Forty Nights

With Johnny and the Janissary

The Teachings of Islam
encapsulated in the form of 40 Q & A's

Asiff Hussein

Forty Nights with Johnny & the Janissary

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INTRODUCTION

Johnny meets the Janissary

It was a fine summer's evening. The blue sky had just taken on a golden tint and a group of geese were flying high like an arrowhead towards some unknown destination. The mountains in the distance seemed to be taking on a blue hue and a lone car could be seen finding its way to a little town nestled in the hills. Behind the wheel was a young man on his way to meet a man said to be well versed in a faith he was presently studying – a faith called Islam.

Johnny's curiosity of Islam had been piqued when once walking past a park early one morning a month earlier, he had come across a group of people praying, men in front and women behind, upon dainty mats or carpets spread out on the grass, all led by a wizened old redbeard garbed in a white robe and a bright red skullcap neatly perched on his crown. The lot of them seemed so other-worldly, as if right out of a tale from the Arabian Nights he had read as a child. The group seemed to mimic the redbeard in every single detail with an almost military precision. They stood in neat rows, one line after the other as if in some sort of army drill, only that their hands were folded across their chests. They then bowed down, their bodies bent in a right angle, their backs straight, with hands on their knees and eyes fixated on the ground below; they then went down on their knees, on all fours as it were, placing their foreheads on the carpeted ground.

From a distance they now looked as if they were a flock of sheep and if they had a shepherd, it had to be their leader, but strangely he himself had assumed the same pose; they then stood seated on their knees for a short while before going down again, as if in some sort of ancient arcane rite, prostrating before some unseen force or power, for there were no idols around. They again assumed a seated posture on their knees, before turning their heads to the right and then to the left. Their ritual, or whatever it was, seemed to be over, and he could now see them greeting one another, young and old, black and white and in shades of colours between the two. They seemed to be happy, these folk, whoever they were, smiling with beaming faces, and clasping one another's hands, and even embracing each other as if they had won a victory of some sort.

Who are these people? he asked himself. They seemed as if they were from another era; he had seen some of their likes only in the drawings accompanying the fairy tales he had read in his very young days; but these were very real people. Many of the men, but not all, wore beards, some of these little more than a stubble, and others longer, about the size of a fist or even longer, while one old fellow had a really long one, like the Longobards of his history class. Some of the older folk had hair and beards of a weird reddish brown, though it seemed strange that some of the darker skinned ones also had this peculiarity, which Johnny concluded might be because they had their hair dyed with some natural hair colour, perhaps that exotic dye called henna he had heard about.

The women had their heads covered, some in black, some in white and others in myriads of other colours; some, with their long black gowns and wimpled heads looked like nuns of some sort, not very unlike the Catholic nuns he knew, only that they were all in black; others, also long robed, wore colourful headscarves, like Orthodox Russian women at church or in the cold of winter, though here it was a mild Summer's day; many of the younger ones in their early teens wore ankle-length frocks, and one he could see, a pretty young lass of about twelve or thirteen dressed

in a long white frock with a red headscarf wound round her rosy face, a little Red Riding Hood.

A few of the women looked rather strange or even foreboding to his untrained eyes, for they were veiled all black, with only a slit for their eyes; they struck him as being a rather militant lot, like some Japanese Ninja warriors. Perhaps they did n't like men gazing at them, which explained why they were all covered up so completely. They were a few nevertheless, though they stood out from the rest. In any case, he reasoned, they were not all that shut out from the world like the cloistered Carmelite nuns of his Christian faith. At least these veiled ladies came out once in a while. There was plenty of variety here, even among the fairer sex. At length he could see them streaming out of the park, happy families of the likes he had never set eyes on before, faces shining in the light of the morning sun. They had just finished the prayer of their festival of Eid Ul Fitr after a moon long fast.

So here he was on his way to meet a man who belonged to this community of believers, one whom he could speak to about this faith called Islam. The man lived in a mosque not very far away and as he approached the mosque from a distance, he could see it was a rather imposing structure, giving to Johnny's fertile imagination the impression of a giant soldier rising from the earth, for its blue grey dome seemed like a colossal army helmet and its minaret or spire from which the call to prayer was being made, like a colossal gun flung on its shoulder with a bayonet for good measure.

As he drove closer, the perception changed and he now found himself walking towards a grand and extremely beautiful edifice surrounded by blooming blossoms the likes of which his eyes had never feasted upon before. The huge dome he had seen from a distance crowned a most charming structure with ornate Gothic arches and fine Arabesque motifs. The minaret he now saw not as a jutting piece of martial metal, but as a tall tower with a balcony of sorts nearer the summit, and wondered whether not it was the inspiration behind that most picturesque of European castles, *Neuschwansteinberg* in the Black Forest built by King Ludwig of Bavaria over a hundred years ago, the spires of which it closely resembled.

As he parked his little car and walked past the gate, he could see the faithful in prayer. Tarrying a while, he noticed a young man come out and greeted him *Assalamu Alaikum* Peace Be Upon You! The young fellow, about his age, replied *Wa Alaikum Salam* And upon you be peace! Johnny inquired where he could meet Sheikh Ahmed and he was directed to an old man lost in contemplation in a corner of the mosque. The ruddy old man garbed in long white robe struck him as a dignified looking fellow, with deep set eyes and an aquiline nose and a flowing white beard, a bit like Gandolf in the film *Lord of the Rings* he had seen at the cinema a few years ago. It was getting dark and a large chandelier hanging from high now took the place of the sun sinking in the horizon. It brightly illuminated the prayer area while beautiful lamps fitted on to the walls spread their light into the corners of the mosque including the recess in which the old man sat in calm contemplation.

The quiet old man was referred to as the Janissary by all those around him. He was said to be a descendant of an unusually meek member of the Ottoman Turkish Guard known as the Janissaries which in the heyday of that great empire protected it from within and without and extended its domains far and wide. His ancestor Aslam Beg had wanted no part in a rebellion against the Sultan who wanted to modernize his army along European lines, absorbing the restless Janissaries in the process.

The Janissaries rebelled, but met with a swift response from the Sultan's army. Its leaders were killed and its young recruits exiled. That was in 1860. Young Aslam had meanwhile returned to his hometown of Pristina and set up home to sire a long line of scholars. The quiet old man was the last of the line as he had only three daughters who had gone their own ways. The name of his ancestor stuck, and they were all called *Janissary*, down to the last of the line, the venerable old Ahmed himself. So Johnny now decided to shoot out the first of his questions.

1st Night

Johnny: Assalamu Alaikum Sheikh. My name's Johnny and I'm still very much a seeker. I'm rather curious about your faith, but I have quite a number of questions I need to ask to convince myself that yours is the path. So help me find the way!

The Janissary: Wa Alaikum Salam, young man. I am more than pleased to answer any queries you have, but keep them short, for I am afraid my answers will be long!

Johnny: Certainly Sheikh, so let's get on with it right away. Here's my first question:

What is Islam and what's so special about it when compared to other faiths?

The Janissary: Islam, my young friend, is the way of life God chose for all humanity. It is not just a faith, it is a complete way of life from cradle to grave. Previous to this, there were other revelations which God sent down to this earth to guide men on the straight path, but they were confined to specific nations, take for example Judaism, which was meant for the Jews, or Zoroastrianism for the Persians.

This is why all these faiths take their names from their nation or their founders. Judaism takes its name from the tribe of Judah; Likewise Christianity which originally started as a reformist movement within Judaism – remember Jesus said that he was sent not but unto the lost sheep of Israel – takes its name from Christ. Zoroastrianism takes its name from Zoroaster, or to give his proper name Zarathustra, an ancient Persian Prophet. Even if you consider the polytheistic or for that matter the atheistic doctrines of old, they too have their names in their founders or the countries that gave rise to them. So we have Hinduism taking its name from Hind, an old name given to India and Buddhism from the Buddha, an ancient Indian word meaning Enlightened One as applied to its founder Siddharta Gautama.

None of them apply or appeal to the whole of mankind. Islam on the other hand claims to be universal, that it is meant for all humanity. It holds that all revelations from Adam to Muhammad are in essence the same, which is a call to surrender to the Will of the One True God. They may be different at the social, cultural and spiritual level, but these merely reflect the conditions of those peoples to whom it was revealed. Whereas the earlier revelations were limited in time and space, meant as they were for particular peoples living at a particular period of time, this cannot be said of Islam, which not only covers the essence of the earlier faiths, but also prescribes a code of living that is universal in scope. It provides for the needs of all people in every aspect of life for all times till the very end of the world. In other words - a complete way of life from cradle to grave.

Its universal character we can glean from its very name. What is its meaning you may wonder? Well it has a wonderful meaning, so profound that you cannot help but wonder whether it is more than just any religious message or mission. Islam means Surrender, that is, Surrender to the Will of God. This is what Islam means. The word Islam, if you care to dwell deeper, originates from the word *aslama* which occurs in our Holy book, the Qur'an in verses such as:

To Him has surrendered whatsoever is in the heavens and the earth, willingly or unwillingly, and to Him shall they all be returned
(Family Imraan:83)

The word used for surrender here is *aslama*, forms of which also occur in other verses of the Qur'an with reference to the earlier prophets, as for instance in the story of Abraham:

When His Lord said unto him surrender (aslim)! he said "I surrender to the Lord of the Worlds (aslamtu li rabbil alameen)
(The Heifer:131)

It even occurs with reference to the Queen of Sheba. Solomon, the story goes, invited her to his palace, but when she saw it, she thought it was a lake of water and tucked up her garment uncovering her legs, only to have Solomon tell her: *This is but a palace paved smooth with slabs of glass".* Said she:

O my Lord! I have indeed wronged my soul. I submit (aslamtu) with Solomon to the Lord of the Worlds
(The Ants: 44)

If Islam means *Surrender*, then a Muslim –who takes his name from the word *aslama*- means *One who thus surrenders himself or herself.* So a Muslim is not necessarily one who follows the faith brought by Muhammad. It is anybody who submits to the Will of God. Thus Muslims have been around even before the days of Muhammad. As God says in the Qur'an:

Abraham was not a Jew nor yet a Christian, but he was true in faith and surrendered his will to God's
(Family Imraan:67)

The word used here is *Musliman*, from *Islam* meaning 'surrender, a *Muslim* being one who surrenders thus. You'll be surprised to learn that in the Qur'an the disciples of Jesus are called *Muslims*. We read in the Holy Book that when Jesus found unbelief on the part of his Jewish compatriots, he asked "*Who will be my helpers to (the work of) God?*" and the disciples answered:

We are God's helpers. We believe in God and bear witness that we are Muslims
(Family Imraan:52)

Nay there were Muslims even among the Egyptians of Pharoah's time. In the Qur'an we read that when Moses defeated the Sorcerers of Pharoah, they fell prostrate in adoration saying "*We believe in the Lord of the Worlds*". Hearing this, the tyrant threatened to cut off their hands and feet and nail them on to the cross. But they replied:

Would you wreak your vengeance on us simply because we believed in the Signs of our Lord when they reached us! Our Lord! Pour out on us patience and constancy and take our souls unto Thee as Muslims
(The Heights:120-126)

We also learn that when Joseph's mistress heard some malicious talk of some city ladies about her seeking to seduce the lad, she invited them to a banquet, gave each

of them a knife and told Joseph "*Come out before them*". When they saw him, they cut their hands dazzled by his beauty and said: "*God preserve us! No mortal is this! This is none other than a noble angel!*" (Joseph: 30-31). The word for *God* the Egyptian ladies use here is *Allah*. So there we are. Even some ancient Egyptians lived and died as Muslims or those who surrendered to the Will of God. The Old Testament is silent on these believing Egyptians because the Jews thought only they would be saved as the *Chosen People*. The Gospel of Jesus eventually reached them before being superseded by Muhammad's Message in the seventh century.

In order to be a Muslim, one must surrender oneself to God, and to surrender oneself to God means first and foremost believing in Him as the One True God; that He is the Creator, Preserver and Destroyer. It is equally important to believe in the Oneness of God; that He alone created the universe, governs it and preserves and sustains it; that there is none like Him. The Supreme Oneness who knows no beginning or end, who is birthless and deathless, Who is peerless and absolutely boundless. Let me illustrate this to you by simply citing three verses from the Qur'an which so beautifully sum up His Unity:

Say He is God, the One; the Self-Sufficient;
He begets not, nor was He begotten; and there is none equal unto Him
(The Purity of faith:1-4)

Verily Your God is One! Lord of the Heavens and of the earth, and all that is between them, and Lord of every point of the rising of the sun!
(Those Ranged in Ranks: 4-5)

God is He, than whom there is no other god. The Sovereign, the Holy One, the Absolute Peace, the Guardian of Faith, Preserver of Security, Exalted in Might, the Irresistable, the Supreme. Glory to God! Above the partners they attribute to Him. He is God, the Creator, the Evolver, Bestower of Forms.
To him belong the Most Beautiful Names
(The Gathering:23-24)

All heavenly bodies and indeed all earthly life are in a constant state of submission to God, each even having its own mode of prayer which man with his limited intellect cannot even comprehend. Take the moon that goes around the sun. Does it not obey the laws of God when doing so? The Qur'an reminds us that even animals like man are in state of submission to God, in a sense also in a state of Islam or Surrender:

Seest thou not that to God bow down in worship all things that are in the heavens and on earth,- the sun, the moon, the stars; the hills, the trees, the animals and a great number among mankind?
(The Pilgrimage:18)

Seest thou not that it is God Whose praises all beings in the heavens and on earth do celebrate, and the birds (of the air) with wings outspread? Each one knows its own (mode of) prayer and praise. And God knows well all that they do
(The Light: 41)

This submission of nature to God's Law is so complete that it is seen in every age and at every place. None departs from these laws. For example, can trees bear fruit

out of season? Can a fish live on land or an elephant in the sea? Thus to depart from God's laws is to go against the grain and to perish. We also know now that everything in creation, from the atom to the cosmos, are all bound by a law that compels matter to move in a circular, anti-clockwise movement, a fact only recently discovered by science. The electrons of an atom revolve round its nucleus in an anti-clockwise direction. On a larger scale, we find the earth rotating on its own axis to produce night and day and revolving around the sun to give us a year, again taking an anti-clockwise direction. The same holds true of all heavenly bodies. As interestingly, the circumambulation the Muslim performs around the Mosque in Mecca as part of his once a lifetime pilgrimage also takes this counter-clockwise direction, this universal movement ubiquitous all over nature, showing again that the Muslim submits to God like the rest of creation, only willingly.

In the Qur'an, we are told here that all animals bow down to God while it is not all but 'a great number' among mankind who do so (The Pilgrimage:18). This is because unlike animals that follow the natural laws ordained by God, man, has a higher purpose and position as *Vicegerent of God on earth:*

Behold thy Lord said to the angels: "I will create a viceregent on earth"
(The Heifer:30)

Man unlike the rest of nature has been endowed with a certain amount of free will which he may use for better or worse. Thus a man or woman who beckons to the call of Satan and disobeys his or her Creator is even lower than the most seemingly insignificant creature on earth. As the Qur'an says of such evil persons, they shall be reduced to *the Lowest of the Low*

We have indeed created man in the best of moulds, then do we abase him the lowest of the low, except such as believe and do righteous deeds
(The Fig: 4-6)

However when man surrenders himself to God willingly he brings his will in conformity with God's Will, aligning it as it were, thus achieving perfect equilibrium with the Divine scheme of things. Since he submits his will to that of God's freely he becomes a perfect Muslim. So just as the moon going round the sun is a Muslim because it obeys God's Laws, a man obeying God without question of his own accord becomes a far superior Muslim because he obeys Him out of the free will given to him. This is why God says in the Qur'an:

So set thou thy face steadily and truly to the Faith, God's Handiwork according to the pattern on which He has made mankind; no change (let there be) in the work (wrought) by God
(The Romans: 30)

It is this spirit of submission to the Divine Will that has made Muslims the most God-fearing of peoples. It was this spirit that was captured by that greatest of European thinkers, Wolfgang Goethe when he who wrote in his *Divan*:

"*If Islam means submission to God,*
We all live and die in Islam."

In his letters to his friends we find him writing in a similar vein: "*And thus we have to remain inside Islam, (in complete submission to the will of God)"* and "*I cannot tell you more than this that also here I try to remain in Islam*".

This is why you will find Muslims thinking that their faith is the most natural thing in the world. It is not only born Muslims, even those of other faiths who have embraced Islam think so. To put it in the words of Lady Evelyn Zeinab Cobbold, a British convert, or rather revert, since we Muslims hold that we all are born as Muslims and that it is external satanic influences that make us otherwise: "*I am often asked when and why I became a Muslim. I can only reply that I do not know the precise moment when the truth of Islam dawned upon me. It seems that I have always been a Muslim. This is not strange when one remembers that Islam is the natural religion that a child, left to itself, would develop*".

Now it may be asked, why would God want us to believe in Him while concealing Himself from us, nay not even allowing us to catch a glimpse of Him? This is a question atheists often ask. Let's look at it this way. God has in His Wisdom placed us in a world where we feel we are all to ourselves without His manifest presence towering over us, and asks us to believe in Him, not because of His powerful presence that in itself is enough to scare us into submission, but by what He has done for us through His Signs apparent everywhere in the universe. What can be more beautiful than this? This is what belief is all about, loving God without seeing Him, the purest form of love there can be!

Yes, God loves man and it is only fair that He expects man to love Him. This is why in Islam, man's relationship with God is direct. There are no intermediaries like a Holy See, Papal Authority or a Cult of Saints in Islam. The Jews call God *Rabb* (Lord) and address their priests as *Rabbi* (My Lord). The Christians call Him *Abba* (Father in Heaven) and address their priests as *Abbe* (Father) all meant to reflect the divinity in the priesthood. Not so Islam. Man has a direct connection with God which he establishes through prayer and supplication, not to mention doing good deeds which God rewards generously. Thus in Islam, every man and woman is the high priest of his or her own soul, needing no other intermediary. His or her heart is the temple of the faith dedicated to the One True God.

To believe in God itself is not enough to make one a Muslim. One must also believe in all that God would have us believe. These are the Six Articles of Faith. God ordains that first and foremost we believe in Him; and secondly in His angels, winged beings created from light that serve Him; and thirdly in the Prophets, pious men He sent to guide mankind; and fourthly in the Scriptures, His Words which He revealed to mankind through His Messengers; and fifthly in the Last Day where humanity will be resurrected to face Divine Justice and rewarded with heavenly bliss or punished in the hellfire; and Sixthly, in the Divine Decree, that what God has Willed must come to pass.

But holding these beliefs alone are not enough to make one a Muslim. One's heart no doubt is the best repository of faith, but faith must also have a form and it is ritual that best gives form to a faith, helping to perpetuate it in word and deed. Thus Muslims have what is known as the *Five Pillars of Islam*. The first is the *Shahada* or Bearing Witness that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God. To believe in God itself is not enough, we must verbally declare that we believe in Him, and that too in a formula we Muslims know as the *Kalima* or The Word:

La ilaha illallah Muhammadur Rasulullah
(There is no god but God, Muhammad is the Messenger of God)

The *Kalima* consists firstly of negation, *La ilaha* (No god) followed by affirmation *illallah* (Except God); thus one negates the existence of other gods before affirming the existence of the One True God. Why, because each person blind to the reality may have had a national god or a personal god before; so one first negates these and then pledges belief in the universal God. How beautiful a formula this is, the chant of all chants, the mantra of all mantras - *La ilaha illallah!*

The second is the *Salat* or Prayer. One's faith in God must also be expressed in deeds, and the best way to express such faith in Him is in one's Worship of Him, not once a week as many in the West are used to, but five times a day. This is the *Salat* or Islamic Prayer devoted to God and God alone, cycles of standing, bowing and prostrating on the ground as a sign of utter humility before the One True God.

The third is the *Zakat* or Alms Tax. Just as prayer is needed for the individual to gain the pleasure of God and attain spiritual felicity, the Alms Tax cleanses one's soul of worldly dross and purifies one's wealth. By stipulating that an individual sacrifice a certain portion of one's wealth for the sake of God and for the good of the community, Islam impresses on him or her the need not to be too engrossed with material pursuits, which are, after all, fleeting moments in this worldly life, and to be more conscious of the needs of the community, for to give to man is to give God.

The fourth is the *Saum* or Fasting. Man is a material being satisfying his needs from the bounties God has blessed the earth with, eating, drinking and fulfilling his sexual needs. These are of course essential needs he cannot do without, but at the same time to be too dependent on these and enjoying these solely as pleasures rather than for survival-like eating and drinking- and procreation -like sex- could weaken our spiritual ascent and prevent us from drawing closer to God. What we enjoy in this life are only a foretaste of the pleasures to come in paradise and it is good that we eschew these every once in a while. Islam sets aside an entire month where the Muslim, man or woman, gives these up for the sake of God from dawn to dusk.

The fifth is the *Hajj* or Pilgrimage. This involves visiting at least once in a lifetime the great temple in the Holy City of Mecca known as the Ka'aba and engaging in the hallowed and sacrosanct rituals that form part of it. This temple is a very ancient one, built by the Prophets Abraham and his son Ishmael, Upon Whom Be Peace, and dedicated to the worship of the One True God over three thousand years ago. It is also the birthplace of our Prophet Muhammad, Upon whom be the Peace, who was descended from these patriarchs and whom we Muslims regard as the Final Messenger of God. The pilgrimage brings together all men and women as one nation, wearing simple garments and praying together irrespective of race or social status. They are all equal before God.

But remember these are only the pillars of Islam; they are what support the superstructure that is Islam, holding firm the house of islam. But I ask you, can you live in a house that has only pillars ? Nay, a house needs a foundation, walls and a roof and so it is with Islam. Islam in its totality embraces much more than these five pillars and involves man's fulfilling his obligations to God, to his fellow man and to his fellow creatures to earn God's Pleasure. Submitting to God's Will is the foundation of Islam and earning his Pleasure the highest aim, the loftiest pinnacle a believer can aspire to reach; in a sense it is the roof of the house of Islam. Fulfilling one's obligations to God, one's fellow men and fellow creatures are likewise important duties, like the walls of a house providing a sense of comfort and fortification for the believer. A fault in the walls cannot in any way harm the foundation, but if allowed to crack could even bring the roof down so that the whole purpose of our worldly existence, to earn God's Pleasure, is lost.

Remember that the life of this world is not the end of it all. This world is nothing but a battleground between good and evil. It is a test to determine whether we are fit for a better world. If we obey God and do good, we pass this test and earn the bliss of paradise as its reward and if we persist in disobeying him and doing evil, we fail the test and reap its consequences, the scourge of hell. God has made it easy for us to understand what this hereafter is all about. To put it simply, the good things in life are a foretaste of the things to come in paradise, and the bad things in life are a foretaste of the things to come in hell.

But remember, heaven itself is not the aim of the believer; it is the recompense he or she gets for his or her efforts to earn God's Pleasure. As a pious Muslim lady many centuries ago, one Rabia very beautifully put it: "*O God if I worship Thee for fear of hell, burn me in hell. If I worship Thee in hope of paradise exclude me thence, but if I worship Thee for Thine own sake, withhold not from me Thine eternal beauty*". Thus we have not only to fear God, but we also have to love Him and be grateful to Him, constantly remembering Him in our hearts, the temples of our faith. Such love we can only give Him and none else. As God tells us in the Qur'an:

There are some who take to themselves others besides God, loving them as they should love God. But those of faith are overflowing in their love for God
(The Heifer:165)

But Islam does not stop at merely fulfilling this spiritual longing for God. Everything in Islam from personal cleanliness to a happy family life has been designed in such a way as to be conducive to God's Remembrance. It is a whole way of life from cradle to grave by which we can live a rich and contented life as a community looking after the needs of one another, the closest, if I may say so, to an utopia in this worldly life. After all, it is the only faith that, within the lifetime of its Prophet, could turn a rude and crude race of barbarians who even buried alive their infant daughters to a wise, polite and cultured nation that went on to excel in the arts and sciences within less than a century.

You will find in the nights to come, God Willing, that everything laid down in Islam for living this worldly life has a purpose, which is to get closer to God and to earn his pleasure, while at the same time benefiting us earthlings in ways more than we can ever, ever, imagine. To go out of it is to invite unhappiness. The truth is that man is about the only creature still uncertain of his role in the universe; and in his uncertainty, he has been looking for answers to the almost eternal questions: *Who am I? Why am I here?* He is curious to know the answers, not even knowing where this wellspring of his curiosity lies.

