman was sent out to negotiate. The negotiations took a long time, and in the meantime there was a rumour that he had been murdered. The Muslims were furious. They pledged themselves under a tree to fight to the bitter end. But Uthman returned safely, and told the Prophet that the Meccans would allow the Muslims to enter Mecca only the following year. The Prophet agreed, and the Treaty of Al-Hudaibiya was drawn up. The treaty ran as follows:

'In the Name of Allah, these are the terms of peace between Muhammad, son of Abdullah, and Suhail ibn 'Amr, the envoy of Mecca.

'There will be no fighting for ten years. Anyone who wishes to join Muhammad and enter into an agreement with him is free to do so. Anyone who wishes to join Quraish and enter into an agreement with them is also free to do so. If a youth, or one whose father is alive, goes over to Muhammad without permission from his father or his guardian, he will be sent back to his father or guardian. But if any one goes over to Quraish, he will not be sent back. Muhammad will go back this year without entering Mecca. But next year he and his followers can enter Mecca, stay three days, and go round the Ka'ba. During these three days Quraish will withdraw to the surrounding hills. When Muhammad and his followers enter into Mecca, they will be unarmed except for their sheathed swords.'

These were the terms of the Treaty. They were at first the subject of a prolonged negotiation, and when they were agreed upon and nothing remained but to set them into a formal written agreement, the Muslims were very upset. Umar went up to the Prophet and began to expostulate with him. He said: 'O Prophet of God, are we not in the right?'

'Yes', said the Prophet.

'Were we not told by God that we would go round the Ka'ba?' asked Umar.

'True,' said the Prophet, 'but He did not say when. I judged that it was going to be this year. Must it be this year?'

Other companions made other objections. They argued that it was unfair that the Muslims should send back a youth who had become a Muslim, and that the Meccans should not in return send back a Muslim who had defected to them. The Prophet's explanation in reply was that a Muslim who would give up Islam by going over to the unbelievers was, in any case, of no good to the Muslims. The sceptics were appeased.

Then the Prophet started to dictate the terms of the treaty. He said: 'In the name of Allah, the Gracious, the Merciful.' Here Suhail objected and said: 'Allah we know and believe in, but what is this: the Gracious, the Merciful?'

The Prophet agreed and said to the scribe: 'Only write: in the name of Allah.'

Then the Prophet proceeded, saying, 'these are the terms of peace between Muhammad, the Prophet of God'.

Again Suhail objected and said: 'If we had thought you the Prophet of God, we would not have fought you.' The Prophet conceded the point, and replaced the phrase with 'Muhammad, the son of Abdullah', and deleted 'the Prophet of God'.

But soon afterwards, while the terms were being dictated, another difficulty arose which again enraged the Muslims. A son of Suhail, the chief Quraishi negotiator, fled from Mecca and came to the Prophet. The terms had been agreed, and the Prophet was now bound by them. He therefore ordered that the refugee should be sent back. The Muslims pleaded with the Prophet to allow the man to remain, but the Prophet replied that he had given his word and could not go back on it. The man was sent back, but on the way he escaped from the Meccans and came again to the Prophet. The Prophet then refused this time to hand him over. A few days later a woman escaped from Mecca and came to Medina. The Prophet refused to hand her over, because women were not covered by the agreement.

The soundness of the Prophet's decision in signing the agreement was confirmed by the revelation: 'Surely we have given you a clear victory' (انا فتحنا لك فتحا مبينا . . .).

This, by the way was interpreted by some commentators to mean that the agreement of Hudaibiya was a victory. Others thought that the words were a prophecy about the future conquest of Mecca. The confusion among some commentators arose from a misunderstanding of the word 'Fataha' فتح which, according to current usage meant 'conquered'. The

word, however, meant something else. (Fataha) فتح as used in the holy Qur'ān in certain places, and especially by the southern Arabs, meant 'judged' or 'ruled'. Therefore the meaning of the verse should be: 'Surely we have made for you a clear judgement.' The reference here is to the Prophet's decision to sign the Hudaibiya agreement.

This spirit of compromise pervaded many of the teachings of Islam. Think of the rules of marriage, the prohibition of wine, slavery, and others: they were all examples of compromise.

The point to remember here is that compromise in Islam was a source of strength rather than of weakness. This is exactly the argument that is used by British historians to prove that what consolidated government and society in Britain was this same spirit of compromise. We only hope that this spirit will be the rule, on a wider scale, for saving the world from annihilation with which it is now threatened.