Science, skeptical as it is of everything, cannot answer these questions, only revelation can. God asks us rather rhetorically in the Qur'an, His Word which he sent mankind "*Did you think that We had created you without purpose, and that you would not be brought back to Us?*". Now, what is this purpose God is telling us about? He Himself answers this in His Own Words when he tells us rather tellingly:

I created not Jinn and Men except that they should serve Me
(The Scattering Winds:56)

We created not the heavens, the earth, and all between them merely in sport. We created them not except for just ends, but most of them understand not
(The Smoke:38-39)

Thus if we think that enjoying life is the sole purpose of existence or that God created us simply to enjoy life, you are sadly mistaken.

There is a higher purpose and it is when you lose sight of this higher purpose that life becomes really meaningless. You don't have far to look. Take the number of your celebrities in the West who get so fed up with living their mundane existence that they take their own lives. It seems that life is simply not worth living for these people. This is what happens when you lust after material pleasures. You lose your spiritual values, the values that God decreed for you, and so you hasten your downfall. Worldly pleasures, however much you have of it, can never give you true happiness. As I told you, there is a purpose and everything in this world is meant to achieve that purpose. The laws of nature God created in His Wisdom bear testimony to this truth.

Take marriage. God has decreed marriage for man and woman. It unites two hearts in love and leads to a rich companionship only those who are married can really feel. It steers the ship of love to carry us through the stormy sea of lust. Married people are much more likely to be happier than the unmarried, despite the fact that they may squabble once in a while. Even the latest findings in the West prove this point and so let me dwell no further on it. Marriage also helps as a conduit for satisfying one's sexual feelings, which is a most natural desire. Sex is in a way a divine blessing. It entices humans to procreate, thereby ensuring the survival of the human race. If not for this strong feeling between man and woman the human race, including you and I, would not have come into being. In Islam, however, the pleasure one gets from sex is more than this. It is a foretaste of the delights of paradise which one can only achieve by pleasing God and doing good to one's fellow creatures. Sex is a good thing as long as it is confined to marriage- the more the merrier!

Now suppose we depart from this divinely ordained institution of marriage, so divinely instituted indeed that it has come to be accepted as the proper way in all human societies. Indeed, even polytheists who worship many gods or for that matter even atheists who worship none believe in its need for achieving happiness and for the survival of the human race. Suppose we departed from it, as many hedonists of our age do today, just to achieve sexual satisfaction. What do you suppose would be the outcome? For one thing, there would not be this thing we call civilization within a few generations; it would only be chaos, chaos and chaos, for the simple reason that sex outside marriage destroys the family which nurtures the young and instills in them the proper values to be decent human beings. In fact those who engage in sex outside marriage most often have no desire for offspring. It is merely a question of satisfying their carnal lusts, irrespective of the consequences.

Secondly, promiscuity leads to destruction by way of terrible diseases that have arisen whenever people engaged in it. Sooner or later it got them. Take the venereal diseases of the olden days, take Syphillis and Gonorrhoea; and when it became treatable what did we have- AIDS for which there is still no cure. Strangely, there is a saying our beloved Prophet uttered 1400 years ago, which we even in our modern age should seriously ponder over:

Sexual immorality never appears among people to such an extent that they commit it openly except that they will be afflicted by plagues and diseases unknown to their forefathers
(Ibn Majah)

So if religious commandments don't ensure men follow the ordained path, then the fear of contracting these diseases will. Thus marriage has to exist in this modern age as it did centuries, nay millennia go, ever since the days of Adam and Eve. It has to exist as it is the only way man can live a civilized life and serve God. To go out of it only invites destruction, and this God ensures in a most strange way. And we still wonder why these sexually transmitted diseases plague us. They are a Godsend, my friend, and however much suffering they cause they are there to ensure men don't trod the path of destruction for themselves and their species.

Whether they like it or not, they are bound to live as God wants them to live. They have a choice to make; either way they reap the fruit of their actions, the good or the bad, which is evident to us even in this earthly life. This life is, after all, a fleeting one; it is only a test, a battleground, to determine whether we are fit for the good life which God promises us. The choice is yours, so choose wisely.

Any more questions you have, come tomorrow after the night prayer, God Willing. So go in peace!

2nd Night

Johnny: Salams, Sheikh. Nice to see you again. I found your words yesterday very enlightening, but I have much more questions for you. If you don't mind I can ask you right away. Here's my second question:

Who is your God, the God of Islam - Allah?

The Janissary: Allah is simply the Arabic word for God, my friend. My God, Your God, Our God, the One True God. Whatever name men may call him, if they believe in a Single Divinity as the Sole Divinity that Creates and Governs all that exists, He is that God -the One True God. Whether you call Him *God* in English, *Gott* in German, *Dieu* in French or *Allah* in Arabic, He is One and the Same. Some wrongfully believe that Allah is the name of the Muslim god, an ancient Arabian divinity, just as Baal was to the Canaanites and Phoenecians of old and distinct from the God of the Jews or Christians, but this is totally false. He is the same God as that of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, Solomon, John and Jesus and of all the good prophets found in the Bible, both the Old and New Testaments. To suppose that Muslims worship a different god based just on the name they call him is absurd to say the least when we know that even in Europe to this day Christians call him by different names. Such faulty reasoning denies even the universality of the Divinity.

God, after all, is not the exclusive deity of a particular people or tribe. He is the God of all humanity. And not just of man, He is the God of the Angels, winged messengers created from light; He is the God of the Jinn who are creatures made from fire; He is the God of the Houris, the heavenly nymphs of paradise, and indeed of all the worlds seen and unseen.

The Arabic word *Allah* which we use for God is not a personal name of God. It simply means *The God*, formed from the definite article *Al* preceding the term for God which is *Ilah*, hence *Allah* – The God. Thus this word *Allah* 'The God' strongly stresses His Unity and what's more it cannot be made into a plural just as the English god can be made into gods. This is why Muslims use the word Allah for God. In the Qur'an which is in Arabic you will even find the Biblical Prophets using the word *Allah* for God because this is exactly what Allah means – God!

God speaks to Moses in the valley of Mount Toor:

"O Moses, I am Allah, Lord of the Worlds
(The Narrations:30)

Jesus, the son of Mary, says to his people:

"*O Children of Israel, worship Allah, my Lord and your Lord'"*
(The Repast:72)

And the Queen of Sheba reads out a letter from Solomon to her court:

"In the Name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. Be ye not arrogant against me, but come to me in submission (to the true faith)"
(The Ant:29-31)

Even Christian Arabs in the Middle East, in Palestine, Lebanon and Syria-who by the way are the oldest Christians in the world - refer to God as *Allah*. The word *Allah* for God occurs in their Bible, in their hymns and even in their day to day lives.

In Aramaic, the language which Jesus (Peace Be Upon Him) spoke, God was addressed as *Alaha.* In the Beautitudes of the Syriac Bible Jesus says: "*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see Alaha*" (Matthew 5:8) and goes on to call the Kingdom of God *Malkutha D'Alaha*. In the Hebrew Bible God is called *Eloha* or *El* as in Genesis where we read of Jacob invoking *El*-the God of Israel (33:20) and naming the site where God had spoken to him *Beth-El* meaning 'House of God' (35:15). These Aramaic and Hebrew words for the Divinity are related to the Arabic word *Ilah* since all three are Semitic languages. In later times, Hebrew in order to stress the Majesty of God went further, and I would say a bit off track to call him by the plural form *Elohim* which though used as a grammatical singular nevertheless literally means *The Gods*.

This problem does not arise in the Arabic form. It is simply *Allah* – The God. See the beauty of it. Its uniqueness, its inimitability, its exclusivity, so fitting for the uncompromising monotheistic ideal that is Islam. It cannot be formed into a plural like *gods* or turned into a feminine like *goddess.* It gives absolutely no scope to play around with or conjure up any mental picture. In short, there is absolutely no room for tampering or manipulating with this hallowed name! This is why Muslims all over the world prefer to use this Arabic word for the one and only God whatever language they speak. Why, because there cannot be more than one Allah!

Having said this, let us try to know God, to understand Him and what He expects from us, His Creation. God speaks of Himself in His Word, the Qur'an in this way:

He is God; there is no god but He. He is the Knower of the unseen and the seen;
He is the All-Merciful, the All-Compassionate. He is God; there is no god but He.
He is the Sovereign, the All-Holy, the All-Peace, the Guardian of the Faith,
the All-Preserver, the All-Mighty, the Irresistable, the Supreme. Glory be
to God, above that they associate! He is God, the Creator, the Evolver,
the Bestower of forms. To Him belong the Most Beautiful Names.
All that is in the heavens and the earth magnifies Him;
He is the Almighty, the All-Wise
(The Gathering: 22-24)

God! There is no god but He, the Living, the Self-subsisting,
Eternal. No slumber can seize him nor sleep.
His are all things in the heavens and on earth
(The Heifer:255)

There is no god but He. It is He who gives life and death
- The Lord and Cherisher to you and your fathers of yore
(The Smoke:8)

What we learn from all this is that God is One, That He is Eternal and Self-Subsisting. He is the Creator and we His creation. Just as He began Creation, He can also end it and bring it back if He Wishes. But since He Himself was not caused and had no maker, He is different from the creation. Unlike His creation, He is Self-Existent, and since He does not depend on any other for the continuance of that existence, He must be eternal.

All that dwells in the earth will perish, yet still abides the Face of Your Lord
(The Most Merciful:26)

We also believe that God is Omnipotent, that He is All Powerful and that when He has decreed something, he says *Be !* and it is:

To Him is due the primal origin of the heavens and earth.
When He decrees a matter,He says to it 'Be' and it is!
(The Heifer: 117)

From the Qur'an we learn the prayer:

In Your Hand is the Good. Verily, over all things You have Power. You cause
the night to gain on the day and You cause the day to gain on the night.
You bring the living out of the dead, and You bring the dead out of the living.
And You give sustenance to whom You will without measure
(Family Imraan:26-27)

His Power encompasses all things throughout all time and all space over which He rules Supreme. In the Qur'an we read of Moses in his sermon to Pharaoh describing God as the Lord of all time:

"Your Lord and the Lord of your fathers from the beginning!"

And the Lord of all Space:

"Lord of the East and the West, and all between!"

(The Poets: 26-28)

God is also omniscient, that is to say, All-Knowing for as He says:

It is We who created man and we know what his soul whispers to him,
for we are nearer to him than his jugular vein
(Qaf:16)

To God belongs the East and the West; wherever you turn, there is God's Face.
For God is All-Embracing, All-Knowing
(The Heifer:115)

We also hold that everything takes place according to the Will of God. God condemns in no uncertain terms those vain fools who say:

There is nothing but our life of this world, we die and we live and
nothing destroys us except Ad-Dahr (time)
(The Kneeling Down:24)

The Almighty speaking through His Prophet tells us:

The son of Adam annoys Me for he abuses Ad-Dahr (Time), though I am Ad-Dahr (The Time); In My Hands are all things, and I cause the revolution of day and night
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

Nothing takes place in the heavens or the earth without God's Leave and it is best that we put our trust in Him rather than follow our own fancies. Take the fate of the Titanic. The men behind it hailed the ship as unsinkable and put it to sea against the face of God, only to be sunk by an innocent looking iceberg. What this drives home is that nothing is possible without God. Yes, man or for that matter all creation is utterly dependent on God. This dependence is so complete that even modern scientists who are professed atheists are known to instinctively cry out O God! in times of great distress, despair or desperation. Why because the innermost stirrings of their soul tell them that it is only God who can save them. This is why we have God telling us in His Word, the Qur'an:

Of Him seeks every creature in the heavens and on earth
Every day in Spendour doth He (shine)!
(The Most Merciful:29)

No creature is there crawling on the earth, but its provision rests on God.
He knows its lodging place and its repository
(Hood: 6)

Say: Who is it that delivereth you from the darknesses of land and sea, when ye call upon him in humility and silently (from the depth of your inner heart): "If He only delivers us from these (dangers) we shall truly be grateful"? Say: "It is God that delivereth you from these and other distresses, and yet ye worship false gods!"
(The Cattle:63-64)

In everything we see the Hand of God from our vast universe and very existence to everything in nature from the leaves in a tree to the clouds in the sky and the birds flying high above with wings outstretched:

Glorify the Name of your Guardian Lord Most High, who has Created, and further given order and proportion; who has ordained laws and granted guidance, and who brings out the pasture, and then makes it swarthy stubble
(The Most High:1-5)

With power and skill did We construct the heaven. Verily We are expanding it. And We have spread out the earth. How excellently We spread out!
And of everything We have created pairs"
(The Scattering Winds:47-49)

It is God who created you in a state of weakness; then gave you strength after weakness. Then, after strength, gave weakness and a hoary head
(The Romans:54)

It is God who sends the winds, and they raise the clouds. Then does He spread them in the sky as He wills, and break them into fragments, until you see raindrops issue from their midst
(The Romans: 48)

Do they not observe the birds above them, spreading their wings and folding them in? None can uphold them but the Most Gracious. Truly it is He who watches over all things
(The Dominion: 19)

At the same time, God is Just and Oft-forgiving. As He Himself says:

The Word changes not before Me, and I do not the least injustice to My servants
(Qaf:29)

He also declares in His own words spoken through the lips of His Prophet:

O My slaves, I have forbidden oppression for Myself and have made it forbidden amongst you, so do not oppress one another. O My slaves, all of you are astray except for those I have guided, so seek guidance of Me and I shall guide you. O My slaves, all of you are hungry except for those I have fed, so seek food of Me and I shall feed you. O My slaves, all of you are naked except for those I have clothed, so seek clothing of Me and I shall clothe you. O My slaves, you sin by night and by day, and I forgive all sins, so seek forgiveness of Me and I shall forgive You
(Saheeh Muslim)

But there is one thing that God is so very particular about, and that is His Unity, His Oneness; His right of being worshipped alone with none other sharing in His Adoration. As He Himself says:

God forgives not (the sin of) joining other gods with Him; but He forgives whom He pleases other sins than this. One who joins other gods with God, has strayed far, far away
(The Women:116)

This radical and uncompromising monotheism is the bedrock of Islam, the very cornerstone on which Islam itself has been founded. Some wise men who have delved deep into the truth of God's unity have even felt that God's creation of everything in pairs from atoms with its electrons and neutrons to biological cells with its pairs of chromosomes to animal species including humans with their males and females all point to God's desire to preserve Unity for Himself, in other words His Unique Oneness. As the Qur'an says:

Glory to Him Who created in pairs all things that the earth produces as well as their own (human) kind and (other) things of which they have no knowledge
(Ya Sin: 36)

Despite all this, God shows us that it is Unity or Oneness that is the ideal. There is always in the human psyche a deep-rooted tendency towards unity, which we may

suppose stems from the very unity that exists at the source of all existence itself. Take for instance marriage where two become one in love and affection, the union of one with the other engendering life and leading to the perpetuation and propagation of our kind. Such a tendency we see also in our social life with unifying slogans calling for unity like *One Nation Under God* and even within ourselves, for is it not true that although many thoughts run through our minds, it is finally one that we choose to act upon and make sense of our world. Thus despite creation in pairs, there is a natural proclivity towards oneness which we may suppose emanates from the One True One.

There is much evidence to show that it can be only One God who rules the universe. As God Himself tells us:

If there were in the heavens and the earth, other gods besides God, there would have been confusion in both ! But glory to God, the Lord of the Throne. (High is He) above what they attribute to Him !
(The Prophets: 22)

He also tells us:

No son did God beget, nor is there any god along with Him: (if there were many gods), behold, each god would have taken away what he had created, and some would have lorded it over others! Glory to God! (He is free) from the (sort of) things they attribute to Him
(The Believers:91)

Such verses tell us that the very order of the universe with its unity of design and purpose is in itself testimony to the existence of One Supreme Being as against a multiplicity of divinities. If there were more than one god, they would contend with one another, battle one another, each one trying to outdo or impose his will on the other as we often see in some ancient mythologies like the Greek, Roman and Hindu traditions. This would only lead to chaos and disorder while on the contrary we see that the universe is in complete harmony.

You have only to consider some ancient Indo-European mythologies that have nature deities like the Sky, Dawn, Sun etc to realize the futility of their beliefs. The Sky Father was *Dyaus Pitr* to the Vedic Indians, *Zeus Pater* to the Greeks and *Jupiter* to the Romans. The Sun God was *Suryas* to the Indians, *Helios* to the Greeks and *Tsar Solnitse* to the Slavs. The Dawn Goddess was *Ushas* to the Indians, *Eos* to the Greeks and *Eastre* to the Anglo-Saxons. Now, I ask you, how could the Dawn goddess be separated from the Sun god when it is the interaction of the Sun with the Sky that gives us the dawn. They all work in perfect harmony. So how can they be separate divinities with their own wills and attributes which their ancient scriptures assign them? By the way what would the Sun worshippers have had to say had they known their deity was a mere star out of millions in the galaxy?

We also know that every creature is linked to one another in a chain of dependency, one living off the other to form a cycle of life. How then could they have emerged from different creators? Defies logic doesn't it? Isn't it much more logical to assume that these are all the creation of a Single Divinity working in perfect harmony with one another?

Why, because the creative style is one. It is uniform from the infinitesimally tiniest atoms to the mightiest galaxies. Our universe is bound by certain fundamental laws that operate in perfect harmony with one another, one complementing the other as if it were all one entity.Take the heavenly bodies, the planets and stars. They do not

collide with one another. Stars have their stations and planets their orbits, each knowing its place in the grand scheme of things. The same holds true of everything else in this universe, all working in harmony like a vast symphony in the cosmic orchestra that is our universe, each knowing its part, each knowing its role, each fitting the other like a jigsaw puzzle.

Now, imagine different singers singing at the same time, or different artists painting on the same canvas? Would not it be a chaotic scene? This is exactly what it would have been like had there been many gods. Thus Islamic monotheism helps man make sense of his world, pointing to the ultimate unity behind the seeming diversity of the universe. It helps us rationalize our universe and creates order out of the chaos of polytheism.

God tells us again and again not to slip into the folly of polytheism: "*Your God is One God. There is no god but He. Most Gracious, Most Merciful*" (The Heifer:153). He is relentless to those who do not testify to His Unity, so much so that taking other deities besides Him or associating partners with Him is the gravest sin in Islam and one which would lead to a most painful torment in the hellfire. We as Muslims hold that humanity entered into a covenant with God to recognize Him as their Lord even before our coming into this world. God reminds us of it:

And (remember) when your Lord brought forth from the children of Adam, from their loins, their seed and made them testify (saying): "Am I not your Lord ?".
They said: "Yes ! We testify
(The Heights:172)

It was referring to this primeval covenant that Prophet Muhammad told us:

God will say to that person of the (hell) fire who will receive the least punishment: "If you had everything in the earth, would you give it as a ransom to free yourself (from the fire).He will say "yes". Then God will say: "While you were in the backbone of Adam,I asked you much less than this,but you insisted on worshipping others besides me"
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

Thus Islam is nothing but being faithful to the primal covenant. The material life of this world is however subjected to the diabolical influences of God's arch foe Satan so that men tend to forget their primeval covenant with Him. Hence the need to follow His Messengers who throughout history have called upon their respective nations to testify to His Unity and Worship Him and Him alone. After all isn't it said in the Bible: *Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad* (Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is One) (Deuteronomy 6:4). And did not Jesus say: *The first of all the commandments is, 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord' And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'* (Mark 12:29-30), These words of Jesus known as the *Great Commandment* are considered by most Churches as the very core of the Christian Creed. This long line of messengers ended with Muhammad, whose mission was not confined to any particular people but was to embrace all humanity.

Of course when you study the religions of the ancient cultures, be it that of the ancient Egyptians, the Greeks, the Celts, the Romans or the Hindus, you may wonder why they were polytheistic, worshipping many divinities instead of a Single Deity. You may wonder why if indeed the idea of monotheism had been imbued in men

before they came into existence into this world, why then have so many nations in the past and even of today worshipped so many gods. The facts however are much more complex than that.

It is very likely that the ancient Indo-Europeans, the tribe that gave rise to nations as diverse as the Germans, Romans, Persians and Indians, despite worshipping natural phenomena such as the sky and the dawn even more than 5000 years ago, had preserved remnants of monotheism. That they at one time had some sort of primeval monotheism is suggested by their generic term for god, reconstructed by linguists as *deiwo*s and attested in Sanskrit as *devas*, in Lithuanian as *dievas* and in Latin as *deus*. Now, it is not possible for such a term to come into existence in a primitive vocabulary where people worshipped many divinities. They would have simply addressed them by their names just as primitive people have words for specific things and not generic terms. For instance they may call an animal by such and such a name, but do not have a general term for animal or for a kind of animal such as bird, fish or mammal.

It is possible that this primitive monotheism, however vague it may have been, degenerated into nature-worship when these folk began seeking intermediaries between the Supreme Being and themselves. What should have been considered the Signs of God comprehended in the workings of nature; in the heavenly bodies and natural laws and phenomena, they came to look upon as intermediaries between themselves and the Almighty and later as deities in their own right, which is probably why they ultimately came to look upon the Sky, the Dawn and the Sun as divinities.

It is also possible that since the abode of the Supreme Being was thought to be the sky, the term sky would have been used to address Him, which may be why we find the name of a deity meaning 'Sky-Father' occurring in ancient Indo-European civilizations as far apart as the Greek in the West and the Indo-Aryan in the East, *Zeus Pater* in the case of the Greeks and *Dyaus Pitr* in the case of the Indo-Aryans

The monotheistic ideal, though obscured was not altogether lost and may account for the traces of monotheism, or rather latent monotheism, found amongst later Indo-European-speaking folk such as the Persians and Hindus, as seen for instance in the Iranian Supreme Deity Ahura Mazda 'The Wise Lord' and the Indo-Aryan Varuna, also known as Asura 'Supreme Ruler of the Universe'. Both the Iranian *Ahura* and the Indian *Asura* derive from an Old-Indo-European term *Heshos* 'lord', literally 'He That Is' derived in turn from the root *hes* 'to be', 'existent', which is reflected in forms like Hittite *Eshas*, Latin *Erus* and Norse *As*, all of which mean 'lord' or 'god'.

Although the Old Indo-European term *Deiwos* may have at one time meant 'God', with time, the term was extended to a plethora of nature deities as seen for instance in the Sanskrit *deva* 'god' of which there were many in the Indo-Aryan pantheon. The Slavs and Iranians then went through a monotheistic revolution where they converted the Indo-European term for 'gods' into hostile demoniacal beings, which is why in Slavic *div* came to mean 'demon' while in Iranian *daeva* came to mean the same thing.

That the ancient Iranian faith was monotheistic there can be no doubt. The Gathas of the Iranian Prophet Zarathustra makes it very clear that Ahura Mazda 'The Wise Lord' is the One True God and Creator:

I also realized, Wise Lord, that serenity is Yours,
O Creator of the Living World, that wisdom of mind is Yours
O Wise One, at the beginning, You, through Your mind,
fashioned for us the living world, conceptions and intellects,

put life in the physical frame, and gave deeds and words,
so that one makes his choice through free will
(Gathas 4:11)

The First and the Last and the Giver of Life:

Wise One, I realized You as the first and the last,
and the patron of good mind, when I grasped You in my vision
as the true creator of righteousness and the Lord of life's actions
(Gathas 4:8)

And the Knower of all actions performed in the past and indeed of those which will be performed in the future:

The Wise God knows best what the divines and their people have been doing
in the past and shall do in the future. God alone is the judge.
Let it be so as He wishes us to be
(Gathas 2:4)

Further correspondences between Islam and Zoroastrianism can be seen in the belief that creation was realised in six days or stages, the weighing of the good and evil deeds on scales on the Day of Judgement, the notion of the pre-existence of human souls, the existence of angels who record men's deeds, or question the souls of the deceased, the crossing of the bridge over the hellfire and the belief in jinns who closely resemble the daevas of the Avesta.

Hinduism at its earliest stages was also monotheistic. The One True Deity was given the name of Asura which has the same root as Ahura, the Supreme Deity of the Iranians. He was more generally called Varuna. He was looked upon as the All-powerful Universal Monarch and Guardian of the Cosmic Order. Although compassionate to those obeying his commands and giving security to those maintaining order, his wrath is aroused by disobedience and only he is capable of forgiving such sinners. The penitent would beseech Varuna to release him from the Divine wrath like a charioteer unyoking a yoked horse.
The Rg Veda, the earliest scripture of the Hindus says of Him:

The All-knowing Asura established the heavens, and fixed the limits of the earth.
He rules all the worlds. These are the achievements of Varuna
(RV:8: 42:1)

The Atharva Veda says:

If one were to flee far beyond the sky, King Varuna would still be around about him.
From heaven his envoys issue forth to this (world) and with their thousand eyes
survey the earth. King Varuna sees all that happens between heaven and earth and
beyond them. The very twinklings of the eyes of men are numbered by him
(AV:4:16)

But that's not all about Varuna that agree with Islamic teachings about God. This Veda declares in the same hymn (Hymn 16): "*When two persons whisper, the third, King Varuna, knows it*". Is it any surprise that the Qur'an should mention likewise of

Allah as if continuing the lines: "*There is not a secret consultation between three, but He is the fourth among them, nor between five, but He is the sixth, nor between less or more, but He is with them wherever they be*" (The pleading Woman:7).

Although a multiplicity of divinities were known to Hinduism, even during the Vedic period, there was still great stress on the monotheistic ideal. The Rg Veda declared of Him:

Do not worship anybody but Him, the Divine One. Praise Him alone (8:1)

He is One alone that bears the divine names, to whom others look for wonder (10:83)

Only Lord of all created beings. He fixed and holds up this earth and heaven (10:121)

Indeed some of the most sublime verses of the Veda are those addressed to this Unknown God:

He alone was the Lord of all that is. He established the earth and this heaven
- Who is the God to whom we shall offer sacrifice?
He who gives breath, He who gives strength, whose command all the bright ones revere, who shadow is immortality, whose shadow is death
- Who is the God to whom we shall offer sacrifice?
He who through His Might became the Sole King of the breathing and twinkling world, who governs all this, man and beast
- Who is the God to whom we shall offer sacrifice?

He through whom the heaven and the earth were made fast, He through whom the ether was established, and the firmament; He who measured the air in the sky
- Who is the God to whom we shall offer sacrifice?

Reminiscences of monotheism are also found in later Hindu scripture, such as in the Bhagavad Gita:

He who knows Me as the Unborn, as the Beginningless,
as the Supreme Lord of all the Worlds
(10:3)

And in the Brahma Sutra of the Vedanta:

There is only One God, not a second, not at all, not at all, not in the least bit!

Thus it is very clear that there is a monotheism that precedes the polytheism that corrupted the ancient faith of the Hindus. And yet we still find the reminiscences of that One Infinite God breaking through the chaos of polytheism like the sun shining through dark rain clouds. Take the passages of the Upanishads which I compare with that succinct chapter of the Qur'an known as Surah Ikhlas verse for verse:

Ekam ekadvitiyam	*Qul Hu Allahu Ahad, Allahus Samad*
(He is One only without a second)	(Say He is God, One, God Eternal)
(Chandogya Upanishad 6:2:1)	(Surah Ikhlas 1-2)

Nachasya kaschij janita na chadipah	*Lam yalid walam yoolad*
(Of Him there are no parents nor Lord)	(He begets not nor was he begotten)
(Svetasvatara Upanishad 6:9:2)	(Surah Ikhlas:3)
Ta tasya pratima asti	*Walam lakun lahu kufuwan ahad*
(There is no likeness of Him)	(And there is none like unto Him)
(Svetasvatara Upanishad 4:19:3)	(Surah Ikhlas:4)

Indeed even in the days of the Buddha about five centuries before Christ, belief in an all powerful deity was widespread in India. In the life story of the Buddha we come across similes such as "*Like the Divine Sakra around whom all the devas assemble*" suggesting that the people of his time conceived of the deity just as He was described in the Abrahamic faiths of Islam, Christianity and Judaism, as a Magnificent Being surrounded by angels. Did you know that at one time, the Sinhalese, a Buddhist people of Sri Lanka who are atheistic in principle but idolatrous in practice once did believe in a Supreme Being. Robert Knox, a shipwrecked Englishman whose story very likely served as the inspiration for Defoe's Robinson Crusoe wrote in his book Historical Relation of Ceylon in 1681: "*They do acknowledge one to be the Supreme, whom they call: Ossa Polla Maupt Dio which signifieth the Creator of Heaven and Earth; and it is He also, who still ruleth and governeth the same. This Supreme God, they hold, sends forth other deities to see His Will and Pleasure executed in the World*".

Then take ancient Egyptian religion. Although it has a plurality of deities, we come across a singular deity Ra who is regarded as the All-father of creation, watching over his creatures from the heavens. His character is seen in an ancient invocation to him in an old Egyptian hymn:

You are the lord of heaven; You are the lord of earth; You are the creator of those who swell in the heights and of those who dwell in the depths.You are the One God who came into being in the beginning of time,You created earth, fashioned man, You made the watery abyss of the sky

The most common symbol associated with this ancient Egyptian deity is the sun, so that with time He would have come to be associated with the sun and eventually be regarded as the Sun god which was exactly how the ancient Egyptians regarded Him. *Ra* - His name is however thought to mean simply 'Creator' or 'Creative Power'. In later times when Isis and Osiris overtook him in popularity, he still remained *Re retjer-aa neb-pet* (Re, the great God, Lord of Heaven). That the Egyptians knew of One Supreme God whom the likes of tyrants like Pharaoh sought to do away with to arrogate divinity to themselves is seen from Moses' reminder to Pharaoh that finds mention in the Qur'an:

Your Lord and the Lord of your fathers from the beginning
(The Poets:26)

The ancient Babylonians also knew of a Supreme Creator God, though like in many other cultures, they eventually came to have a pantheon of false divinities. Hamurabi the famous Babylonian lawgiver invokes the Great God as *ilu rabu-um* 'God the Lord'. But he also calls him *father of the gods* and refers to other divinities such as Bel, the Decider of Destiny and Adad, the Lord of Abundance. However there can be

little doubt that they were originally monotheists. This becomes clear when we look at early Babylonian personal names which are compounded with *–il* 'God'. That the name of God was used here shows that a single supreme deity was recognized. Had they worshipped other deities as supreme, they would have had their names compounded with the personal names of these divinities, but no, they formed the names by invoking the Most High God *Il* or *Ilu* in the manner Abraham's family called one of her sons *Ishmael* 'Whom God Hears'. Such monotheistic presuppositions we will find in many cultures of the world.

To show how widespread this belief in a Supreme Creator God is, let us just look at the names of this Supreme Being as He is known by various peoples scattered all over the earth beginning only with *A* as the Arabic *Allah*. Thus we have *Ahone* of the Red Indians who lived in the Virginia region and *Ababinili* of the Chikasaw people of North America, *Alakaluf* of the Tierra del Fuego of South America, *Akongo* of the Nagombe people of Africa, *Abora* of the Canary Islanders, *Armaz* of the Pre-Christian Georgians of the Caucasus, *Anu* of the ancient Sumerians who lived in Mesopotamia and whose name means 'Above' or 'Heaven', not to forget *Amenominakanushi* the Supreme Transcendent Divinity of the Shinto Buddhists of Japan whose name means 'Lord of the Bright Centre of Heaven'.

Indeed, even primitive African peoples believed in a creator god whom they called by various names. The Masai of Kenya worshiped the creator god *Ngai* while the Zulus of South Africa believed in a Supreme Transcendent Creator God they called *Unkulunkulu* 'The Great One'. Then there was *Leza*, the Supreme God of the Central African people, Mulungu of East Africa and Dendid of the Dinkas of the Upper Nile. The Dogon people of Mali also believed in a creator god called *Amma* who created the sun, moon and earth and moulded people out of clay. Interestingly, many such African peoples believed that the Supreme Being withdrew into the heavens after creating humans. They did not have temples to this distant being and instead feared and worshipped lesser divinities whom He is said to have created. Only in times of severe crisis, in direst need when the sky seemed to fall and the universe topsy turvy would they appeal to the supreme being.

Even in the New *World*, we find reminiscences of a great creator god. The Incas, for instance had Viracocha who is said to have existed at the very beginning, before the world was created. He created the sun, moon, stars, civilization and men in his likeness. He sculptured and designed on a great piece of stone, all the nations that he intended to create. He ordered people to know and serve him and was entreated in prayer by the penitent. Among his epithets were Powerful and All Knowing. He was known to be Kind and Compassionate though hard on the wrongdoers who disobeyed him. Likewise, the Red Indians of New Plymouth believed in *Kiehtan*, the Creator God who made man and a woman and who dwelt above the heavens, the word for their deity originally being *Kittantowit* 'Great living Spirit'.

In Polynesia, which was untouched by the rest of the world for thousands of years, people believed in the creator god *Tangaroa* who lived in a dark emptiness called Po and then created the world by throwing rocks into the watery wastes, after which he created humans. Likewise the ancient Japanese people known as the Ainu believed in the creator god *Kamui* who created men and animals. Nay, even ancient China had its Supreme Being, *Shang Ti,* the All-Powerful Creator above the heavens. And in an Altaic story from Siberia we find the creator God being called *Ulgen*. Yes, monotheistic ideas are widespread not just in the major faiths, but also in minor folk religions all over the world. What can explain this unique belief of men scattered all over the world, but the existence indeed of such a God!

If we reflect on how this primordial monotheism could have relapsed into polytheism we can find many causes for it.

One such is confusion. Suppose two different tribes each have a Supreme Creator God. They eventually come into contact and interact with one another, But they have different names for Him, like say the Australian tribes did. Although the Supreme God would have been originally deemed the one and only God of the World, tribal ideas might affect this view with each tribe clinging on to its high God instead of looking at it more rationally and unifying the idea. Thus two gods might emerge instead of one and with time more gods added to the religious sphere as more and more interaction takes place with other peoples. Thus tribalism could well be the root cause for much of this degeneration from monotheism to polytheism.

Another such is differentiation, which may take place when one of the attributes of the Supreme Being are split off and personified, so as to eventually overshadow the importance of the Supreme Being Himself. This was usually the work of petty-minded people who felt that all things could not emanate from the same source, that the one who gave life could not be the one who caused death, the one who gave the warmth could not be the one who gave the cold, the one who bestowed riches could not be the one who caused poverty. So they saw two divinities, one Good and one Evil as the Iranians of old did, or saw three as the Indians did with their trinity known as *Trimurti* with Brahma as the Creator, Vishnu as the Preserver and Siva as the Destroyer.

Well before all this took place in Hinduism, the earliest Hindu scripture, the Rg Veda declared in its first and last books: *Ekam sad vipra bahudha vadanti* (The Learned call One God by Many Names) (1:164.46) and *Yo devanam namadha eka eva* (He is One alone that bears the Divine Names) (10:83.3). By names what it means is attributes. The Qur'an in like manner declares: *Allah La Ilaha Illa Huwa Lahul Asma Ul Husna* (God! There is no god but He! To Him belong the Most Beautiful Names) (TaHa:8). In other words God is One, but His Attributes are countless. However the crude mind would not look at it this way, and hence Nomina developed into Numina, Names into Gods themselves.

Another is anthropomorphism where men who had no clear idea of a transcendent God came to believe that he must have looked like them and had a spouse and offspring just as they did. This may explain why the Greeks ascribed to Zeus human qualities and a family with wives and children, leading to the emergence of a pantheon of deities.

Yet another is excessive love for somebody or something, such as one's ancestors whom one loves dearly, or even something regarded as having a fruitful vitality such as the sun or cow. Take for instance the sun. Many ancient cultures had their solar deities. The ancient Babylonians had *Shamash*, the Hindus *Surya* and the Greeks *Helios*. Then take the holy cow in India where the love and respect for this creature who provides milk and other dairy products has degenerated into veneration and even worship. The same holds true of one's ancestors who men believed were responsible for creating them. They came to view the departed spirits of their ancestors as watching over them and sought to appease them by placating them with prayers and sacrifices which is what the aborigines of Sri Lanka known as the Veddas did, seeking their help with the wild game which they hunted.

Another trait that can lead to polytheism is fear, fear of disease and evil creatures noxious to men. This is why you will find Indian Hindus worshiping the serpent and the ancient Egyptians worshipping the crocodile. In India, somebody came up with the ludicrous idea that smallpox was caused by a goddess and so people began

worshipping this false goddess, not only addressing their prayers to her to safeguard themselves from the dreaded disease but also sacrificing to her.

Finally there is hero-worship, perhaps the most despicable of all, a result of misplaced affections that bestowed divine honours upon someone whom one venerated beyond measure. This resulted in thinking of men one deemed to be 'great' as gods. But there's a spin off from this as well, for others would come to look upon such 'great' men as god incarnate. This is what happened in ancient India where on the one hand we find men being deified as gods, as for instance Indra, and on the other men being considered avatars or incarnations of divinities such as Krishna.

Thus it is that Indra, the tawny-bearded hero of the fair-complexioned Indo-Aryans in their struggle against the dark-skinned natives of India came to be deified as their war-god. The ancient Indians thought that by praying to their departed hero, he would grant them victory in war and so it was that Indra came to be regarded as god, even ousting Varuna, the Supreme God of the ancient Aryans, in the process. Such developments did not bode well for the spirit of monotheism. While in the early Vedas, Varuna was regarded as the Supreme God of the heavens and the earth, he was later dethroned to become god of just of the Dark Sky, ending up as a demigod in charge of water. Though Varuna was referred to in the Vedas as "Our father, the Asura who sprinkles down the waters" - as the one who dispensed rain or water from heaven - in later times he came to be regarded as a mere 'god of the water', eventually to be eclipsed by lesser divinities.

This is not surprising when we consider the fate that befell his Iranian counterpart *Ahura Mazda* among certain Iranian-speaking tribes who came to look upon him as the sun or a solar deity. Both the Khotanese Saka term *Urmaysda* as well as the Khwarezmian *Remazd* used for the sun have their origins in the Avestan Ahura Mazda 'The Wise Lord', the name by which the ancient Iranians called their Supreme Deity.

Man-deities like Krishna, the wise man who counseled the Pandavas during the great Mahabharata War, underwent a different fate. They were transformed into *avatars* (gods incarnated as humans) by the sages who found it difficult to justify their divinity. They claimed that the Almighty, being transcendent, was so pure and holy that He could simply not be aware of the trials, travails and tribulations of human beings and that he had to descend in the form of a human to taste the weal and woe of this earthly life; something like saying that you have to become like a bee to understand how a bee feels about things. This is the very argument that modern Trinitarian Christians use to justify why God had to descend to earth in the form of the man Christ- to understand their suffering. It's that easy for people to fall prey to such faulty logic, in spite of the fact that it goes against the very grain of intelligent reasoning, for if God indeed created man, would He be ignorant of His Creation?

That even the true messengers of God could be deified and regarded as the very things they preached against, namely as partners with God, could be seen from how Jesus was venerated in the years after his death so as to become in some Christian sects, not only a son of God and partner in the Godhead, but God Himself as some Eastern Orthodox Churches hold. This is why our Prophet Muhammad advised us:

Do not praise me as the Christians praise the son of Mary, for I am
but the servant of God and His Messenger
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

It was not only Jesus, but the Prophet Jonah - of whom both the Bible and Qur'an speak of as a great prophet - who seems to have been so deified. In the Qur'an he is called *Yoonus* and in the original Biblical *Yonas*. The name of this great prophet who lived in Nineveh in Iraq bears a great resemblance to the Babylonian deity known as *Oannes*. According to Mesopotamian legend *Oannes* came to Babylon from the Red Sea. He dwelt in the Persian Gulf and rose out of the waters in the daytime to teach mankind to write and instruct them in the sciences before returning to the sea. He is said to have had the body of a fish and the head of a man though his voice was human. This may well be a misinterpretation of the story of Jonah emerging from the great fish. That he taught men is also in keeping with the mission of a Prophet which is to teach men the Truth and save them from Destruction.

Thus it is quite possible that even holy men, Men of God themselves, could be deified due to excessive admiration. Such is human nature which Satan finds easy to manipulate. You will be surprised to learn that even in the birthplace of the Prophet, Mecca which housed that holiest of the holy temples, the cube-shaped Ka'aba dedicated to the Worship of the One True God by Abraham and Ishmael, their Arabian descendants had so much come under the influence of Satan that they actually engaged in idolatry, so much so that prior to the coming of our Prophet, on whom be peace, the Ka'aba housed the images of 360 gods, each one for a day of a year. It was not until the Prophet, who victoriously entered the city after his many years of exile in Medina, smashed the idols and dedicated the ancient house to the One True God once again.

This is not to say that the pagan Arabs had totally forgotten the One True God *Allah*. They certainly knew Him and termed Him as such, even going to the extent of giving their children names compounded with it such as *Abdullah* which means "Slave or Servant of Allah". In fact this was the name given to the father of our Prophet who lived in those days of ignorance. The problem was that although they still recognized God as the Creator Lord, they had come to associate other divinities with him, making them polytheists. This High God whom they called *Allah* was believed to have created the heavens and the earth, only to conveniently retire as though tired by the effort, his place being taken by other deities thought to be more attractive or accessible, like the fertility goddesses the Arabs of old worshipped. These Arabs adored goddesses like Lat, Uzza and Manat when times were easy, but in times of crises, or of utter helplessness, instinctively turned to Allah, who alone had the power to help them in such times. This we see in the Qur'an itself where it is said of the Pagan Arabs:

If you asked them who created them, they would surely say "Allah"
(Ornaments of Gold: 87)

If you were to ask them "Who created the heavens and the earth and subjected the sun and the moon?" they will surely reply "Allah"
(The Spider: 61)

"If you were to ask them "Who sends down water from the sky and with it brings the earth to life after its death?" They will surely reply "Allah"
(The Spider: 63)

As to what made them unbelievers, God Himself answers:

Most of them believe not in God except while joining partners to Him
(Joseph: 106)

So pervasive has the influence of Satan been throughout the ages. How easy it is for monotheism to degenerate into polytheism is seen from the fate of Christianity which came with a powerful monotheistic message, but degenerated into the worship of Jesus as the Son of God just like the Pagans of pre-Islamic Arabia discarded their original monotheistic worship by adoring whom they called the 'Daughters of Allah', the goddesses Lat, Uzza and Manat. Indeed, Christianity went one worse in promulgating the ridiculous doctrine of Trinity or Three in One, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost that flies in the face of the Oneness of God taught by Jesus, Upon Whom Be Peace. Just because Jesus did not have a human father does not make him a son of God. If we were to argue on this logic, we might as well call Adam a son of God as he had neither father nor mother when God created him from clay and blew something of His Spirit into him. What's more to attribute to God the base animal function of sex is debasing to His Dignity and Grandeur.

This ridiculous idea of Jesus' sonship of God, quite naturally led to a most unsavoury development that would have shocked the early Christians, the anthopomorphisation of God Himself, with the Almighty being pictured as an old man with a flowing white beard as seen in the paintings of the artists of the renaissance. In fact, one major reason that the modern West has by and large shied away from religion is due to the Christian picture of God as an anthropomorphized divinity much like a father figure in the pattern of Zeus, which it quite naturally regarded as primitive and backward.

The Jews, despite being quick to condemn Christianity as diluting the monotheistic teachings of the Hebrew Prophets by calling Jesus the Son of God were themselves not altogether free of polytheistic ideas. The Old Testament of the Bible as we know it sometimes seems to understand the pagan gods to be lesser divine beings who have been assigned by Israel's God to rule foreign nations. You will read in Deuteronomy:

For the Lord, your God, is the God of gods, the Lord of lords, the Great God, Mighty and Awesome. who has no favourites, accepts no bribes
(Deuteronomy 10:17-18)

And in the Psalm of Asaph:

God rises in the divine council, gives judgement in the midst of gods: "How long will you judge unjustly and favour the cause of the wicked?"
(Psalm:82:1-2)

I declare "Gods you be, offspring of the Most High all of you, yet like any mortal you shall die; like any prince you shall fall"
(Psalm 82:6-7)

Interestingly, you will find many primitive peoples who believed, and still believe, in a Supreme God, perhaps because the simplicity of their societies did not make it that susceptible to the degeneration more complex societies would have been subject to. Such diffused monotheism is widespread and found even in the remote regions of Africa, Australia and the Americas

In Africa alone there was *Wuni* of the Dagamba, *Katonda* of the Baganda, *Waka* of the Gallas, *Kwoth* of the Nuers, *Ngai* of the Masais, *Omukuru* of the Herero of Namibia, *Arebati* of the Bambuti people and *Nzambi* of the Bakongo people of the Congo and *Tiko* of the Hottentots of South Africa. Many Australian aborigines also believe in the Supreme Being though they had different names for him. The Kulins called Him *Bunjil*, the Kurnais *Mungan-Ngaua*, the Kamilaroi *Baiame* and the Yuins *Daramulun*. In India's tribal areas of Bengal, the Kookies of Chittagong called this Supreme Being, the Omnipotent Creator of the World by the name of *Khogein Pootteeang* while in the Bay of Bengal, the Andaman islanders called Him *Puluga* regarding Him as the Supreme Being by whom all things were created, who was invisible, never born and immortal, omniscient knowing even the thoughts of hearts and the judge from whom every soul received sentence after death.

The modern Western mind is thankfully returning to this primitive simplicity of belief. In the Marvel movie *Thor. The Dark World*, the Norse Thunder god and his race are shown not as gods, but as a superhuman race who even taste of death. Odin point blank tells his haughty son Loki: "*We are not gods. We are born and we die just as humans do*".

To believe in God is to believe in the Truth and nothing but the Truth. Just as the frost cannot dwell with the fire, so the truth cannot share with the lie. Since God is the Truth, the never-changing Unity, all that contests this fact, the manifold deities man has taken in his place or to share in his divinity is a lie. A lie cannot thrive, it must perish sooner or later, which is why God tells the true believers to say:

Truth has (now) arrived, and Falsehood perished: for Falsehood
is (by its nature) bound to perish
(The Night Journey: 81)

3rd Night

Johnny: Salams, Sheikh. Nice to meet you again. I guess we can proceed right away with my third question if that's ok with you:

How can you be so sure that God exists?

The Janissary: It is true that we cannot see God in this worldly life, my friend, but that does not mean He does n't exist. Would you not agree that there are many things we cannot see, but exist, like electricity, x-rays and the force of gravity. Though we cannot see them, we know that they exist because we can see their effects, like when we see a light bulb alight or a photofilm of our bones or an apple falling from a tree. Some things simply cannot be seen, but they exist. On the other hand, your eyes can deceive you, like when you see a mirage of a soothing oasis in the heat of the desert. Tests your assumption that *seeing is believing*, doesn't it?

Human perception is limited and this even modern science accepts. Science tells us that our sight is confined to what is called the visible range and our hearing limited to a particular frequency range. In fact we now know that animals have a sixth sense we humans don't have. This was illustrated in the Boxing Day Tsunami of 2004 which took its toll of human lives in a wildlife park known as Yala in Sri Lanka, but left untouched animal life, elephant and hare alike. Why because they had a sense men did not have. They sensed it and escaped to safer ground before the catastrophe struck. Thus the knowledge one gains from one's senses has shortcomings since everything is not observable. Similarly God cannot be observed by the human eye, but He exists and we know of that existence from its signs spread out throughout creation. As we read in our holy scripture, the Qur'an:

No vision can grasp Him. But his grasp is over all vision. He is above all comprehension, yet is acquainted with all things
(The Cattle:103)

But man also has a unique sense, a sort of spiritual sixth sense, an innate, inexplicable sense that longs to know God, to seek Him and adore Him. This conception of God, even the theory of evolution cannot explain. It has been there since the birth of humanity from time immemorial and has lasted for millennia. It is ingrained, and ingrained deeply in human nature. There is something in man that prompts him to know God, to yearn for Him. There is no race on earth, however small it be, that has not had an idea of Divinity.

Why is that that men, be they in the materially advanced West or the jungles and desserts of Africa or Australia believe in a divinity? Yes, God is in men's thoughts everywhere, from the American Pledge of Allegiance '*One Nation under God'* to the Russian National Anthem *This land protected by God* To Switzerland's Schweizerpsalm *When the alps glow bright with splendour, Pray to God, to Him surrender!* And Britain's *God save the Queen*. He is thought of as such even in deepest Africa where peoples like the Dogon of Mali call him by the name of *Amma*, the Supreme Creator God who created the stars, sun and moon and then went on to create man and woman.

There seems to be in man's collective conscience a primordial reminiscence of a Divine Being who created them and all that exists. Even if you were to tell me you do not believe in God, I'll find that hard to believe. Why, because deep down you know there is a God though you cannot bring yourself to accept it. If you were to jump from a plane without your parachute there's a good chance that you will cry out

"*O God!*". That's how ingrained this belief in God is in us, sometimes coming out in our most helpless situations.

This belief in God is innate in man, it is inborn in him, which explains why it is so pervasive and universal. All this we can explain on the basis of the Islamic concept of Pre-Creation.

Ah, now you're going to ask me what pre-creation is. Well let me explain. Pre-creation is a notion in Islamic cosmogony that holds that the soul of every human came into being prior to its birth on earth. Our Prophet said that when God created Adam, he took a covenant from him and extracted from him all of his descendants who would be born until the end of the world, generation after generation, and spread them out in front of Him in order to take a covenant from them as well. He spoke to them face to face saying "*Am I not your Lord* ?" and they all replied "*Yes, we testify to it*". This the Almighty did lest men should say on the Day of Resurrection that they had no idea that He was their God. So according to our faith every human being has the belief in God imprinted on his or her soul even before it enters the foetus in the fourth month of pregnancy. A newborn therefore has a natural belief in God which is known in Arabic as *fitrah*. Every child, our beloved Prophet said, is born in a state of *fitrah* and it is his parents who make him a Jew or Christian or Magian. Thus belief in God is indelibly written in every human soul and this is nothing but the remnants of the primordial revelation when God revealed Himself to man during the pre-creation. It is Islam that best explains why man is predisposed to worship God, more so than any other faith or this new fangled theory men call evolution.

But beware. Satan lurks everywhere. In the minds of men and in the blood that circulates in their veins, constantly finding ways to corrupt man's innate tendency to venerate a Higher Being by substituting in its stead revolting superstitions and a multiplicity of false divinities. Indeed so pervasive has this influence been that even the Israelites of old, despite being strict monotheists, could not always hold firm to their faith and were enticed by their pagan neighbours to sacrifice their children to false deities like Molech as we read in the Bible. Even the Qur'an talks about this handiwork of the devil:

In the eyes of most of the pagans, their partners (other divinities) made alluring the slaughter of their children, in order to lead them to their own destruction
(The Cattle:137)

So now we come to the question, How do we know God? Simple, we know Him by His Signs. which are the rational proofs of God's existence, His tell-tale signature scattered over all of creation from the tiniest germ to the fiery sun. This is why you will find even a child so very curious about the universe, asking questions such as *where did I come from? Who made the world, Who made the Sun?, Who made the moon?*. What this shows is the inherent God-seeking nature of the child has begun to awaken. He longs to know the answer through the creation he sees around him.

In later years as he ponders over the mystery of creation, he realizes that there must be a creator behind it all. This was neatly captured by well known American Natural Scientist Dr.Irving William when he said: "*I believe in the existence of God because His Divine existence is the only rational explanation of all the features of the universe we can see about us*".

How true. Everything in the universe bears eloquent testimony to this fact. Take the workings of the cosmos which operates in perfect order. This perfect celestial order would be apparent to any man or woman who chooses to reflect on it:

God is He who raised the heavens without any pillars that you can see; Then He established Himself on the Throne; He has subjected the sun and the moon. Each one runs for a term appointed. He regulates all affairs, explaining the Signs in detail, that you may believe with certainty in the meeting with your Lord
(The Thunder:2)

But man does not have to look to the cosmos to understand these Signs. They are all around us, even within ourselves. As God says:

We shall show them our Signs in the Universe and within themselves. Until it becomes clear to them that this is the Truth
(Expounded:53)

Reflecting on these Signs of God and reasoning on them brings us closer to realising the truth of God's existence, which is why we have Him reminding us again and again:

Verily all things have We created in proportion and measure. And Our Command is but a single (act) like the twinkling of an eye
(The Moon: 49-50)

It is He created who the seven heavens one above another. No want of proportion will you see in the creation of the Most Gracious.
Turn your eyes again. See you any flaw?
(The Dominion:3)

And the earth we have spread out (like a carpet); set therein mountains firm and immovable; and produced therein all kinds of things in due balance
(The Rocky Tract:19)

Do they not look at the sky above them? How We have made it and adorned it, and there are no flaws in it? And the earth – We have spread it out, and set thereon mountains standing firm, and produced therein every kind of beautiful growth
(Qaf: 6-7)
And it is He who spread out the earth and set therein mountains standing firm, and rivers, and fruit of every kind He has made in pairs, two and two; He draws the Night as a veil over the Day. Behold, verily in these things are Signs for those who consider!
(The Thunder:3)

It is He who shows you the lightning, by way of fear and hope; it is He who raises up the clouds, heavy with rain! Nay, thunder repeats His praises, and so do the angels with awe;He flings the loud-voiced thunderbolts and with it strikes whomsoever He will
(The Thunder: 12-13)

Thus we come to know God by His Signs. This is the evidence of His Creation which we can reflect upon by using the intelligence He has endowed us with. See how beautifully God Almighty Himself explains this in His Word, the Qur'an, such as when he says:

God beckons by His Grace to the Garden (of bliss), and Forgiveness, and makes His Signs clear to mankind that they may receive admonition
(The Heifer:221)

Soon will We show them our Signs in the (furthest) regions (of the earth) and in their own souls, until it becomes manifest to them that this is the Truth
(Expounded:53)

And of His signs is that He created for you, from yourselves, mates that you may find tranquility in them; and He placed between you affection and mercy. Indeed in that are signs for a people who give thought
(The Romans:21)

He is it that cleaveth the daybreak (from the dark). He makes the night for rest and tranquility, and the sun and the moon for the reckoning (of time). Such is the Judgement and Ordering of (Him). The exalted in Power, The Ominiscient. It is He who makes the stars(as beacons) for you, that ye may guide yourselves with their help through the dark spaces of land and sea. We detail Our Signs for people who know
(The Cattle:96-97)

Behold! In the creation of the heavens and the earth; In the alternation of the night and day; in the sailing of the ships through the ocean for the profit of mankind; in the rain which God sends down from the skies, and the life which he gives therewith to an earth that is dead; in the beasts of all kinds that he scatters through the earth; In the change of the winds, and the clouds which they trail like their slaves between the sky and the earth – indeed are signs for a people that are wise
(The Heifer:164)

A Sign for them is the earth that is dead. We give it life and produce grain therefrom, of which ye eat. And We produce therein orchards with date palms and vines, and we cause springs to gush forth therein. That they may enjoy the fruits of this (artistry). It was not their hands that made this. Will they not then give thanks? Glory to God, Who created in pairsall things that the earth produces, as well as their own (human) kind and (other) things of which they have no knowledge
(Ya-Sin, 33-35)

And a sign for them is the Night. We withdraw therefrom the Day, and behold they are plunged in darkness. And the Sun runs its course for a period determined for it. That is the Decree of (Him), the Exalted in Might, the All Knowing. And the Moon, We have measured for it Mansions (to traverse) till it returns like the old lower part of a date stalk. It is not permitted to the Sun to catch up the Moon, nor can the Night outstrip the Day. Each swims along in (its own) orbit
(Ya- Sin 37-40)

Man is called to reflect upon these Signs. The Almighty asks men:

Do they not look at the camels, how they are made?
And at the sky, how it is raised high?

And at the mountains, how they are fixed firm?
And at the earth, how it is spread out?
(The Overwhelming Event: 17-20)

First, God brings our attention to the camel, the ship of the desert which is perfectly adapted to its surroundings, as if it were made for the desert with its ability to store water in its body for days on end. It represents living beings, all of which are created with the ability to thrive and survive in their environment and blend into their surroundings, a miracle as it were!

He then brings our attention to the sky which towers over us like a dome, a vault of life supporting ether that does not rest on pillars and does not come crashing down on our heads. How did it come into being, this wonder of the world!

He then brings our attention to the mountains which are fixed like pegs on to the earth, a symbol of stability in the earth that have existed since the beginning of creation, so solid that they will last till the end of days!

Finally He brings our attention to how the earth is spread out. Now, we may ask, why should this be brought to our attention if not for the fact that the earth is a globe? God was telling us so over a millennium ago. Despite its being a globe, the God-given gravity it exerts holds us down and makes it seem as if it were flat all over from sea to shining sea!

Reflecting on these Signs expands our horizons and helps us understand the wonders of creation. The camel is but a single creation and still it is a miracle in itself. But what about the vast array of flora and fauna we see all around us, from the humblest lichen to the mighty oak? From the puniest worm to the majestic elephant? Even if all humans on earth came together, could they create as much as a tiny grain of rice from inorganic matter? Could they manipulate the atoms to fashion a living organism even as simple as a worm? Nay. They would not be able to create even a single-celled germ.

They would not be able to give it the beauty with which God has created nature. We know today that much of nature bears the signature of God as it were. This is seen for instance in the golden mean, a ratio of measurement pleasing to the eye much seen in nature such as flowers and mollusk shells, where the width of an object is roughly two thirds of its height 8:13 or 1.618. Such beauty ubiquitous throughout nature could not have come into being by natural processes, but through the deliberate workings of a Higher power obsessed with beauty. As Islam tells us God is Beautiful, and loves Beauty.

It is not surprising then that He should have created His creation beautiful, not the least His choice creation, man, which he made most beautiful, reflecting as it were His Beauty on earth.

He has created the heavens and the earth in just proportions,
and has given you shape,and made your shapes beautiful
(Mutual Loss and Gain:3)

Take your navel as your centre and stretch out your limbs and you will find your fingertips and tips of the toes touching the circumference of an imagined circle, a fact captured in Da Vinci's Vituvian Man. God it is who has created all things in proportion as the Qur'an itself tells us and no better is this seen than in man himself whom He created after His Own Image. The circle is, after all, a symbol of infinity,

and that God chose to bestow this form as an outline of man's outstretched limbs is not surprising.

Then take the world we live in. Until the days of Newton, we took gravity for granted. Nothing seemed so natural as being pinned down to earth. But then came Newton and gave it some thought, and hey presto, discovered a new force that changed the entire course of science. It also made us realize in what a strange place we live in. The earth spins continuously on its axis at an incredible speed of 1000 miles an hour and yet we cling to it like a limpet rather than be thrown off balance every split second. We carry on our lives without fear of flying around in limbo between earth and sky or thrown out into space. The pull of the earth below us and the pressure of the atmosphere above ensure this, but little do we stop to think how they came to be. Modern man should be in greater awe of the power behind creation than his ancestors.

But does he even stop to wonder what power on earth or the heavens explains how a simple-looking Godwit bird can fly non-stop without any sustenance whatsoever for than eight days and a distance of 7,200 miles, the equivalent of making a roundtrip flight between New York and San Francisco in opposite ends of the US, and then fly back again to San Francisco without ever touching down?. What power on earth explains how the buzzard effortlessly stays in the air for hours at a time waiting for the right moment to swoop down to get its food? As God tells us in the Qur'an:

Do they not observe the birds above them, spreading their wings and folding them in? None can uphold them except the Most Gracious.
Truly it is He who watches over all things
(The Dominion 19)

So using our intellect, we deduce from Cause to Causer, from creation to creator. It's like seeing a palace and reflecting on its builder or holding a book and reflecting on its author. It's that easy. Could a palace have come into being without a builder or a book without a writer? Can there be smoke without fire or steam without water?

This is a far cry from other faiths which require blind belief in its tenets. Islam on the other hand gives you ample scope to use your reason and your senses to know God. Take the story of Abraham, whom we Muslims call the Friend of God. The Qur'an tells us how he discovered the One True God by using his intelligence:

When the night grew dark over him he saw a star and said, 'This is my Lord,' but when it set, he said, 'I love not things that set.' And when he saw the moon rising he said, 'This is my Lord,' but when it too set, he said, 'If my Lord does not guide me, I shall surely be among those who are astray.' Then he saw the sun rising and cried, 'This is my Lord! This is greater.' But when the sun set, he said "O my people! Surely I am free from that which you associate with God. Verily, I have turned my face towards Him Who has created the heavens and the earth,
and I am not of those who associate others with God'
(The Cattle:76-79)

In times of yore too God expected people to know Him through His Signs. The Book of Job is a wonderful repository of such Signs, where we are told of God's Signs such as in the balance of nature:

Have you (O Job) entered the storehouse of the snow and seen the treasury of the hail which I have reserved for times of stress, for the days of war and of battle? Which way to the parting of the winds, whence the east wind spreads over the earth? Who has laid out a channel for the downpour and for the thunderstorm a path to bring rain to no man's land, the unpeopled wilderness, to enrich the waste and desolate ground till the desert blooms with verdure? Has the rain a father; or who has begotten the drops of dew? Out of whose womb comes the ice, and who gives the hearfrost its birth in the skies?
(Job 38:20-29)

In the sustenance of the animal kingdom:

Do you hunt the prey of the lioness or appease the hunger of her cubs, while they crouch in their dens, or lie in wait in the thicket? Who puts wisdom in the heart and gives the cock its understanding? Who provides nourishment for the ravens when their young ones cry out to God,and they rove abroad without food?
(Job 38:39-41)

And in the workings of the Cosmos:

Have you fitted a curb to the Pleiades, or loosened the bonds of Orion? Can you bring forth the Mazzaroth in their season, or guide the bear with its train?
(Job 38:31-32)

Likewise we find the Iranian Prophet Zarathustra invoking the Supreme Being who he and his followers called *Ahura Mazda* 'The Wise Lord":

This I ask You, tell me truly, Lord.
Who is the foremost creator and parent of righteousness?
Who made the sun and the stars in their paths?
Who makes the moon wax and wane?
I am, Wise One, eager to know all this and more.

This I ask You, tell me truly, Lord.
Who holds the earth below,
who keeps the sky from breaking away?
Who creates the waters and who the plants?
Who lends the wind and clouds speed?
Who is the creator, Wise One, of good mind?

This I ask You, tell me truly, Lord.
Which artist fashioned the light and the darkness?
Which artist planned sleep and awakening?
Who made the dawn, day, and dusk
that remind the wise of the ultimate goal?
(Gathas: 9:3-5)

We learn from God Himself that we know Him through His Signs. Many of these Signs are so obvious that we take them for granted, even so manifest a Sign like the rain. This is why God reminds us:

And We send the fecundating winds, then cause the rain to descend from the sky,
providing you with water, though you are not the guardians of its stores.
And verily, it is We who give life and who give death. It is We
who are the Inheritors (after all else passes away)
(The Rocky Tract:22-23)

So let's ask ourselves: Who is it that holds in check the waterdrops that form into rain clouds that then shower down on the earth to nourish a parched land, dressing the earth with beautiful meadows as far as the eye can see and even throwing in a rainbow for good measure? Who else but God! Who made the sea sand that soaks up the waters of the oceans so wonderfully without muddying it? Who else but God! Who created the sun, so much larger and so much further away, in such a manner as to appear to us earthlings just about the size of the moon as you see during an eclipse? Who else but God!

Who gave us our food, with which we sustain ourselves? Who put in its taste to make it palatable and its nutrients to make it wholesome? Who made such a great variety of it to enjoy and think of the good days to come? Who else but God! Somebody once said that man is what he eats. Why, because everything he is physically is whatever nourishment he has gotten from his food. But do we ever stop to wonder at the plant and animal matter that go into the making of our flesh and bones, nails and hair. Do we ever stop to ponder how we came to depend on fruits for our sustenance and how is it that every bit of it down to the little ascorbic acid it has is necessary for our wellbeing. If not for such nutrients provided by these fruits around us, would we be alive today to tell our tale. So we are in a sense, what we eat. So who put it there and who enables us to sustain ourselves with it? Who else but God!

How is it that blood turns to milk for the mother or grass becomes milk for the cow? Yes, I ask you, who gave the mother her milk to feed her child and put in it the colostrum to build its immunity to ward off infection in those vital early days of life? Who is it that taught the bird to build its nest to lay its eggs and nurture its young? Who is it that gave the kangaroo its pouch to nurse its young? Who is is that gave the spider its ability to spin its silken web to catch its diet of flies and bugs using tough threads for foundation lines and sticky threads for snare lines. Who gave it its threads ? Who taught it to spin? Who else but God! Our existence in this world is such a web of complexity, so intricate and delicate and yet so perfect, that little do we stop to think of the one true reality behind it all.

We take these things for granted because we take many things in this world for granted. Like why each and every single human being on earth has a different face, a unique cast of features peculiar to himself or herself. A lookalike strikes us as strange while a million faces differing from one another is not strange. Ever stopped to think how, given that there are six billion people out there, your face stands out from the crowd, different from everybody else's. How unique it is, and yet you think nothing of it.

How blind man is that he cannot see the wonder of it all. How he loses sight of the obvious which is all around him. You may wonder why. Well I'll tell you. Human nature is such that familiarity dullens perception. You are not impressed with a

familiar place because you have grown up with it throughout your life. You take it for granted, don't you? Now suppose you are in a strange and exotic land. Doesn't the experience sharpen your senses so that you pay it due attention? So sometimes to learn you have to unlearn and then relearn. Suppose you put on green glasses, won't you see everything in green, the blue sky will be green and the brown sand will be green. It is only by taking them off will you see the truth in its proper light.

The same holds true of our relationship with God. His Signs are all over us and yet we tend to overlook them. Why? Because we are so used to it! That is why God reminds us of these Signs, over and over again so that we know Him. These Signs are countless, for creation itself is so vast and immeasurable. These Signs are also called the Words of God in the Qur'an as they all came into being by His Command:

If the ocean were ink (wherewith to write out) the Words of my Lord, sooner would the ocean be exhausted, than would the words of my Lord, even if we added another ocean like it for its aid
(The Cave:109)

And If all the trees on earth were pens and the ocean (were ink) with seven oceans behind it to add to its (supply), yet would not the Words of God be exhausted (in the writing).For God is Exalted in Power, Full of Wisdom
(Luqman:27)

Yes, God's Signs are everywhere. Think about it. We are blessed with a transparent atmosphere that opens out to the night sky like a giant observatory to view stars and constellations. Yes, God not only made the earth for us, but He also placed it in a place where we could understand the vastness of His creation and so humble ourselves and glorify Him. Think about it. Though the moon is 400 times smaller than the sun, it just happens to be 400 times closer than the sun so that their size in the sky are almost identical to us on earth. This is why we are able to see a total solar eclipse like a halo around the moon. Only planet earth gives us this opportunity. And so it is in the vastness of space. When astronaut Frank Borman returned from his memorable Christmas 1968 flight around the moon in the Apollo 8, he was told that a Soviet Cosmonaut who had recently returned from a space flight had commented that he had seen neither God nor angels on his flight. Had Borman seen God? the reporter asked. Borman frankly replied, "*No, I did not see Him either, but I saw His evidence*." As for those who do not wish to know their Creator after seeing it all, let us see what God has to say about them:

Do they not travel through the land, so that their hearts may learn wisdom and their ears learn to hear? Truly it is not their eyes that are blind, but their hearts which are in their breast
(The Pilgrimage: 46)

Truly is it said: *None are so blind as those who refuse to see!*

4th Night

Johnny: Salams Sheikh. I found your explanations last night quite interesting. I guess there's more to the real world than what we assume to be true. So my next question is:

How can your belief in God stand up against the theory of evolution?

The Janissary: My friend, it's much more rational to believe in a God who created the universe than to suppose that life arose spontaneously out of nothingness. We can see all around us, in all places and at all times, evidence of the existence of God, the Creator of all things. We see this in His many Signs, in the cosmic order, in the creation of pairs, in the balance of nature and indeed in everything upon the face of this wide, wide earth. He has given us the Intelligence to perceive these Signs and so through them recognize Him as our Creator.

It is Creation that holds the key to the mystery of existence. The universe could not have come into being from nothing. Nothing comes from nothing. This is why God challenges the atheists to consider a very simple question about existence:

Were they created of nothing, or were they themselves the creators ?
(The Mount:35)

Any rational person will tell you this. For example, if you were to see a maggot in your meat, would you assume it came from nothing? A child might and some philosophers of old thought that maggots came into being from nothing –spontaneous life they called it – but today we know that maggots are really little fly grubs that have arisen from tiny eggs laid by flies on rotting matter. Would you see an egg and conclude that it came from nothing? No. You know it had to have an origin. As such, the very existence of creation itself is testimony to God's existence. If you can believe that the world is real, then you must also believe in its maker. The Qur'an brings this fact out very clearly when it asks man to ponder over the wonders of nature:

Do you see that (human seed) which you throw out?
Is it you who create it, or are We the Creators?

See you the seed that you sow in the ground?
Is it you that cause it to grow, or are We the Cause?

See you the water you drink?
Do you bring it down from the cloud or do We?

See you the fire which you kindle?
Is it you who grows the tree which feeds the fire, or do We?

(The Inevitable:58-72)

Likewise, the universe had to have a beginning. That beginning is God. In the Qur'an we read:

He is the First and the Last. The Evident and the Hidden.
And he has full knowledge of all things
(Iron: 3)

Thus God is Alpha and Omega. There was nothing before Him and nothing after Him. He is All Encompassing. As the Prophet used to say:

O my Lord! You are the Beginning, and nothing existed before You
(Saheeh Muslim)

In like vein the Rg Veda declared in its Hymn of Creation:

There was neither death nor immortality, nor was there then the torch of night and day. The One breathed windlessly and self-sustaining.
There was one then and none else

So it is God who is the beginning of everything. Scientists today tell us that the universe originated with a Big Bang where all the matter that exists today was once squished into an infinitely dense, ultra-hot fireball called the singularity which exploded billions of years ago to give rise to what we call the universe. But they still cannot tell us how the matter that originated with the Big Bang got there. If as the basic laws of physics hold that *matter cannot be created or destroyed* then where do we ask did the original matter come from?

Then take the elements, the basic fundamental units of matter as we know it. Which power in the universe gets them to combine to give us the molecules that go into the making of more complex substances? We still don't know, which is why British Novelist D.H.Lawrence observed some time ago: "*Water is H2O, Hydrogen two parts, Oxygen one, but there is also a third thing that makes it water and nobody knows what that is"*.

Again ask yourself: What power drives the electrons in the atoms or planets around the sun or even endows the little ungainly seed its ability to develop into a beautiful flower? The sun gives us light it's true, but then who gave the sun its light? The hen gives us eggs it's true, but who gave the hen its eggs? And which came first, the egg or the hen? When you ponder over these questions, you can naturally come to only one conclusion, and that is that there has to be a God and that He is the Power that drives the universe and sustains all of creation.

Everything in the universe has a marvelous design and one simply cannot imagine it coming into existence without a designer. You have only to look at snowflakes, stalactites or sand dunes in the environment around you to realize how ubiquitous such design is in nature, as if the Divine Hand had touched each and every aspect of creation. It all points out to a deliberate design, not a chaotic haphazard development as atheistic science would have us believe. So just like a matchstick needs a maker or bread a baker, the cosmos needs a creator. The universe also has order. like a clock with the most precise clockwork. There is order in the universe and anything that is ordered necessarily indicates intelligence. For example, if you were to gaze at the sky and notice a trail of smoke with the words PEACE would you conclude that this is a chance occurrence of clouds forming those letters ? No, you'll infer that it is a very deliberate attempt to scrawl it in the sky by means of an airplane, in other words, an intelligence behind the letters that have been ordered in such a way that you could easily comprehend it. Would you ever have imagined that it happened by chance. Certainly not!

Likewise we will find that everything in the universe from the tiniest atom to the vastest galaxies is so well ordered and operates in such perfection that it simply could not have come into being by random chance. Indeed, the universe is so highly

ordered that were if not for the sum total of the laws of the universe operating in perfect harmony, life on earth would be all but impossible. It's as if everything in the universe, the totality of the laws of physics, chemistry and biology had all been tailored to make life possible. Take that universal force we know as gravity. How gravity came to be, we still do not know. All that scientists can say is that as the universe began to expand following the Big Bang, atoms simply floated around in the dark void of space and that this thing called gravity emerged as if from nowhere, and began gathering them into clumps that would eventually become planets, stars and galaxies. Even then, the scientists cannot explain how this force of gravity had to be just right for it all to happen. If the force of gravity was a bit weaker, it would never have had the power to gather together the atoms to form the universe as we know it.

If it was even a bit more stronger the atoms would simply have been pulled together into a single mass resulting in a Big Crunch. The strength of gravity had to be just right for the universe to form, and when I say 'right' it's like saying that you have to be exactly a certain weight, not heavier or lighter by even one billionth of a gram. That's the kind of difference needed to determine whether the universe comes to existence or not.

Now consider how the earth and other heavenly bodies swim in their own orbits under the cosmic pull of the sun so that they are suspended in space like a ball in the air without going off course and disrupting the order of the universe as if a path had been laid for them in the vastness of space?

What power in the heavens drives them and determines their course? You certainly know that life on earth would not be possible without the sun, but did you know that even if we did not have a moon, life on earth would not be possible. This is because the moon affects the gravitational force of the earth to stabilize its axis. If it did not, it would increase the earth's rotation to such an extent that a day would be only a few hours long, making life on this planet of ours impossible. Is it any wonder then that God should remind us:

And He has subjected for you the night and day and the sun and moon, and the stars are subjected by His Command. Indeed in that are signs for a people who reason (The Bee:12)

When we see that the laws governing the universe are in perfect order and operating in perfect harmony with one another, it is only natural to suppose that they must have been put together in an organized way - by An Organiser. This idea of intelligent Organiser is best explained by the existence of God, the Uncaused First Cause that Caused all else to come into existence. Such a Primal Cause must of necessity be eternal and self-sufficient, transcendent and unbound by the limitations of Time and Space. This Cause must also be extremely intelligent, given what little we can make out of the universe around us. This Cause we know as God. With Intelligent Design must come the Intelligent Designer and that Intelligent Designer must be One. He cannot be Two, Three or Four. This is a pre-condition of creation and of the impeccable order in our universe.

Some of the greatest scientific minds in the West are agreed that so many exacting conditions are necessary for life on earth that they could not possibly come into being by chance. One of the wisest among them, a gentleman known as Abraham Cressy Morrison, an American Scientist who wrote an interesting little book *Seven Reasons Why a Scientist believes in God*, points out for instance how the earth rotates on its axis 1000 miles an hour at the equator; if it turned at 100 miles an hour, our days and

nights would be ten times as long as now, and the hot sun would likely burn up our vegetation each long day while in the long night any surviving sprout might well freeze. Again the sun, source of our life, has a surface temperature of 10,000 degrees Fahrenheit, and our earth is just far enough away so that this "eternal life" warms us *just enough and not too much!* If the sun gave off only one half its present radiation, we would freeze, and if it gave as much more, we would roast.

He further points out that the slant of the earth, tilted at an angle of 23 degrees, gives us our seasons; if the earth had not been so tilted, vapors from the ocean would move north and south, piling up for us continents of ice. If our moon were, say, only 50,000 miles away instead of its actual distance, our tides might be so enormous that twice a day all continents would be submerged; even the mountains could soon be eroded away. If the crust of the earth had only been ten feet thicker, there would be no oxygen, without which animal life must die. Had the ocean been a few feet deeper, carbon dioxide and oxygen would have been absorbed and no vegetable life could exist. Thus it is evident from these and a host of other examples that there is not one chance in billions that life on our planet could have been an accident.

Then take the unique system of checks and balances that ensure life on earth is sustained. Take what this same scientist said when he observed that many years ago a species of cactus was planted in Australia as a protective fence. Having no insect enemies in Australia, the cactus soon began a prodigious growth; the alarming abundance persisted until the plants covered an area as long and wide as England, crowding inhabitants out of the towns and villages, and destroying their farms. Seeking a defense, entomologists scoured the world; finally they turned up an insect which lived exclusively on cactus, and would eat nothing else. It would breed freely, too; and it had no enemies in Australia. So animal soon conquered vegetable, and today the cactus pest has retreated - and with it all but a small protective residue of the insects, enough to hold the cactus in check forever. Such checks and balances have been universally provided. Why have not fast-breeding insects dominated the earth? Because they have no lungs such as man possesses; they breathe through tubes. But when insects grow large, their tubes do not grow in ratio to the increasing size of the body. Hence there never has been an insect of great size; this limitation on growth has held them all in check. If this physical check had not been provided, man could not exist. Imagine meeting a hornet as big as a lion!

All this my friend is not coming from me, but from one of your greatest scientists. Isn't this itself reason enough for you to at least reconsider the fact that God must of necessity exist? When such scientists conceive of God, they think in terms of a universal, all merciful God, not the vengeful tribal deity the Jews have made him to be or the confusing trinity most Christians think Him to be.

God Almighty reminded us of this wonderful order of the universe well over a thousand years before scientists like Cressy could even put their minds to it:

No want of proportion will you see in the creation of the Most Gracious.
So turn your vision again. See you any flaw?
(The Dominion:3)

Little wonder that Werner Von Braun, the German-born founder of the U.S. space program and one of the twentieth century's greatest scientists who pioneered rocketry and developed the Saturn V rocket that took man to the moon, had this to say:

For me, the idea of a creation is not conceivable without invoking the necessity of design. One cannot be exposed to the law and order of the universe without concluding that there must be design and purpose behind it all. Some people say that science has been unable to prove the existence of a Designer. They challenge science to prove the existence of God. But must one really light a candle to see the sun? Many men who are intelligent and of good faith say they cannot visualize God. Well, can a physicist visualize an electron? The electron is materially inconceivable and yet, it is so perfectly known through its effects that we use it to illuminate our cities, guide our airlines through the night skies and take the most accurate measurements. What strange rationale makes some physicists accept the inconceivable electrons as real while refusing to accept the reality of a Designer on the ground that they cannot conceive Him?

Yes my friend, evolution is unproven and unprovable. The Only reason why materialist scientists cling on to it is that the only other alternative is Divine Creation, which to them is simply unthinkable. Can random chance explain why the natural laws that govern the universe exist, like why the heavenly bodies are all rounded, or why planets orbit stars or why they exert gravitational pull on objects? Can it explain what life is or how it came into existence? Can it explain what power on earth makes the heart beat to ensure we live, pumping blood a 100,000 times a day, a whopping forty million times a year without stopping? Can it explain how the sexes came to be, how the sex organs of male and female came to fit one another so well as if they were deliberately designed one for the other, like key and keyhole, and that too in rapturous delight? Can it explain what impels one sex to be drawn toward the other by the magnetic pull of love and attraction or from where a single impregnated cell gets its power to replicate itself over and over again to form an organism, splitting and growing till it becomes a single, integral and yet multicellular being issuing forth from its mother's womb; what power drives cells that have their beginnings as alike as peas to differentiate so as to form different organs of the body like the eye, brain, bones and skin?

Can it explain what we call the ecological balance or how the food chain operates. How come prey and predator evolved simultaneously, one nourishing the other throughout the ages and surviving to the present day. How is it that plants emerged at the same time and place to be eaten by herbivores and herbivores had to be there to be eaten by carnivores? Isn't it worse than having to ponder over which came first, the hen or the egg ?

Can evolution explain how nature came to have the wonderful equilibrium we see all around us, if not for which life would be all but impossible, like how animals came to use up oxygen for respiration, turning it into carbon dioxide while at the same time plants came to use this carbon dioxide to process their food through photosynthesis, turning it into oxygen, each doing its part for the other's survival? How I ask could this cycle upon which life depends have been created by such life itself ?

Can evolution explain what scientists call 'the balance of nature', the notion which holds that of necessity that there must be some animals who hunt, and some who are hunted; some who eat plants and some who eat flesh. Scientists tell us that if all animals were plant-eaters, there would be so many of them that they would eat the world bare and there would not be enough food to go around. By having some animals feed on others, their number is kept down so that life on earth is not threatened by some mass starvation event. What these scientists don't ask themselves is how the meat eaters came to be. Did they suddenly decide to switch

from vegetarian to meat-eater anticipating mass starvation if they didn't. That's hard to believe as we know that herbivores remain herbivores and carnivores carnivores and this has been so from the age of the dinosaurs. So if they did not evolve, we have to ask ourselves, who put them there?

Can evolution explain the beauty we see in nature, like the marvelous designs we see in the wings of the butterfly with its geometric patterns so very even or the beautiful coat of a spotted leopard? If as evolution tries to explain butterflies with an eye shape on their wings survived because predators from high feared them, how come other butterflies without the trait survived?

Can evolution account for the mystery of sex, this unique bifurcation of almost every species of animal and plant into male and female. How did it come to be and what was the reason for it? Why are males attracted to females and females to males and why do they need to unite to produce offspring? How is it that everything in nature is geared towards this end, this manic obsession to reproduce one's kind? How is it that the plumage of male birds is brightly coloured for courtship displays while that of the females is drab? How is it that insect pollinated flowers are brightly coloured, well scented and produce nectar to attract insects which feed on the nectar in the process becoming covered with the pollen grains and transfer to the next flower they visit. How is it that wind pollinated flowers produce lighter pollen grains that are blown by the wind to other flowers? How is it that succulent fruits are brightly coloured to entice animals and tasty enough to be eaten by them so that their seeds are dispersed to a wider area to spread their kind far and wide rather than take root near its parent and threaten the survival of the entire species? How is it that dry fruits have wings or parachutes to disperse in air or even hooked pericarps to aid dispersal in animal fur?

Can evolution account for the long neck of the giraffe to eat from tall trees or the beautiful plumage of the peacock to attract the peahen? Can it account for the bright lights the firefly uses to attract her mate? Can it explain how human mothers who give birth to a single infant or twins at a time have two nipples to nurse their babes, while cats and dogs that give birth in litters have several, one teat to nurse each offspring?

Can the dazzling beauty of birds, of fish, of flowers all be the product of natural selection ? Can the perfectly hexagonal combs bees make be explained on this basis? How is it that every single organ of an animal has a purpose, for does not even so trifling an organ as the tail of a cow serve the purpose of a fly-flapper. How is it that weak-sighted bats make up for their low visual ability by uttering shrill sounds, the equivalent of an advanced sonar or radar, to help them to find their way ? How is it that carnivorous plants use bright colours and scented nectar to attract their prey?

Indeed, can evolution explain the unique phenomenon we call sight, a faculty shared by most creatures on this earth. Think about it, what a wonderful sense this is? This faculty by which we perceive our external environment and make out objects, discern distances and even enjoy the beautiful colours of life, which we otherwise would have absolutely no idea of. What gave rise to the unique organ we call the eye and how come we all have a pair of eyes for better perception? How come teeth got its enamel and the tongue its taste buds? How come the eyes got its eyelids and the brain its skullcase? How come each hand has five fingers and each foot five toes? Can evolution explain it all?

Ask yourself, could life simply have come into existence from non-life - from inanimate chemical matter? How could living things have originated from non-living elements, in this case inanimate clumps of carbon and other atoms which

exhibit well defined physical properties even when they combine with one another to form molecules irrespective of the influence of time or space, none of which show any hint of life whatsoever. In fact, making sense of life at the molecular level is impossible, nay unthinkable.

Let's just take a single living cell, the assembling 'blueprint' of which is locked, so to say, into the DNA present in its nucleus. This DNA dictates the order of assembly of the amino acids and the RNA carries it out. But there's a problem here. Proteins which are the building blocks of life cannot form without DNA, but at the same time neither can DNA form without proteins. So we have a conundrum here just like the classical one of which came first, the chicken or the egg?

Nature is full of such paradoxes that even stupefy seasoned scientists. Could such a blueprint for life have come into being without simultaneous planning? Nobody, even in the most advanced laboratories of the world, has ever managed to manipulate inanimate substances to produce a living cell, however much they have managed to replicate the conditions of a primitive earth.

Indeed, did you know that scientists themselves have calculated that the probability of life evolving from a primeval soup of organic matter is one in 1040000. Why? Because there are over 2,000 independent enzymes necessary for life. The probability of building any one of these is less than one in 1020 and the likelihood of getting them all by a random trial is one in 1040000. Such a small probability could not be possible even if the entire universe comprised of an organic soup. A typical enzyme consists of 100 amino acids and since there are 20 kinds of amino acids, they add up to 20,100 possible combinations The possibility of a specific enzyme forming by chance in a single step from among so many possible combinations is 1 in 10130. It is extremely improbable that such complex proteins arose spontaneously in the same place at the same time. And yet that is what we would have to suppose if we held on to the evolutionists views.

To illustrate the enormity of the problem, let us take the respiration enzymes. We'll have to assume they all existed completely in the cell before it first came into contact with oxygen. This is because those failing to use oxygen fully, in the intermediate level would disappear as soon as they react with oxygen. So we would have to assume that all enzymes necessary for the cell entered it at once by some coincidence or else were formed in that cell all at once, both of which go against the grain of the evolutionary model. There is no absolutely no way that the components of this complex system could have formed all at once, in the right place, at the right time, so as to be compatible with one another.

How can one explain the manner in which a human develops from a tiny fertilized cell that keeps on splitting and splitting to form millions of cells with the same genetic material that eventually take on different functions, coalescing to make tissues that form skin to clothe our bodies, muscles to protect our organs, bone to give us support, stomach to absorb our nutrition and heart to beat and pump blood to convey life giving oxygen to the other parts of the body and as if that were not enough know exactly when to stop developing when our term is up to come out into the world. If not for it, we would become monstrosities with the cells not knowing when to stop replicating. It's as if it had all been pre-programmed, this phenomenon scientists call mitosis. But who or what on earth put it there!

Yes, life is that complex, from the teeniest cell to our brains which is by far our most complex organ. Indeed could the immense complexity of the human brain or any brain for that matter have come into being by random chance? Think about the kind of intelligence that would have gone into its making, for the mind to think, for

the neurons to act and the different parts to function to control our movements and absorb sight, taste and smell and discharge functions which even a super computer cannot. Artificial intelligence still remains in the realm of science fiction. And mind you, it was the complexity of the brain alone which prompted Atheist Alfred Russel Wallace to switch from godlessness to a belief in a Creator.

The same holds true of every bodily function, each presenting its set of problems science finds insurmountable. Take sight for example. Did you know that the eye is composed of 40 essential components such as the retina, lens and light sensitive cells. If even a single component did not exist, the eye will fail to function. For an eye to be able to see, it has to form simultaneously with all these 40 components that make vision possible together with the other factors that make sight possible such as light sensitive optical nerves which convert incoming the light impulses to an image the conscious mind can comprehend . For instance acquiring a lens will have no meaning in the absence of a retina. It could simply not have been a step-by-step process since in the absence of even one, an eye that is unable to see will become vestigial and disappear before it can fully form. It would be useless until the full structure was in place. In other words an eye can perform its functions only when fully developed, just as the wings of a bird or butterfly. Thus all these components had to come about simultaneously which needless to say is surmounted by immense obstacles that evolutionists themselves cannot explain in a rational way. After all, which random process could possibly explain such a complex development? Could it be blind chance? Certainly not, because life is no random event or accident of nature. It is an enigma that can only be explained by a deliberate and intelligent act of creation.

Then take human hairlessness when compared to the apes. Why should humans have shed their fur for naked skin? Did shedding body hair offer the 'evolutionary advantage' of freeing humans from the burden of parasites like fleas, ticks and lice as some would contend or as Darwin could simply contend "man or rather primarily woman, became divested of hair for ornamental purposes" just as he theorized that the peacock's tail was the evolutionary product of the peahens' choices. Some might venture to suggest, ingeniously combining the two ideas, that human hairlessness evolved because of mating choice as it was a sure sign that no parasites were lurking in the fur of their mates. But then, we ask, what happened to the rest if this were so. Do we see a hairy variety of men or for that matter women among us. What happened to them? Could this preference have swept through the population eliminating these undesirables like the wave of a wand? Did the hairy ones face some sort of mass extermination? Or did they run and hide in the caves never to emerge again?

Can evolution explain why a newborn babe is so dependent on its mother, unlike the apes whom it supposes men descend from. Does not this go against the very grain of evolutionary theory of the survival of the fittest which holds that only positive features survive while negative traits are eliminated through natural selection over time?

Can evolution explain why almost all animals on the face of this earth, including humans, dogs, cats, mice, cows and elephants, have a pair of eyes, the better to see with, two ears, the better to hear with, nose to smell with, mouth to eat with, limbs to hold and walk with and even similar looking genitalia to copulate with? Would not this mean, if we are to explain it through evolution, that the ancestral form of all these creatures should have also had all these features? One can only picture how this proto creature - or should I say proto-evoluture, since evolutionists don't believe in

creation, but evolution- must have looked like since no fossils exist of such a fellow. We must also ask ourselves, how could this one beast have evolved into so many different forms? Could mutation account for all these forms when there must have been constant mating and in-breeding among them from the earliest times.

Indeed it's all so puzzling that many scientists today admit that the evolutionary theory faces impossible quandaries that are outside the bounds of natural science. This is why you often see them employ the term "Mother Nature", as if nature were a living entity, directing the course of evolution, even to the extent of bestowing necessary organs and removing redundant organs or giving creatures special impulses like instinct to organize themselves as groups or communities, notwithstanding the general thought in evolutionary circles that nature is not a benevolent force but a living battlefield where the survival of the fittest comes first.

If evolution had indeed taken place, why don't we have intermediate forms of flora or fauna ? If evolution were an ongoing process, why don't we see evidence of it today, taking place even at the present moment? Not only that, we don't even see forms between life and non-life, between animate forms and inanimate substances. Rather nature, from amoeba to man, is more or less fixed and each species has its own characteristics. In other words each and ever species is a dead end. And if it's a dead end, the only assumption is that it had to have an abrupt beginning. Creatures may acquire immunity or evolve longer beaks over time, but that doesn't change what they essentially are.

That is why there are no 'missing links' between one species and other. They simply don't exist. For example, despite the much hyped story that man evolved from apes, not one shred of evidence of a missing link between ape and man has been found. The only 'missing link' ever presented, the remains of Piltdown man retrieved from a gravel pit in Piltdown, England, in 1912 proved to be a fake. The specimen given the Latin name of Eoanthropus dawsoni ("Dawson's dawn-man") after its collector Charles Dawson was shown to be an elaborate forgery in 1953. It was formed of a lower jawbone of an orangutan deliberately fused with the cranium of a modern human.

Darwin's theory of natural selection holds that survival of a species depends on how they best adapt to the prevailing environment and that those individuals that lack these advantages will become extinct with time. For instance, in a herd of giraffe threatened by scarce food, those able to stretch their necks the furthest will naturally survive. The others will simply starve to death and the result will be the remaining herd of long-necked giraffe. Yet one must bear in mind no matter how long this process continues, it will never turn a creature into any other species. Can you in your wildest stretch of imagination imagine a giraffe originating from a horse. Horses always remain horses and never become anything else.

Ask yourself whether acquiring a new physical trait, say for instance, the longer beaks of birds that have evolved to drink milk from milk bottles change the genetic structure of a creature? It simply cannot. In the supposed transition from sea to dry land which evolutionists postulate, one may ask how could fishes' gills have turned into lungs and their fins into legs, and that too all at once? How could birds have evolved from reptiles, when their wings differ so much structurally from the scales of reptiles? How could they, when reptiles are cold blooded and birds warm blooded?

Notwithstanding this obstacle, evolutionists hang on to mutations that could give rise to new species. But little is it known that mutant genes are almost always harmful and hardly if ever give rise to good traits. Scientists pursuing this elusive dream have exposed countless generations of fruit flies to radiation to evolve a

higher species, but only obtained sterile, defective or hideous creatures with legs protruding from their heads. Further, we must ask ourselves whether we have been sitting around for millennia just waiting for favorable mutations to occur and then anxiously guard ourselves against others that are harmful when it is beyond our control to do so. One might as well say that a magic wand suddenly appeared from nowhere to change the frog to a prince.

The fact is that life on earth emerged all of a sudden and not through a series of mindless accidents. The oldest fossil record, that of the Cambrian, said to be about 500 million years old, contains very advanced forms of life with eyes, gills and other organs all of which seem to have emerged suddenly without any primitive forms preceding them. This explosion of life all of a sudden has baffled scientists. Trilobites for instance had extraordinarily complex eyes consisting of hundreds of comb-like components and a double-lens structure. And snails, crustaceans, starfish and sea urchins of the time show the exact structures they do today. Where then are the intermediate forms in the fossil record? Surely there would have been countless forms of them, but none are to be found.

The same holds true of plants. Not a single fossil has been found showing any evidence of one plant evolving into another. There exist no intermediate forms. Despite so many plant fossils been unearthed, not one has been shown to be the ancestral form of another. They are all perfectly formed, flawless and beautiful as their counterparts are today. They are also structurally very different from one another. Indeed can one imagine that weeds, grasses, plants and trees so vastly different from one another have emerged from a common source ? Certainly not.

Although we know that in nature instances of evolution do take place like the long beaks of birds that have evolved in response to pinch milk from milk bottles, they do not cross their bounds to transform one species into another. Rather we have to look upon such developments as an emanation of the boundless mercy of God, in providing these poor birds the ability to get their sustenance. How else could they have got their long beaks? As the old saying goes: God gave us teeth, he'll give us bread!

What all this shows is that all life originated in a single act by an Intelligent Creator rather than evolving from a lower to a higher state as the evolutionists would have us believe. Yet little do they realize that in their zeal in deceiving others, they are only deceiving themselves. Honest scientists are taught never to overlook anything, but yet they overlook the fact of God, denying even the first principle of science.

The fact of the matter is that the most scientific explanation for the world around us is divine creation. To believe in evolution is like saying you could turn out a beautiful castle Disneyland style complete with spires and chandeliers by continuously bombarding a range of rugged mountains from high. Yet, the more we dive into the wellsprings of the natural order, the more convinced we become that the greatest problems in science cannot be solved without believing in God. It restores our faith rather than making us doubt it.

5th Night

Johnny: Salams Sheikh. I quite agree with you that believing in a God who created the universe is much more rational than supposing that the world came out of nothingness. My next question is:

Why would you think God is Merciful in spite of all the suffering we see around us?

The Janissary: To believe in God is also to believe in His Mercy, an inestimable, incomparable, infinite Mercy that encompasses all Creation. This Mercy we see all around us, in the love of mother for her child, in the kindness man and beast show to their kind and in the beauty and balance of our world, though we hardly notice it, taking it for granted as it were. We see this mercy in the good things in life we are blessed with to satisfy our needs - food to satisfy our hunger, drink to satiate our thirst and clothing to cover our nakedness. And not just us, even the tiniest creatures are blessed with these things. Humans have been given bare skin and so have been provided clothes, but cats have fur that serve as a natural coat and birds have feathers and down that protect them from the outside environment.

Our skins though not providing the kind of cover animals are blessed with still serve a purpose, clothing our internals like the case of a clock and giving us external forms pleasing to the eye. But that's not all, it's a natural thermostat since its pores open out when the heat is on and contract when it is cold. When the pores open you sweat and reduce your body temperature and when they close you maintain your temperature to survive the cold. But hold on, there's more to it. Your skin's also an alarm siren. It is fitted with pain receptors to sense pain so that you can avoid harm to your body. Imagine you didn't feel pain? You could be bitten by a scorpion and not know a thing about it, until it takes its toll on you. And yet it's an alarm that knows when to stop. Just in case you're being eaten alive by a tiger and can't take the pain, your body goes into shock so that you feel no pain till you pass out or pass away!

Then take your eyes, your window to the world. Its not just a lens by which you find your way in this physical world, but so much more, a kaleidoscope that lets you savour the beauty of creation in all its colour and splendour, its tints and tones and wondrous shapes that move before you like a perennial panorama. And yet there's so much more to it than meets the eye, for it knows how to take just enough light to make it all possible, reducing its iris and expanding its pupil to let in maximum light in dim light and expanding its iris and reducing its pupil to prevent excessive light flooding the organ and harming its light sensitive cells. It's that well designed, like a dam in a hydropower plant that takes in enough water to drive its turbines and light our homes, but keeps the rest at bay.

Think of it, would you part with your two eyes for all the wealth in the world? Certainly not. That is the worth of your eyes. But still you take it for granted. Now suppose you were a King, and you found yourself in a barren land dying of thirst. Somebody comes to you with a bowl of water and in exchange for it asks you to write away your kingdom to him. Won't you? That is the worth of a little water. It's worth more than a kingdom because your very life depends on it. And still we take it all for granted. Indeed the very air we breath that keeps us alive is from His Mercy and we take it for granted, giving little thanks to God. Has it ever struck you that the most important things in life - like air and water- are free while it is those things we can do without - like gold and diamonds - that come with a big price.

It is sad that many of us in our blindness do not even realize what the source of all this mercy is. If only we were to give it some thought we would realize that there has to be a source, a wellspring from which all this universal mercy arises. We don't have far to look. God our Creator Lord clearly tells us:

My Mercy extends to all things. That (Mercy) I shall ordain for those who do right, and practice regular charity and who believe in Our Signs
(The Heights:156)

His Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) explains this All-encompassing Mercy in the following vein:

God has divided Mercy into one hundred parts, and He kept ninety-nine parts with Him and sent down one part on the earth, and because of that one single part, His creatures are merciful to each other, so that even the mare lifts up its hoof away from its baby animal, lest it should trample on it
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

So here we have the explanation for a beautiful and reassuring trait that even the theory of evolution with its emphasis on the 'Survival of the Fittest' cannot explain – a mother's love, compassion for one's kind and even for those that are not. A trait that ensures that the infant, the most helpless creature on earth, survives and grows to his or her full years by God's Grace, a trait that ensures that man survives even when he cannot earn a living when advanced in years when others who are near and dear to him shoulder that responsibility. It is only when you become a parent will you really understand how great this love is.

A wise man from the west once said: "*Before I had children of my own I knew God would not forget me; when I had children I knew He cannot forget me*". This is how a pious man once expressed how strong God's love for man was, and what he experienced as a parent was only a fraction of that love God has for His Creation. So all this mercy and compassion we see in the world around us is simply a reflection of the outpourings of God's unending Mercy.

Pondering thus we discover a God whose All Embracing Mercy is reflected in our worldly life, an ever so intimate mercy encompassing all aspects of our lives from cradle to grave. Take the case of the Sun He created for us. It floods the sky with its light and so we have day to see our surroundings and get on with our lives. Its rays with its range of seven hues enables us to distinguish colour in its different combinations. It also provides plants with energy, so that through photosynthesis they get their nourishment, forming the basis of the food chain that ensures the survival of every other living creature including us humans. By its rising and setting it gives us a count of our days so that we can measure time. In like manner the fire we kindle gives us heat to cook our meals and light our hearths when nipped by the winter's cold. The trees around us give us food and shade while plants and minerals give us the medicines we need to fight the ills that affect us, as if it were all in-built in nature.

Then take the case of a human baby, perhaps the most helpless creature on earth. Consider how it gets its sustenance even before its birth by means of the umbilical cord and after birth how it gets milk from its mother who has only to hold it to her breast. As soon as the growing child needs better nourishment through solid food, it starts getting its teeth as if by some miracle and the mother's milk disappears, again

as if some unseen force had taken it away. And as if that were not enough, the lactating mother is provided with a natural mechanism of birth control so long as she nurses her infant, ensuring her births are spaced and as importantly the nursling is not deprived of its due share of milk by an untimely sibling competing for the milk it so badly needs to nourish itself. Can evolution explain this? Come to think of it, can evolution even explain the love and care the mother gives her child, a unique bond that none can sunder?

Then take the making of man; how each and every cell in his body works in complete harmony like bees in a beehive, busily going about doing their jobs while we enjoy our days,, building damaged tissue and staving off invaders. When we bleed, our blood clots and skin heals, when a germ gets in to our bodies our white cells fight and gobble it down like little mechanics fixing a fault as soon as it's detected.

Each knows its function; each knows its purpose; each knows its part in the great drama of life. How can we even count our blessings, even those blessings we so often take for granted like that wonderful faculty known as memory which gives us our very identity or those organs which we cannot do without like eyes to see with, nose to smell with and mouth to eat with, all so perfectly placed in relation to one another to ensure we live life with ease? And even if that were not enough, how can we thank God even for the little mercies He has given us, like putting taste buds on our tongues to ensure we enjoy our meals so heartily!

It is this same wonder of creation that the Prophet Job expressed many thousands of years ago:

Did you not pour me out as milk, and thicken me like cheese?
With skin and flesh you clothed me, with bones and sinews knit me together
Grace and favour you granted me and Your Providence has preserved my spirit
(Job 10: 10-12)

And the same that Jane Montgomery Campbell expressed when she penned those beautiful lines:

We plough the fields and scatter the good seed on the land,
But it is fed and watered by God Almighty's Hand
He sends the snow in winter, the Warmth to swell the grain
The breezes and the sunshine and the soft refreshing rain

Yes, God's Mercy is seen everywhere, in the sun and the seasons it brings and the wind and the rain it scatters. It is seen when the sun, the clouds and the wind all keep busy so that we have our daily bread and the saltless water we drink.

It is seen in every aspect of creation, from the beasts of the land to the birds in the sky and fish in the sea. Each creature has its own unique set of faculties which help it survive. The owl has sharp vision even at night while the bat has little or no vision, though it has in its place a unique sonar system, a combination of their high pitched voices and hearing that operates like a radar, enabling them to find their way in the darkest recesses of caves and other haunts. The tarsier, a lemur-like mammal has eyes that cannot turn in their sockets, so that they have to stare straight ahead, but it is adequately compensated by its flexible neck that lets it turn its head 180 degrees either way, added to its other faculties like its paper-thin ears that can furl and turn to

pick up even the faintest sounds. The fox has its scent and the lion its fangs, each equipped for its own survival.

These faculties are in-built into these creatures. This is why birds migrate thousands of miles to warmer climes when winter approaches and food becomes scarce. Something in them tells them it's time to take off on their long flights to continents thousands of miles away and when the season is over and spring approaches, to return to their native land, very often to their very same nests. All this without any landmark whatsoever as they fly over sea where there are no landmarks and at night when they cannot be seen even on land. This is why baby turtles as soon as they hatch out of their eggs, fan out to reach the seas so that they will not easily fall victims to predators, and if that were not enough, after spending almost a lifetime in the waters they return to the very spot they were born to lay their eggs, as if a homing device had been implanted in them at birth.

This is why European eels on maturity migrate en masse from lakes and rivers everywhere in Europe across thousands of miles of deep ocean bound for the same abysmal depths near Bermuda in the Atlantic where they breed and die. Their young, with no evident means of knowing anything except that they are in a wilderness of water, will find their way not only to the very shores whence their parents came but even to the same rivers and lakes. More remarkable is the fact that the maturity of these eels is delayed by a year or so to make up for their longer journey. So I ask you, who put this inborn instinct into them? Who else but God, who brings home all his creatures.

Yes, God's Hand we see everywhere, guiding the course of life, colouring and perfuming flowers and giving taste to fruits, teaching birds to sing their melodious songs and insects to cry out their mating calls, spiders to spin their webs to hunt their prey and bees to go in search of nectar to feed their young.

Who gave human mothers a pair of breasts overflowing with milk to feed a babe or two and cats and dogs several more teats to feed their large litters? Who gave the birds their wings to fly thousands of miles over ocean waters to warmer climes with the approach of the cold season? Who gave the fish in the deepest and darkest depths of the oceans their bioluminescence to light the way, flashing away their colours to rival our lamplit streets in the dead of night? Who gave spiders their threads and bees their homing skills. Who else but God who is the Lord of the Bee as He is of Man:

And your Lord taught the bee to build its cells in hills, on trees and in (men's) habitations. Then to eat of all the produce (of the earth) and find with skill the spacious paths of its Lord. There issues from within their bodies a drink of varying colours wherein is healing for men – Verily in this is a Sign for those who give thought (The Bee: 68-69)

We see God's Merciful Hand everywhere, but refuse to acknowledge it. Contrary to what evolutionists would have us believe, nature is not a battleground where only the fittest survive in the law of the jungle. It is full of love and compassion, from the kindness a mother shows her child to the kindness creatures show to their own kind or even other kinds. It is simply not a case of the selfish gene perpetuating itself at the expense of others. If we are to go by Darwin's theory, every being fights for its own survival and the continuation of its species. Helping other creatures might even decrease its own chances of surviving, and therefore, evolution, if at all it took place, should have eliminated this type of behavior long ago. Why indeed do living beings

help one another? Why is altruism so evident everywhere in nature from a colony of ants to a hive of bees, and in birds and higher forms of life ? Evolutionists cannot rationally explain such behaviour because according to their flawed logic, nature is a ruthless order where only the fittest survive. But Islam can. They are all simply reflections of the boundless mercy of the Almighty.

It once happened that one of the prophet's daughters sent a messenger calling him to visit her and see her son who was on his deathbed. He sat with the child and its eyes froze in their places like stones. Seeing this, the Prophet wept. His companion asked him: "*What is this, O Prophet of God?*". He said: "*This is a mercy that God the Exalted places in the hearts of His Slaves. Truly God is Merciful to those who are merciful to others*" (Saheeh Al-Bukhari). In the Qur'an we read of Jacob telling his sons: "*Truly no one despairs of God's Soothing Mercy, except those who have no faith*" (Joseph: 87).

To believe in God is also to believe in His Mercy. As God Himself tells us:

Your Lord is Full of Mercy. All Embracing
(The Cattle:147)

If you were to count the favours of God, you would not be able to number them
(The Bee:18)

God Himself tells us of some of the Mercies He has given us:

And out of His mercy He made for you the night and the day that you may rest therein and (by day) seek from his bounty and (that) perhaps you will be grateful
(The Narrations:73)

This is why we are constantly reminded in the Qur'an of God's Mercy. All but one chapter of the Qur'an (Chapter of Repentance) begin with the words: *Bismillahi ar-Rahman ar-Rahim* - In the name of God, The Most Merciful, The Dispenser of Mercy. Even the Opening Chapter of the Holy Book Al-Fatiha contains these attributes in its very body "*Praise be to God, the Lord of All the Worlds; the Most Merciful, the Dispenser of Mercy*". Though both these twin titles of God *Ar-Rahman Ar-Rahim* are derived from the Arabic root *r-h-m* meaning 'mercy', 'compassion' 'loving kindness' there is a subtle difference between the two, *Ar-Rahman* describes God's nature of being All-Merciful, while *Ar-Raheem* describes His acts of mercy dispensed to His creation. Both these attributes nevertheless demonstrate His All-Encompassing Mercy enveloping every aspect of creation; saturating man and nature with the light and warmth of His Affection, Benevolence and Compassion.

This is why we Muslims view Islam as a religion of mercy and our Beloved Prophet as God's gift of Mercy to all humanity, to sustain the human spirit and put man on the path to salvation by His Divine Grace. As God Almighty Himself says:

And We have sent you (O Prophet) as a Mercy to all the worlds
(The Prophets:107)

In like manner the prophets God sent to the nations in former times were also sent as a mercy. This was especially true of Jesus (Peace Be Upon Him) of whom God says:

And that We may make him a symbol unto mankind and an act of Mercy from Us
(Mary:21)

Despite all this the Bible does not even once mention God's name as *The Merciful One!*

Indeed, God is more merciful toward us than our own mothers. It so happened that some prisoners of war were brought before the prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) and behold, a woman amongst them, her breast full of milk, found her baby amongst the captives, whereupon she took him to her breast and nursed him. The Prophet asked his companions, *"Do you think that this lady would throw her baby boy in the fire?"* They replied, "*No, if she has the power not to throw him in the fire*" The prophet said, *"God is more merciful to His servants than this lady to her son" (Saheeh Al-Bukhari)*

He also once told his followers:

When God created the heavens and the earth, he created one hundred mercies, each one can cover what is between the earth and the heaven. He allocated to the earth only one, with which the mother is compassionate with her child; the beast and the bird are compassionate with their babies. When the Day of Judgement comes, God will complete His mercy
(Saheeh Muslim)

Thus it is simply unimaginable that the mercy one creature shows another, however intense that mercy, could ever supersede the Mercy of God which is like a bottomless ocean, boundless like a shoreless sea. Yes, we wallow in the Sea of God's Mercy, we bask in the Sun of His Mercy. When we accustom our minds to this kind of reasoning, that God's Mercy is All-Encompassing we will see spirituality blossoming in every little mundane thing. We see God's Mercy pervading all things, we see it mirrored in all of creation, in the rose that blooms in summer, in the nightingale that sings in the spring, in the leaves that take on enchanting colours in autumn and in the ants that busily gather provisions for the long winter.

Indeed, God is even merciful to sinners, so long as they repent of their sins. As He says in His Word, the Qur'an:

O My servants who have transgressed against their souls! Do not despair of the Mercy of God: for God forgives all sins: for He is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful
(The Groups:53)

He has inscribed for Himself (the rule of) Mercy. That He will gather you together for the Day of Judgement, there is no doubt whatever. It is they who have lost their own souls, that will not believe
(The Cattle:12)

The Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) made this very clear when he stressed on the importance of repentance to earn God's Mercy:

If a disbeliever knows of all the mercy which is in the hand of God, he would not lose hope of entering Paradise
(Saheeh Muslim)

God extends His Hand at night to accept the repentance of one who has sinned during the day, and He extends His Hand during the day to accept the repentance of one who has sinned during the night – until (the day comes when) the sun rises from the West
(Saheeh Muslim)

God is more delighted with the repentance of His slave when he repents, than any of you would be if (he found his) camel, which he had been riding in a barren desert, after it had escaped from him carrying his food and drink. After he despaired of it, he came to a tree and laid down in its shade. Then while he was despairing of it, the camel came and stood by his side, and he seized its reins and cried out in joy, 'O God, You are my servant and I am your Lord!' - making this mistake (in wording) out of his excessive joy
(Saheeh Muslim)

Besides sincere repentance another way to earn God's Mercy is to show mercy to one's fellow creatures. See how beautifully our Prophet (peace be upon him) explains this:

The Most Merciful will have mercy on those who show mercy to people. Show mercy to those who are on earth and the One above the Heavens will have mercy upon you
(Tirmidhi)

Indeed God is so merciful that He gives those who accept Islam the opportunity to be forgiven of all their previous sins, however grave they may have been, so that they enter Islam with a clean slate, so to speak. Some people once asked the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him): "*O Messenger of God! Will we be held responsible for what we did during the days of ignorance before accepting Islam?*" He replied: "*Whoever accepts Islam purely for God will not be held to account*" (Saheeh Muslim).

As for your concern about suffering, remember that human suffering is only a test from God. Every one of us is tested in this world; some with poverty, some with sickness and some with hardship. In fact there is nobody on the face of this wide world who has not undergone some sort of suffering. But even then remember that whatever burden God places on us it can never really be unbearable. God Himself says in His Word:

On no soul doth God place a burden greater than it can bear. It gets every good that it earns, and it suffers every ill that it earns
(The Heifer:286)

Whatever the burden God chooses to test us with, we must bear it with patience and pray to Him for relief, for there is nobody else who can answer our prayers. It once happened that one of the daughters of Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy of God be upon him, sent him the news of his ailing son. He reminded her that God is the One who gives and the One who takes, and that everyone has an appointed term. He reminded her to be patient.

Besides Islam teaches us that whatever suffering we undergo, it is not a punishment from God, but rather a chance for cleansing oneself of sin. It is in this vein that our beloved Prophet said:

No Muslim is afflicted with any harm but that God removes his/her sins as the leaves of a tree fall down
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

How beautiful a palliative this is when compared to the now commonly accepted Christian teaching that man suffers because of the sins of his first parents in disobeying God when they ate of the forbidden fruit, or the Hindu and Buddhist idea that seeks to explain human suffering on the basis of the law of cause and effect, where one suffers as a result of sins committed in a previous life, which only adds insult to injury to the victim, not only psychologically affecting him, but also determining how the larger society brought up in this mould of thinking looks upon him or her.

6th Night

Johnny: Salams Sheikh. Many thanks for your discourse on God's Infinite Mercy last night. I guess I was so engrossed with what we read in the news bombarding us day and night, we don't count the little mercies we have. Now to my next question:

Why do you worship God and how do you worship Him ?

The Janissary: We worship God because He would have us worship Him. That's not much to ask is it? After all, He's our Creator and we owe all that we are to Him. Indeed, what can be more natural than the creation praising its Creator? We adore God and love Him and fear Him at the same time. In fact He tells us very frankly why He created us: "*I created not Mankind and Jinn except that they should worship me*". Prayer is in keeping with the universal law which even the birds in the sky perform in flight:

See you not that it is God whose praise all beings in the heavens and on earth celebrate, and the birds with wings outspread? Each one knows its own prayer
(The Light: 41)

But there is another good reason why we should revere God and that is His Mercy to His Creation, that infinite Mercy that sustains all that exists. Again I quote from our scripture:

O ye people! Adore your Guardian Lord, Who created you, and those who came before you, That ye may become righteous. Who has made the earth your couch and the heavens your canopy; and sent down rain from the heavens; and brought forth therewith fruits for your sustenance; Then set not up rivals unto God when you know (the truth)
(The Heifer:21-22)

Say : who is it that sustains you from the sky and from the earth? Or who is it that has power over hearing and sight? And who is it that brings out the living from the dead and the dead from the living? And who is it that rules and regulates all affairs? They will soon say, God. Say : Will you not then show piety to Him ?
(Jonah: 31)

He Who has made everything which He had created Most Good. He began the creation of man with (nothing more than) clay, and made his progeny from a quintessence of the nature of a fluid despised, But He fashioned him in due proportion and breathed into him something of His Spirit. And He gave you hearing and sight and feeling. Little thanks do you give!
(The Prostration:7-9)

Although many believe in God in a vague way they are unable to appreciate all that He has done for them, and instead take them for granted when in verity they ought to use their God-given gifts of intelligence and reasoning to acknowledge these blessings and grasp the purpose of their very existence. And not just that, they even take others besides God as their saviours, which is the height of ingratitude. In contrast the pious man or woman thanks God continually for all His Blessings.

Thus prayer is an expression of our gratitude to the Almighty for all the Favours He has bestowed on us; for the Minds which we think with, for the eyes we see with, for the ears we hear with and all the other mercies, great and small, He has granted us to make our life in this world a happy one. Why is it that people, especially in the West, look to God only in times of despair and difficulty, when they should be thanking Him day and night. It is only when some misfortune strikes them, that they look to God. In other words, it is only when they are utterly helpless, beyond the help of men, that they turn to Him. Fickle, isn't it? But nay, do not despair of God's Mercy. He is Ever Merciful and loves those who repent.

Remember that God is totally independent of us while we are totally dependant on Him for our every need. God does not need food for sustenance or sleep for rest to refresh Himself, nor does He need our prayers. As He Himself says:

O mankind! You are the ones who need God,
God is free of all wants, worthy of all Praise
(Originator of Creation:15)

So when we pray to God it is for our own good. If you do not obey God, it is to your loss for you cannot harm God's Design in any way. It is therefore for our good that we serve Him and worship Him. God says of the Children of Israel even after He gave them shade and food from the heavens in their wanderings after their captivity in Egypt:

And We gave you the shade of clouds and sent downto you manna and quails
Saying:"Eat of the good things we have given to you" (But ye rebelled)
To Us they did no harm, but they harmed their own souls
(The Heifer:57)

What God says of the rebellious Children of Israel: *To Us they did no harm, but they harmed their own souls* applies equally to all of us who disobey Him. God does not need us, it is we who need him.

But prayer also benefits us. It benefits our souls and makes us better human beings. Just as food is the remedy for hunger and water for thirst, prayer is the nourishment for the soul. This is why you will find the true believer approaching prayer like a thirsty man in the desert does an oasis of crystal clear water. Why, because his soul needs prayer just as the body needs water. God consciousness brings out all that is best in man and banishes all that is worst in him. Just as an exposed stone gathers moss or a piece of iron gathers rust, so does the heart of man become hardened with the grit and grime of this worldly life.

The answer to this is constant prayer which cleanses our hearts like a polish, removing the dross of the world. And believe me, it is so very liberating, so very irresistible, so very beautiful, when we experience the divine through repetitive ritual. We feel so free, unattached to the world, the greatest liberation of all.

All the more so when such prayer is directed to a Single Deity. True devotion when directed to a Singular Divinity has a certain purity about it that is favourable to instilling religious awe and piety in man. This stress on one divinity gives rise to a single mindedness of thought in whom all our affections may be focused; this fountain-head of all good whose most venerable nature may pervade our thoughts and bring it out in word and deed. This is the kind of fervour that drove Robert Grant to Sing of God:

Our Shield and Defender – The Ancient of Days
Pavillioned in Splendour, and girded with Praise

Prayer helps us to constantly remember God and bring to mind the good things He has cleesed us with, to adore Him for what He is – Our Creator, Sustainer, Cherisher. Remembrance of God is, after all, the life-sprit of faith. Without it, faith becomes meaningless, like a vast desert without a single oasis to to give one renewed life and vigour. This , the best way to keep alive the faith is to constantly remember God through prayer and this what Islam calls for.

The Muslim prayer I must say at the outset is not like the usual prayer which people in the West engage in seeking favours from God for petty material things. Rather ours is a more profound, selfless adoration of God acknowledging His Might and submitting to His Will.

As the Prophet used to pray:

O God! My prayer, my worship, my life and my death
are all for you.My return is to you alone!
(Al Bidaya, Ibn Al Kathir)

Islamic worship is thus a single-hearted, undivided devotion to God with none and nothing else sharing in the adoration, when one separates from the world to bond with God in Holy Communion, when one retreats from the profane and mundane to the sacred and the sacrosanct in these moments of supreme spiritual bliss.

The Arabic word used for the Islamic prayer is *salah*, meaning 'connection' (with God). So the prayer is one that establishes a connection with God. So intense is this communion with God that you do not even feel the world around you. It all melts away in the supreme joy of ecstatic adoration for your Creator. This connection with God gives you a direction, and a whole new meaning to the purpose of life. This connection with God is direct. We need no intermediaries to pray to God. Once a Bedouin asked the Prophet whether God was indeed close to man or far away. He promptly received the revelation from God Himself:

When My servants ask thee concerning Me, I am indeed close to them. I listen to the prayer of every servant when he calls on Me. Let them also, with a will, listen to My Call and believe in Me, so that they may walk in the Right Way
(The Heifer:186)

God declares in a *Hadith Qudsi* or Sacred Tradition revealed through His Prophet:

I have waged war against the one who is hostile to those whom I have befriended. My Servant draws nearer to Me with nothing more pleasing to Me than what I have made obligatory upon him, and continues to draw nearer to Me with supererogatory devotions until I love him; and when Iove him, I become his hearing with which he hears, his sight with which he sees, his hand with which he strikes and his foot with which he walks, so that by Me he hears, by Me he sees, by Me he strikes and by Me he walks. Should he ask Me I shall surely grant him his request; should he ask Me for protection, I shall surely protect him. Never do I hesitate in anything as I hesitate in taking the soul of My believing servant; he dislikes death and I dislike to displease him (Saheeh Al-Bukhari).

God is firm about the prayers we offer Him. He asks that we be constant in our devotion to Him. He ddresses the believers in the Qur'an:

Guard strictly the prayers, especially the middle prayer.
And stand before God devout
(The Heifer:238)

Prayer has also been very strongly stressed by our beloved Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) such as when he said:

Between a person and disbelief and association (of partners with God)
is the leaving of the prayer
(Saheeh Muslim)

The covenant which is between us and them (the disbelievers) is the prayer,
so whoever leaves it, then indeed he has disbelieved
(Tirmidhi)

All this shows that the prayer is an obligatory duty of every Muslim, man or woman. And why not? Prayer purifies the soul, brings peace to the heart and wards away evil thoughts. Ask any Muslim, and he'll tell you that his greatest pleasure is in prayer.

The Islamic prayer is very simple really, but needs some practice as it comprises of cycles of standing, bowing and prostrating before the Almighty. We worship God at least five times a day, at dawn, noon, afternoon, evening and at night. You may wonder why we are required to pray five times a day. But there's a nice story to it which I shall relate to you. This hallowed event is known in Islamic tradition as the Mi'raj or Night Journey.

On this holy night, Prophet Muhammad ascended to the heavens with Gabriel while mounted on a white animal known as *Al-Buraq* smaller than a horse. Leaving Mecca, they first visit the Temple in Jerusalem where the Dome of the Rock now stands and from there ascend to the seven heavens before coming to the presence of God Himself. When they come to the gate of the first heaven, Gabriel seeks permission to enter. The gatekeepers ask: "*Who is it*?" and Gabriel replies: "*It is I, Gabriel*". The gatekeepers then ask who is accompanying him and when they are told it is Muhammad, they ask if he had been given his mission to guide all of mankind to the worship of One God. Gabriel answers in the affirmative, and so the angels welcome the Prophet. Here he sees father Adam and greets him with the greeting *Assalamu alaikum* (May Peace be Upon You). Adam returns the greeting and expresses his faith in Muhammad's prophethood. He calls him his son, for after thousands of years, Adam is able to see Muhammad, the greatest of his descendants and Muhammad in turn is able to look into the eyes of the father of mankind.

Then they ascend to the second heaven and there the Prophet beholds the two cousins, John and Jesus and exchanges greetings with them. In the third heaven they meet Joseph, in the fourth heaven Idris, in the fifth heaven Aaron and in the sixth heaven Moses. At the gate of the seventh heaven, the angels declare their pleasure at meeting the Prophet Muhammad and he enters it accompanied by Gabriel. Here he meets his forefather Abraham. Both Prophets exchange greetings and Abraham too expresses his faith in Muhammad's mission. He then moves to the realm beyond the uppermost boundary, the *Sidrat al-Muntaha* and stands in the presence of God Almighty. The Prophet could however not see him as He is veiled by light.

Here the Almighty enjoins on His Prophet and his followers the daily prayers. It is the only command which God ordains in the heavens.God first enjoins 50 prayers and as Muhammad descends he passes by Moses who inquires about God's Commandment.

When Muhammad explains that he had been ordered to prayer 50 times a day, Moses is astonished and says "*Go back to your Lord and ask for a reduction*". When God had prescribed 50 prayers, Muhammad accepted it without demur, but Moses, having been a great prophet himself, knew from experience what men were capable of performing when it came to their religious obligations and was certain that the followers of Muhammad would not be able to perform that many prayers. Muhammad accepts the advice in good faith and returns to the presence of God, asking for a reduction. God reduces it to forty prayers. Muhammad descends again and Moses asks him what happened. When he hears that the reduction is only ten,

Moses sends him back to ask for a further reduction. The exchange continues until the number of obligatory prayers becomes five. Moses suggests a further reduction saying, "*O Muhammad, I know people, your nation will not be able to handle it, go back and ask for the burden on your people to be relieved*" Muhammad answers "*No*." He feels ashamed to ask for another reduction and says he is satisfied with the five daily prayers. A voice rings out: "*The prayers have been reduced to five but they will be rewarded as though they were fifty*". It becomes clear from this that there are those to whom even five prayers a day can be difficult, but those that long to meet their Lord will find it easy.

So the prayers are five - *Subah* (Dawn prayer), *Ẓuhr* (Noon prayer), *Asr* (Afternoon prayer), *Maghrib* (Evening prayer) and *Isha* (Night prayer). The prayer times are fixed but not rigorous except for the Subah or Dawn Prayer which ought to be prayed before sunrise. Thus *Ẓuhr* could be offered anytime before *Asr* or *Maghrib* before *Isha*. Also whenever the need arises such as when travelling, one could combine the *Ẓuhr* and *Asr* prayers or the *Maghrib* and *Isha* prayers. So *Ẓuhr* and *Asr* could be offered together anytime after the time of the *Asr* prayer while *Maghrib* and *Isha* prayers could be combined together and offered anytime after the time of the *Isha* prayer.

When you read the Bible you will find that the Children of Israel also had fixed prayer times. In the Psalms (113:3) you will read: "*From the rising of the sun unto the going down of the same the Lord's name is to be praised*.". The middle prayer or Asr is particularly stressed in the Qur'an: *Guard strictly the prayers, especially the middle prayer. And stand before God devout*" (*The Heifer:238)* and likewise we find it so in the days of Jesus:: *One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer — at three o'clock in the afternoon*. (Acts 3:1). On Fridays however in lieu of the midday prayer we have the *Jumu'a* or congregational prayer for the males of the community. The prayer is preceded by a sermon and attended by a large gathering. It is in a sense the equivalent of the Sunday service of the Christian Churches.

Basically the Islamic prayer comprises of cycles of physical acts known as *rakats* involving standing, bowing and prostrating before the One True God. Before commencing the prayer one must come before God in a pure state by washing the exposed parts of the body in a specified order, firstly the hands, then the face, then the forearms to the elbows, then a little bit of the hair of your head and finally your feet. This freshens and invigorates the body for prayer and you will feel a sense of purity when you stand before the Pure One. And when you do, you stand firm and upright and do not sway to and fro. The Prophet made this very clear when he told

his followers: "*Whenever one of you stands to pray, let every part of him remain still and in deep reverence. Let him not sway back and forth like the Jews*" (Ruh al-Ma'ani of Al-Alusi).

A very important part of the prayer is the recitation while in the standing position of what is known as *Sooratul Fatiha* which is the equivalent of the Christian Lord's Prayer which it closely resembles. Also known as *Umm-ul-Qur'an* 'Mother of the Qur'an' or *Saba Al-Mathani* 'The seven repeatedly recited verses' it runs like this:

In the name of God, the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful. Praise be to God, the Lord of the Worlds. The Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful. You (alone) we worship and You (alone) we ask for help. Guide us to the straight path, the path of those upon whom You have bestowed Your Grace, not of those who have earned Your Wrath, nor of those who have gone astray

This is followed by *Ameen* which is exactly the same as the *Amen* uttered by the Christian at the end of his prayer. Like Christians, when we say *Ameen*, we affirm our agreement with the words of our prayer we had just made.

See how much we have in common. The bowing position is also one to do with reverence to God, The good Muslim prays when bowing: '*Glory to my Lord, the Supreme*,, adding to it if he wishes *Perfect and Holy, Lord of the Angels and the Spirit*'. The bowing posture is an important aspect of worship in which the creation worships its Creator. As we read in the Psalms: "*O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker*" (Psalms 95:6). Besides, it has its physical benefits, like thinning down the belly, for no aspect of the prayer can be bereft of physical benefit.

Then comes the prostration, an indispensable part of our prayer which also has Biblical antecedents, for as God says: "*To Me every knee shall bow*" (Isaiah 45:23) while in Daniel we read: "*He kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed and gave thanks before his God*" (Daniel 6:16). This is something modern Christians no longer practise, but did in the past, for did not Jesus (Peace Be Upon Him) do the same in the Garden of Gethsemane, when in the words of Matthew (26:39): *Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed*. It is the same that Abraham did when he *fell on his face* (Genesis 17:3) and Moses and Aaron did when they *fell upon their faces* (Numbers 20:6).

Indeed. The prostration occupies a very important place in the Muslim prayer. It involves going on one's knees and placing the forehead on the ground, a posture of utter submission and humility before God while reciting: *Glory be to my Lord, Most High*, adding to it if one wishes *O God, unto you I have prostrated and in you I have believed and unto you have I submitted. My face falls prostrate before He who created it and fashioned it, and gave it hearing and seeing. Blessed by God, the Best of Creators*.

It is at this point in prayer that we are closest to God, this posture of utter humility before the Almighty where we humble ourselves as much as we can, placing the very pinnacle of our bodies, our heads, to the ground beneath our feet while at the same time declaring that God is Most High. Indeed, the Arabic term for mosque *masjid* itself means 'a place for *sajdah* or prostration'. So essential is it to the Muslim prayer. It is also a most pleasurable experience as it results in a surge of blood to the head, with the blood flowing in the same direction of earth's gravity, leading to a pleasure one cannot experience otherwise, not to mention the sense of spiritual fulfilment you get when you immerse yourself in this sea of rapturous bliss.

So you see, the Muslim prayer is not just one of silent contemplation, but one of action and motion as well, cycles of devotion that engage the attention of the devotee throughout, keeping his or her mind focused and body in a constant state of activity, each aspect of it a form of worship. This beautiful blending of inner and outer, the spiritual and the corporeal, mental concentration and bodily movements gives man a certain harmony between mind and body not found in any other faith. Expressing the prayer in both body and mind simply shows we need to approach God through the sum total of all the faculties He has blessed us with. What better prayer than this?

Although there are special places where prayers are commonly offered known as mosques, or in Arabic *masjid* 'Place of Prostration', prayers can actually be offered anywhere, except in unclean places. The Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) told us:

The whole earth has been made a Mosque and Pure for me
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

Yes, we don't need a temple built with human hands to offer our prayers.Prayer can be offered anywhere in this wide spacious earth created by God, anywhere under the vast expanse of the heavens so that we are not constrained in any way in worshipping God when the time for prayer comes. Prayers may be offered individually or collectively, though it is preferable to offer them as a congregation in neat rows like a well disciplined army standing before God, like an earthly shadow of the luminous angelic host in heaven falling before their Lord.

This is why you see mosques throbbing with life daily, a hive of activity devoted to harvesting the honey of God's Good Pleasure, so unlike churches or synagogues that are mostly vacant except for one day a week when they suddenly burst with life to celebrate the Lord's praises. Mosques also have a very peaceful atmosphere as you can see around you. There are no distracting idols of any sort, no music or loud chantings or sacrificial rituals. Here you are at peace to quietly contemplate the universe around you. Here your soul can find peace through self-effacement in the face of the greater reality that is God.

All our prayers are prayed facing the Kaaba, the cube-shaped temple in the holy city of Mecca built by Abraham and his son Ishmael (Peace Be Upon Them) many thousands of years ago. The early Muslims used to pray towards Jerusalem like Jesus and the Hebrew Prophets of old did, till they were ordered by God to turn towards the Sacred Mosque of Mecca built by Abraham which was even older than the temple of Jerusalem built by Solomon by a thousand years, thus signifying a return to the original faith of Abraham, the forefather of both Arab and Jew:

We see you turning your face to the heavens (for guidance).
Now shall We turn you to an orientation that shall please you.
Turn then your face towards the Sacred Mosque.
Wheresoever you be, turn your faces towards it
(The Heifer:144)

So if one is to its East he or she faces West while if one is to its West he or she faces East. The one to its South faces North and the one to its North faces South. In this manner the prayers of the faithful are all oriented towards one spot which we Muslims call *Baitullah* – The House of God.

This direction the worshipper faces at least five times a day takes him back to the cradle of his faith and the trials of his Prophet and the overthrow of the idols that sullied that holiest of holy places on earth while impressing on him or her that he or she is part of a larger community united by faith praying towards that self same spot over and over and over again. It gives a sense of unity and belonging to the community. All their worship being directed to one place, to one God. It recalls the Prophet Isaiah's words: "*Sing unto the Lord a new song, and His Praise from the ends of the earth*" (Isaiah 42:10) which can only apply to the prayer of a universal faith, in other words, the prayer of Islam, for it is only in Islam that God's praises are uttered in all parts of the earth, five times a day when Muslims say their prayers in a single tongue.

The very words '*new song'* seems to refer to another language distinct from the Hebrew of the ancient Prophet who uttered these words. And the phrase '*(Sing his Praises) from the ends of the* earth' certainly cannot apply to the Jews, a single people of little numerical strength living in a very few parts of the world like Palestine and the United States. In contrast Muslims are a widely dispersed racially diverse group found in all corners of the world - from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from the rugged hills of Morocco in the West to the little sun-kissed Islands of the Philippines in the East.

7th Night

Johnny: Ah, there you are Sheikh. Salams to you. I tried out some parts of the prayer you mentioned, and I must say I did experience a kind of bliss I could not have experienced before, especially in the prostration. The blood just seemed to surge into the brain, Some experience it was, both physically and spiritually. So I know what you mean. Now to come to my next question:

How does Islam explain the problem of evil?

The Janissary: To put it in a nutshell, evil is part of the Divine Plan. It exists to test us whether we are fit for a better world. Whether we obey God and follow His Guidance or succumb to the temptations of the Devil is up to us. As we are told in the Qur'an:

Blessed be He in Whose Hands is Dominion. And He over all things hath Power. He who created Death and Life that He may try which of you is best in deed
(The Dominion:1-2)

God created the heavens and the earth for just ends, and in order that each soul may find the recompense of what it has earned, and none of them be wronged
(The Kneeling Down:22)

If God had so willed, He would have made you a single people, but (His Plan is) to test you in what He has given you; so strive as in a race in all virtues.
The goal of you all is to God
(The Repast:48)

So it's quite obvious that this world is a test. Ask yourself, isn't this world with all its trappings the best place where man can be put to the test, where he could express himself best, where the best of his nature could come out, and also his worst, a place where all the material means are provided to use or abuse, to soar to the level of angels, nay higher, or sink to the level of the devils, nay lower. Yes, a test in the truest sense!

For this test to subsist there must of necessity be two forces between which we must choose - good or evil. This is in the nature of things God has created. Since God Himself created evil, it is neither original nor essential and can in no way hold its own against Good which is God's alone. Thus the idea of dualism of good and evil as polar opposites, like ying and yang, does not come into play in the Islamic scheme of things. The idea of good and evil being relative is not something the Muslim mind can entertain.

However, in so far as human life is concerned, the world is a test for us to choose between good and evil. There cannot be one without the other. One needs to exist for the other to have some meaning. What would evil mean if there was no good, or for that matter what would good mean if there was no evil? For example, can we know a Saint if there was no Satan to prod him?

It is obvious then that evil came into being because God Willed it to be so since nothing can happen without His Willing it. Indeed not just good and evil, everything in the universe takes place according to His Will, whether it be Light or Darkness, Life or Death, Laughter or Despair:

Praise be to God, who created the heavens and the earth,
And made the Darkness and the Light
(The Cattle:1)

That it is He who granteth Laughter and Tears;
That it is He who granteth Death and Life
(The Star: 43-44)

This does not mean that God is Evil. Nay, He is All Good and belief in Him is the fountainhead of all good. Why, because all good that we do ultimately has its origins in Him who has made it part of our nature to do good in keeping with His Innate Goodness, and has given us the ability to distinguish between Good and Evil, so that all those who choose His Way will earn His Pleasure and those who stray away from it will earn His wrath. To do good is therefore in the nature of man, in the nature with which God created man. To move away from good is to move away from God. As He Himself says:

God had endeared to you belief, making it fair in your hearts, and He has made detestable to you unbelief, wickedness and rebellion. Such indeed are those who walk in righteousness
(The Chambers:7)

But as I said, God wishes to test us whether we tread His Way of Goodness or another way that leads away from it. To accomplish His Purpose God let loose the evil incarnate in the form of a rebellious devil, a jinn made of fire with a fiery fury even fiercer than fire and a malice none could match, who brought evil into the world by making man disobey God just as he had, one who would work in the minds of men and women, tempting them to stray on the wrong way and earn God's Wrath. The Devil who is all evil is just that, an agent of all that is hateful to God and all that is rebellious towards the Nature He has Created. In the Qur'an God tells of this primal cosmological drama of evil which came about through disobedience to God. It begins with the creation of man in the form of Adam, our archetypical parent:

Behold, thy Lord said to the angels: "I will create a vicegerent on earth". They said: "Wilt Thou place therein one who will make mischief and shed blood? – Whilst We celebrate Thy Praises and glorify Thy Holy (Name)?". He said: "I know what ye know not". And He taught Adam the names of all things. Then He placed them before the angels, and said: "Tell me the names of these things if ye are right". They said: "Glory to Thee. Of knowledge we have none, save what Thou hast taught us. In truth it is Thou who art perfect in knowledge and wisdom". He said: "O Adam! Tell them their names". When He had told them, God said: "Did I not tell you that I know the secrets of heaven and earth, and I know what ye reveal and what ye conceal?"
(The Heifer:30-33)

Behold! Thy Lord said to the angels "I am about to create man from sounding clay, from mud moulded into shape. When I have fashioned him and breathed into him of My Spirit, fall ye down in obeisance unto him"
(The Rocky Tract: 28-29)

It is We who created you and gave you shape; then We bade the angels bow down to Adam, and they bowed down; not so Iblees; He refused to be of those who bow down (The Heights:11)

These three verses occurring in different portions of the Qur'an give us an idea of the importance of man in the divine scheme of things. God tells us that man is special. He blew into him of His Own Spirit, that Divine Spark that gave him both life and a free will. He tells us that He intended to place him as his Vicegerent on Earth. He tells us that He ordered even the angels to pay him obeisance. What this shows is that God loved Adam a lot.

God did not stop at that. He gave him speech, a faculty in humans that is not possessed even in the most rudimentary form by any other species on earth, as if it had popped out from nowhere. He taught Adam the names of all things, enabling him to use his free will to understand the universe around him. This was of course knowledge that even the angels did not possess, placing man on a higher plane than even the angels. Don't you think it's interesting that the Qur'an should tell us that God should have taught Adam the names of all things: "*O Adam! Tell them their names*". Why? Because naming allows us to classify and categorize things and understand them better. In a sense all knowledge begins with names. By naming people and things, man reaches a stage of articulated thinking by which he can acquire knowledge to plan out things, solve problems and progress. Try describing something without a name, or in other words a term for it? It will leave you stumped, won't it! So by teaching Adam the names of things God imbued him with an insatiable need for knowledge, a trait his descendants inherited.

God made Adam with the intention of placing him on earth as His Representative, for did He not tell the angels: "*I am about to place a vicegerent on the earth*"? What this shows is that even before Adam disobeyed God by eating of the forbidden fruit, God planned to put him there. He knew that Adam would sin. He knew that he would eat from the forbidden tree. He knew that Satan would strip away their innocence. And He knew well that He would forgive them, banishing them to earth to live and die and propagate their kind. He had also decided that the earth would be a testing ground for Adam and his kind, so that all those who obeyed God would return to Adam's original abode in the Garden Of Eden, while those who disobeyed Him would be consigned to the Fire, the fire from which the evil one that had seduced our first parents to disobey God had been created. All of it of course depended on how the descendants of Adam used their God given knowledge and make their choices in life. So let's continue with our primal story. God tells us:

"*It is We who created you and gave you shape; then We bade the angels bow down to Adam, and they bowed down; not so Iblees; He refused to be of those who bow down. (God) said: "What prevented you from bowing down when I commanded you?" He said: "I am better than He. You created me from fire, and him from clay". (God) said: "Get you down from this. It is not for you to be arrogant here. Get out, for you are the meanest (of creatures)". He said: "Give me respite till the day they are raised up". (God) said: "Be you among those who have respite". He said: "because you have thrown me out of the way, lo! I will lie in wait for them on your straight way. Then will I assault them from before them and behind them, from their right and their left. Nor will you find, in most of them, gratitude (for your mercies)". (God) said: "Get out from this, disgraced and expelled. If any of them follow you – Hell will I fill with you all*" *(The Heights:11-18)*

Now Iblees was a Jinn created out of smokeless fire present among the angelic host and he refused to bow down before Adam who God had created in His Own Image. He was puffed up with pride and arrogance and looked upon God's new creation with scorn and contempt, like a rich fool would look upon a helpless beggar. When God asked him*: "What prevented you from bowing down when I commanded you?" He said: "I am better than He. You created me from fire, and him from clay".* Thus this Iblees was the first racist in the universe, the first supremacist who felt that he was better than Adam by virtue of his material self, not by virtue of deeds. Satan, puffed as he was with arrogance, looked askance at Adam's outwardly composition, made of clay as he was, and not his nobler inner self. He judged by looks and looks alone.

This act of Satan and his retort to God was the first act of evil in the universe. Why, because it involved disobedience to the One who had created him in the first place. Moreover it involved an act of utter arrogance, looking down on a fellow creature of humble origin.

So Iblees was cast out of the presence of God and vowed to spend the rest of his days trying to lead mankind astray, taking as many as he could to his fiery abode in the hereafter. He asked that he be given respite and that God's punishment for his arrogance be delayed until the Day of Judgment, during which period he would attempt to turn away from God as many as he could of Adam's descendants. God accepts the plea of Iblees and assures recompense to him and his followers in the form of Hellfire. Let's hear what Iblees tells God:

"*I will take of Thy servants a portion marked off; I will mislead them, and I will create in them false desires; I will order them to slit the ears of cattle, and to deface the nature created by God*"
(The Women: 118-119)

But God knew better. He made for Adam a mate He called Eve and told him:

"*O Adam! Dwell you and your wife in the Garden and enjoy as you wish, but approach not this tree, or you will run into harm and transgression*"
(The Heifer:35)

Now, you may wonder why God placed the couple in a Garden of all places? Well you see, a Garden represents the best of creation in one place, all that is beautiful to behold among God's countless blessings, so that there is all the more to thank Him for. But that's not all. God warned our first parents to beware of Iblees:

"*Surely this one is an enemy to you and your wife, so do not let him drive you out from the Garden, so that you are made miserable*"
(TaHa:117)

By now we see a transformation in the name of Iblees. He is henceforth called *Satan*, or in Arabic *Shaytaan* meaning 'the accuser' because he accused man of being ungrateful to God. This is why we find the Qur'an later consistently calling him Satan like when he tempts Adam and Eve to eat of the tree which God had prohibited them from approaching

But Satan whispered evil to him. He said: "O Adam! Shall I lead thee to the Tree of Eternity and to a kingdom that never decays? As a result they both ate of the tree and so their nakedness appeared to them
(TaHa 120-121)

Then began Satan to whisper suggestions to them in order to reveal to them their shame that was hidden from them (before). He said: "Your Lord only forbade you this tree,lest ye should become angels or such beings as live forever"
(The Heights:20)

Then did Satan make them slip (from the Garden) and get them out of the state (of felicity)in which they had been
(The Heifer:36)

When the pair tasted of the tree, their shame or in other words their private parts became manifest to them, and they began to sew together the leaves of the Garden over their bodies. Their Lord called to them, "*Did I not forbid you from that tree and tell you that Satan is to you an avowed enemy?*" They said, "*Our Lord, we have wronged ourselves, and if You do not forgive us and have mercy upon us, we will surely be among the losers*." God told them: "*Descend, being to one another enemies. On earth will be your dwelling place and your means of livelihood for a time*" adding: "*Therein you will live, and therein you will die, and from it you will be brought forth.*"(The Heights: 22-25).

So we are told this is how Satan works- by whispering evil thoughts into the minds of men. He whispers into the hearts of humanity sowing disquieting thoughts and desires. Remember how he whispered to them that they could become immortals if they ate of the tree. This is how Satan works in people, filling our minds with evil thoughts just as he filled the minds of our first parents with thoughts of the tree so that they eventually ate of it. Adam and Eve behaved as all human beings do to this day, becoming preoccupied with their own desires whispered into their hearts by Satan and in the process forgetting about God and His Warnings to us to stay away from such temptations.

The story has a deeper meaning. We are told in it that the shame of nakedness of our first parents became manifest to them only after eating of the forbidden fruit. This implies that they were naked in the Garden, but never felt any shame because of it before this. By whispering to them to eat of the forbidden fruit, it was Satan who really stripped them of their raiment to expose their shame. Thus our first parents were created innocent. Even though they were naked, they never felt any shame because they knew no evil. As soon as they were touched by evil by listening to the devil, they felt shame, they felt guilt, and their primeval innocence was lost. So now we have to ask ourselves, what really is shame?

It certainly cannot be a bad thing because it was after feeling shame that our first parents repented, after having, to put it in their own words "*wronged our own souls*". So shame also helped in their redemption. And so it is with us – this feeling of shame that keeps us on the right track without slipping into sinfulness and immorality and also gives us pangs of guilt when we do wrong. This feeling which no theory of evolution can explain, for how can evolutionists explain something as strange as shame which in evolutionary terms would only be deemed a very negative trait, an abomination detrimental to the survival of the species, and yet it is found in almost

every human being in this wide, wide world. And here we have the Qur'an telling us how it came to be, with that first errant pair.

This repentance of our first parents was their saving grace, their salvation so unlike the arrogance of Satan who would not repent of his evil act. Unlike Satan who could never bring himself to ask God forgiveness, the errant pair acknowledged their sin and sincerely repented of it, humbly beseeching God for forgiveness. This is why God loved our first parents fully well knowing what they would do. God, the Most Merciful not only accepted their repentance, but also guided them:

Then learnt Adam from his Lord words of inspiration and his Lord turned towards him (in forgiveness). For He is Oft-Returning, Most Merciful
(The Heifer: 37)

Adam disobeyed his Lord, and allowed himself to be seduced. But His Lord chose him (for His Grace). He turned to him and guided him
(TaHa: 121-122)

We said, 'Get ye down all from here, but certainly guidance will come from Me to you – and whoever follows My guidance will neither fear nor grieve; but those who reject and deny Our signs, they are the people of the Fire; they will dwell in it.'"
(The Heifer: 38-39)

"Get ye down (upon the earth), both of you - all you together, from the Garden, some of you are an enemy to some others. But when guidance comes from Me, whoever follows My Guidance shall neither lose his way nor fall into misery."
(TaHa:123)

Thus our first parents, upon repenting, were given a chance to start life anew on a lower plane, this earth, to make good and recover their lost bliss. Likewise we the children of Adam do not really belong to the earth as such. Rather our destiny is the hereafter.

Just as God warned Adam, God warns Adam's offspring not to be tempted by the evil one. He warns us again and again and again:

Verily Satan is an enemy to you. So treat him as an enemy. He only invites his adherents, that they may become companions of the Blazing Fire
(The Originator of Creation:6)

Satan makes them promises, and creates in them false desires; but Satan's promises are nothing but deception. They (his dupes) will have their dwelling in Hell, and from it they will find no way of escape
(The Women:120-121)

We sent (our prophets) to peoples before you. But Satan made their own acts seem alluring. He is also their patron today, but they shall have a most grievous penalty
(The Bee: 63)

Satan had got to work shortly after Adam's fall, making short work of Adam's own children. That was when God commanded each son of Adam to offer a sacrifice. Cain offered his worst grain, but Abel offered his best livestock. God accepted Abel's sacrifice and rejected Cain's:

And (O Muhammad) recite to them (the Jews) the story of the two sons of Adam in truth; when each offered a sacrifice to God, it was accepted from the one but not from the other. The latter said to the former; 'I will surely kill you". The former said: 'Verily God accepts only from those who are pious. If you do stretch your hand against me to kill me I shall not stretch my hand against you to kill you, for I fear God; the Cherisher of the Worlds'" For me I intend to let thee draw on thyself my sin as well as thine, for thou wilt (then) be among the Companions of the Fire, and that is the reward of those who do wrong". The selfish soul of the other (latter one) encouraged him and made fair seeming to him the murder of his brother; he murdered him and became one of the losers. Then God sent a raven who scratched the ground to show him to hide the dead body of his brother.
He (the murderer) said: 'Woe to me! Am I not even able to be as this raven and to hide the dead body of my brother?'
(The Repast:27-31)

God's warning to the children of Adam holds good today as it did then. It is man of all creation who is most subject to diabolical influences despite being inherently good by nature. And yet he betrays his true nature when he follows Satan. Take the nature of all other creations. Are they as complex as ours? Do they go against their inherent nature? Take the sheep for instance; is not it in its nature to be gentle and does not it always act in accordance with that nature? But man is much more complex in his behaviour, which shows that it is only he of all creation that has free will and that such free will can easily be manipulated by the evil one for his own ends.The Prophet once told his followers:

Satan said to the Lord of Glory: 'By Your Glory O Lord, I will keep trying to misguide Your slaves so long as their souls are in their bodies.' The Lord said, 'By My Glory and Majesty, I will continue to forgive them so long as they ask My forgiveness'
(Musnad of Ahmad)

God's warning not to fall to the snares of Satan is greater today than it was ever before. There are more humans in the world today than there ever was before, all of them susceptible to the suggestions of the evil one who lurks in our flesh and circulates in our blood, ever ready to incite the weak faithless mind to evil and mischief. Isn't it a fact that men, of all God's creatures, are the ones who are most likely to bring destruction to the peace, beauty and harmony established by God? That's because men without a fear of God are prone to the deceit of the devil whose whispers reach the innermost recesses of our minds.

It is only fitting therefore that we don the armour of faith to withstand his trickery. It is easier for man to resist evil when he thinks it is the devil that is whispering deep inside the innermost recesses of his heart, than to think that they are his thoughts and accept them as such. Such a view, that evil does not come from within him, helps him fight evil thoughts, it shows that evil is so strange to him, so unlike him, that it's a sickness on his otherwise healthy soul, an extraneous germ that has infected him

and from a small spot in his heart seeks to spread like a cancer over the rest of his body. When one thinks so, one are more likely to control evil thoughts and direct one's heart to doing good. The Final Chapter of the Qur'an ends with the prayer:

I seek refuge with the Lord of Men, the King of Men, the God of Men
From the mischief of the Whisperer (of Evil), who withdraws (after his whisper)
who whispers into the hearts of Men, both Jinn and Men.

A Companion once came to the Prophet and said: "*Sometimes I experience such thoughts that I would rather be reduced to charcoal than get them on my lips*" The Prophet replied: "*All praise is to God who restricted the devil's designs to mere evil promptings*" (Aboo Dawood).

Sometimes you will find that the closer you try to get to God, the more you are tempted by the ways of the world, which is why Jesus had to face his temptations and reject him: "*Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only'*"(Matthew 4:10). And remember that Satan is not one, he is legion, having as supporters the evil ones among the jinn ever ready to do his bidding. These evil ones are given a free hand to roam around the earth, creating mischief wherever they can. This is why God warns us:

O ye children of Adam! Let not Satan seduce you, in the manner he got your parents out of the Garden, stripping them of their raiment to expose their shame, for he and his tribe watch you from a position where you cannot see them
(The Heights:27)

Many are the ways in which Satan works to create mischief and discord among men, which is why God lays down certain prohibitions that are only for our good, like telling us to keep away from liquor and gambling:

O ye who believe! Intoxicants and gambling (dedication of) stones and (divination by) arrows are an abomination – of Satan's handiwork. Eschew them that ye may prosper.Satan's plan is to excite enmity and hatred between you, with intoxicants and gambling, and hinder you from the remembrance of God
(The Repast: 90-91)

Satan's aim everywhere is to create mischief. He rouses up envy in men and puffs them up with pride and arrogance and stirs up brawls and fights and wars that seek to place one nation over others. You can see this everywhere in the world today where warmongers have a field day. Ever wondered why those guys we call *merchants of death*, the arms dealers and others like drug kingpins, liquor makers and casino barons make such big money? This is the way of the world today and Satan sits on top of it. That he has power over the evil-minded there can be no doubt:

Seek God's Protection from Satan the Rejected One. No authority has he over those who believe and put their trust in their Lord. His authority is over those only,
who take him as patron and who join partners with God
(The Bee: 98-100)

He prods them and whispers in their hearts to do the most despicable things on earth, to harm the good things God has created for our benefit:

There is the type of man whose speech about this world's life may dazzle thee, and He calls God to witness about what is in his heart. Yet he is the most contentious of enemies. When he turns his back, his aim everywhere is to spread mischief through the earth and destroy crops and cattle. But God loveth not mischief. When it is said to him: "Fear God" He is lead by arrogance to (more) crime.
Enough for him is hell, an evil bed indeed
(The Heifer 204-206)

Another means by which he tries to mislead us is to make us dislike how God created us and the nature around us. This is why you see ordinary people going for plastic surgeries and scientists scrambling to genetically engineer plants and animals to suit their taste. Here again let us bring to mind Satan's words to God:

"*I will take of Thy servants a portion marked off; I will mislead them, and I will create in them false desires; I will order them to slit the ears of cattle, and to deface the nature created by God*"
(The Women: 118-119)

How telling indeed, and to think that these words of the devil were captured for us in the Qur'an revealed 1400 years ago, well before any scientist thought of 'playing God' by genetically altering the fair nature we see around us. But nay, they may escape from the clutches of men, but they cannot escape from God, if not in this life, then certainly in the next:

They may hide (their crimes) from men, but they cannot hide (them) from God,
Seeing that He is with them when they plot by night
(The Women:108)

That evil is the ultimate work of a mysterious demoniacal force prompting men to do evil is held not only by Islam, but also the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism and Christianity as well as the ancient Iranian faith of Zoroastrianism and even oriental faiths like Buddhism, showing that there must be a factual basis to this belief passed down from ancient times. It is just that Islam, being the final revelation gives us a clearer picture of this evil being and his ultimate purpose.

When we compare the Islamic story of our first parents and the origin of how evil came into the world with the Biblical story, we would find both similarities and differences. In the Old Testament we are told that it was the serpent "*the most cunning of all the animals that the Lord God had made*" that tempted Eve to eat of the forbidden fruit. After Eve gave some of the fruit to Adam and he ate of it, they were discovered by God. He said to the serpent: "*Because you have done this, you shall be banned from all the animals and all the wild creatures; on your belly shall you crawl and dirt shall you eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and hers; He will strike at your head while you strike at his heel*" (Genesis 3:1-15).

The earliest mention of a being named Satan in it occurs in the Book of Job composed sometime around the 6th century BC by an author whose name is unknown. Here, Satan comes among the angels when they present themselves before the Lord.

One day when the sons of God (angels) came to present themselves before the Lord, Satan also came among them

In the Book of Revelations, which was not taught by Jesus, but purportedly revealed to a person named John long after Jesus had been taken away from earth, we read:

Then war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels battled against the dragon. The dragon and its angels fought back, but they did not prevail and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. The huge dragon, the ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan,who deceived the whole world, was thrown down to earth, and its angels were thrown down with it (Revelation 12: 1-5)

These conflicting accounts tell us little about Satan or the origin of evil. Was he a serpent as held in Genesis or a Dragon as held in the Book of Revelations, or a fallen angel as implied in the Book of Job and Revelations ? Some Christians even hold that Satan was among the highest of all angels and the " brightest in the sky" before his fall which took place as a result of rebelling against God, why we are not told. His being the brightest in the sky gave him the appellation Lucifer which more or less became like his personal name.

However, the Islamic account clears the confusion. It tells us clearly that he was a Jinn made of fire. He certainly could not be an angel as angels are sinless and do not have freewill in the sense we know it. The last thing they would do, even if they were given the will to do so, would be rebelling against God. He certainly could not have been a serpent as serpents are very earthly creatures, crawling on their bellies and it is unimaginable that they could tempt man to commit sin. But the Jinn, that's a different story. As Muslims we believe that the Jinn race was created before mankind out of smokeless fire. They travel across space, but also inhabit our world, although we cannot see them. They pass on the secrets of the heavens to soothsayers and afflict people with madness, which is why in Arabic a madman is called *majnoon*, meaning, one possessed by the jinn. Thus it is more likely that it is such a one, rather than an angel or serpent that can tempt men to do evil. Interestingly you will find that modern day Christian depictions of him as a fiery being reflect Islamic teachings about this father of evil than the Judeo-Christian stories of old.

Another particular in which Islam differs from the Biblical account is the inheritance of sin. Christianity as taught by Paul says that sin entered the world as a result of Adam's transgression and that all humans, being his descendants, are born in a state of sin. Islam on the other hand teaches us that God forgave Adam and Eve their sin and turned to them in forgiveness. It also teaches us that sin cannot be inherited, and that each person is responsible for his or her own actions. The Qur'an clearly says:

Every soul draws the meed of its acts on none but itself. No bearer of burdens can bear the burden of another (The Cattle:164)

No bearer of burdens shall bear another's burden, nor do We visit with Our wrath until We have sent a Messenger (to give warning) (The Night Journey:15)

Further, if you read the Qur'anic account, you will find that both Adam and Eve are held equally responsible for the sin of eating of the forbidden fruit and very frankly admitted it:

Then they both ate of that tree, and so their nakedness appeared to them
(TaHa:121)

"Our Lord (said Adam and Eve), we have wronged our souls, and if You do not forgive us and have mercy upon us, we will surely be among the losers"
(The Heights: 23)

Not so in the Bible where we read: *And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat. And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked.* When God asked Adam "*Hast thou eaten of the tree, whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldest not eat?*" all he could say was "*The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat*". And the Lord God said unto the woman "What is this that thou hast done?" And the woman said: "*The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat*". Unto the woman He said: " *I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in pain thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee*".

Reading this account you will probably get away with the idea that it was Eve who led to Adam's downfall and brought sin into the world as a result of being tempted by the serpent. All the blame is put on her and sadly even Adam blames the woman. And as if that were not enough Adam is told off by God that his fall was "*Because you listened to your wife*". Islam on the other hand tells us that eating the forbidden fruit was a mistake committed by both Adam and Eve and that they bore equal responsibility for their deed.

The ancient Persians also believed in an evil force known as Angra Mainyu or Ahriman who resembles Satan in many respects. However they took him as a being independent of God, counter-creating against all the good things that God had created. This belief of the devil as a completely independent entity free of God's power as much as Ying was to Yang led to a very unique concept in Persian theology – Dualism where there were supposed to be two beings in constant struggle against one another, Ahura Mazda, the Good One and Angra Mainyu, the Evil One. But this was not part of this ancient Iranian faith's true teachings.

The Iranian Prophet Zarathustra spoke of the One True God Ahura Mazda in very clear terms and declared that both good and evil was a result of His Will. His Gathas bear ample testimony to this, for they have to this day preserved much of their originality due to their use of an inimitable poetic form, an ancient Aryan devise of preserving their traditions at a time when there was no other means to record them. This was profound poetry taught to the great Maga Brotherhood that could be easily memorized and transmitted, so that chances of interpolation became very slim especially since they already had a halo of holiness around it:

If you understand the two principles of prosperity and adversity established by the Wise One, which are a long suffering for the wrongful and a lasting good for the righteous; you shall, then, enjoy radiant happiness
(Gathas: Song 3 - stanza 11)

Between these two, the seekers of false gods did not decide correctly,
because delusion came to them in their deliberations.They chose the worst mind,
rushed in wrathand afflicted human existence
(Gathas: Song 3 - stanza 6)

But in later times much interpolation crept into his teachings in the scripture known as the Vendidad falsely attributed to him. Satan had now become a counter to God, counter-creating all that God had created. When viewed in the light of the earlier gathas it was like saying that God created the universe, but couldn't manage it and so Satan ran amok and spoiled it. In the Vendidad, we find Ahura Mazda telling Zarathustra:

I have made every land dear to its people, even though it had no charms whatever in it. Had I not made every land dear to its people, even though it had no charms whatever in it, then the whole living world would have invaded the Aryan homeland. The first of the good lands and countries which I, Ahura Mazda created, was the Aryan homeland by the Vanguhi Daitya. Thereupon came Angra Mainyu, who is all death, and he counter-created the serpent in the river and winter, a work of the daevas. There are ten winter months there, two summer months, and those are cold for the waters, cold for the earth, cold for the trees. Winters fall there, the worst of all plagues. The second of the good lands and countries which I, Ahura Mazda, created, was the plain which the Sogdians inhabit. Thereupon came Angra Mainyu, who is all death, and he counter-created the locust which brings death unto cattle and plants. The third of the good lands and countries which I, Ahura Mazda, created, was the Strong Holy Mouru. Thereupon came Angra Mainyu, who is all death, and he counter-created plunder and sin. The fourth of the good lands and countries which I, Ahura Mazda, created, was the beautiful Bakhdi with high lifted banners. Thereupon came Angra Mainyu, who is all death, and he counter-created the ants and the ant hills

Here we see an aversion to attribute to the Supreme Being the creation of anything evil or inimical to man. Thus while the creation of the good lands are said to be the work of the Supreme Deity Ahura Mazda, the 'counter-creation' of winter, locusts, ants and ant-hills (all deemed inimical to man) is attributed to the evil spirit Angra Mainyu or Ahriman, who is the Iranian equivalent of Satan.

Defies logic, doesn't it, this ridiculous idea of dualism where all good things are said to be created by the Supreme Being and all bad things by the Devil. Even the poor ants are said to be the devil's creation. Tis true the snake's poison gives it life, but brings death to man and the creatures of the water see the ocean as a garden while we see it as a pool of death, but this is no more than the reality of existence, not evil per se. Such things have no good or evil by themselves.

Rather it is acts that can be good or evil, assuming the colour of goodness or wickedness by the intention behind it. Take fire, it is not good or bad in itself, but in the use you put it into. When you use it to warm your hearth it is good but when you burn the house of another with it, it becomes evil, and it becomes so not by itself but by your motive, so at the end of the day it is you who are evil, not the fire. Further, just because man chooses this way or that, it does not mean that the creation is to be labeled good or evil. That's being very petty-minded.

Satan does not counter-create evil, rather he influences the minds of men to do evil using creation and even corrupt the good in insidious ways so that they become the very opposite. Take monotheism, this belief in one God, innate and inherent in man,

which he corrupted into polytheism, the belief in many false deities, so that you find countless numbers of them even in our modern age. Take the signs of God such as sun, moon and stars which he corrupted into objects of worship. Take respect for elders which he corrupted into ancestor worship. Take religiosity which he corrupted into extremism so that those affected by his touch adopted a *holier than thou* attitude towards others.

Take even so simple an obligation as circumcision, which is a healthy practice for both man and woman so long as the prepuce of the sex organ is removed. But Satan could not let be even this beautiful practice, so much in keeping with our pure God-given nature and found in a good many parts of the world. Nay, came he to certain peoples and corrupted it into brutal grotesque forms, so that in certain remote parts of Arabia, some folk started the practice of flaying the penis by stripping it of its skin as far as the pubis as a test of manliness while in certain parts of Africa others took to infibulation, removing the clitoris and inner labia and sewing together the outer labia so as to render sex impossible until marriage, on the plea of preserving virginity. Thus Satan corrupts things, even good things, in the minds of men, but does not counter-create things in the physical domain.

This is no better illustrated than the history of Zoroastrianism itself; how it degenerated from the Worship of One God to the belief in two, one Good and one Evil, only to further deteriorate into a cult of fire when its misled devotees sought to represent the Supreme Being's Light, the symbol of His Fight against Darkness, by a fire kindled in their temples, housing it there like the pagans of old did their idols. This enshrined fire they held to be sacred, the symbol of Ahura Mazda Himself, hence earning the name of 'Fire Worshippers'. The very fire that Satan was created from and the fire to which the evil are destined had not become sacred, sanctified, sacrosanct, the very representative of the supreme Being on earth. We know now that the Zoroastrian cult of fire with its fire temples came much after Zarathustra. No mention of it is found in the Gathas which he spoke or even the Avesta which is spuriously attributed to him. Little wonder a companion of Prophet Muhammad, influenced perhaps by him, observed: "*When the Prophet of the Persians died, Iblis wrote for them the lore of the Magians"* (Aboo Dawood).

The idea of an evil-prompting devil also occurs in Buddhist tradition which is far removed from the Abrahamic faiths. Its founder, the Indian Sage Gautama Buddha spoke of this tempter whom he called Mara:

"He who lives looking for pleasures only, his senses uncontrolled, immoderate in his food, idle and weak, Mara will certainly overthrow him,
as the wind throws down a weak tree"
(Dhammapada 1)

"*As a fish taken from his watery home and thrown on the dry ground, our thought trembles all over in order to escape the dominion of Mara, the tempter*"
(Dhammapada III)

"*The swans go on the path of the sun, they go miraculously through the ether. The wise are led out of this world, when they have conquered Mara and his train"*
(Dhammapada XIII)

However Buddhism could not explain how evil originated, except to put forward the law of cause and effect, the idea that we reap what we sow over countless births and

rebirths through a continuous process of re-becoming ending only with extinction when one attains the highest state of *nirvana*. This universal law it claimed, has been in operation from the beginning of time, so that every action, *karma*, a being did, was met with a reaction, the *vipaka*. As a result, living beings, both human and animal, were born into a higher or lower state depending on their actions, until through the accumulation of good deeds they rose higher and higher to become, say a prince, after which they could attain the supreme bliss of nirvana by passing into extinction. A person who committed evil deeds on the other hand, would suffer the consequences of his deeds by being born into say, a lowly family condemned to a life of hardship or still lower, say to a lower life form. By doing so, Buddhism sought to eliminate the idea of a creator God altogether.

But I ask you, how can such a law operate when animals are amoral? How could such creatures of instinct know good or bad? How then could they be reborn as humans? Indeed, such a law cannot even explain the existence of non-living things for would not these non-living things at least require a creator?

However we must always bear in mind that what we sometimes call evil are 'Acts of God' like natural calamities such as floods and earthquakes and hurricanes. They are all the will of God and we cannot attribute them to any power other than God.

If God touches you with affliction, none can remove it but He; if He touches you with happiness, He has power over all things. He is the Irresistible (watching) from above over His Worshippers
(The Cattle:17-18)

To attribute whatever evil that befalls one to a power other than God is wrong. This is what led the ancient Persians astray to come up with their nonsensical idea of dualism. But remember, just as He afflicts, God also has the power to remove, and so we pray to Him to deliver us from our troubles. In a sense, this is a way which God demands our worship. When he afflicts us with trouble, We have none but Him to turn to, just like if we do evil, we have none but Him to blot it out.

If God should touch you with misfortune, there is none who can remove it but He; if He intends some good for you, none can keep back His Favour
(Jonah:107)

Thus earthquakes that strike terror into the hearts of men, storms with loud thunderclaps and lightning bolts that take their toll on our possessions and the blight which rots the sources of food we depend on and such like natural events we cannot attribute to any other than God. They are merely the forces of nature created by God busily unfolding their natural destiny that God had willed for them.

In some other cultures, it is the practice to propitiate and offer sacrifices to deities believed to cause such afflictions. For instance not very long ago in Hindu India, the very goddess who was believed to cause smallpox was also propitiated with bloody animal sacrifices. It is also strange to find that it is the most terrible divinities that are sought to be most placated in such cultures. Take the Hindu Trinity, Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver and Siva the Destroyer. It is the destructive power of Siva that is most feared and placated. Why, because men fear his power of destruction. In Islam, however, the One True God is Creator, Preserver and Destroyer, all in One. Just as He can create, He can Destroy. And it is to Him alone

we offer our prayers for relief. So it is that the good Muslim prays as taught by his Prophet:

I take refuge with God's Perfect Words which none, good or bad, can transgress, from all the evil that He has Created, from the evil that descends from the sky and the evil that rises up to it, from the evil that is spread on earth and the evil that springs from her and I take refuge from the evil of the tribulations of night and day, and the evil of one who visits at night except the one who brings good, O Merciful One (Ahmad).

8th Night

Johnny: Salams Sheikh, that was some explanation on the problem of evil you gave last night. Its quite philosophical really though it does make sense. Now to my next question which is not so philosophical:

Are Islamic teachings compatible with Modern Science?

The Janissary: Would you believe it if I told you that Islam is Science? Every teaching of it agrees with unprejudiced scientific reasoning from its uncompromising belief in the Oneness of God to its manifold rituals that cleanse body and mind and lead to healthy living. Long before your Scientists came up with 'scientific explanations' for things, the Qur'an which we take to be the Word of God told us so. So what I will do is give you proofs from the Qur'an itself to show that this 1400 year old scripture contains detailed scientific knowledge that transcends the time in which it was revealed, certainly more so than any scientist would have known even a hundred years ago. Since we believe the scripture is a divine revelation and as it is perfectly consistent with modern science. I will take it as evidence enough that it is indeed the Word of God.

There are numerous scientific facts contained in the Qur'an which are only now being discovered by modern science. In fact they cover a range of scientific disciplines from embryology to cosmology. If as its detractors suppose, Muhammad composed the Qur'an, how we ask is it that it should contain such scientific statements that were unheard of in his day, nay thought impossible?

Statements such as life originating from water, creation of plant life in pairs, the orbit of planets, the expanding heavens and the universe as a single entity before being split to form the cosmos would have at that time been so obscure and incomprehensible to its readers that had it not been for the Fear of God and the Dread of changing His Word, they might have been tempted to expunge them from the text as some Christan sects of yore did the Bible and still do today, editing out the content they think is not in keeping with their ideas. Such folly did not take place in Islam due to the God-fearing nature of its followers and the fact that it was widely memorized in whole, not to mention the fact that the Qur'an itself has an in-built device within it that prevents it being tampered with, that is its unique flow that gives it a coherence not found in any other work or scripture. Even a bit of tampering destroys this flow so that the reader immediately realizes its out of place.

As God Himself assures us:

Indeed, it is We who sent down the Message, and indeed We will be its Guardian ((The Rocky Tract:9).

And so the Qur'an survives to this day in its original form as it did 1400 years ago when it was first revealed, disclosing facts that are only now being confirmed by modern science. So let me begin with the story of how life originated. The Qur'an says very clearly:

We made from water every living thing. Will they not then believe? (The Prophets: 30)

Don't you think this is a remarkable affirmation of the modern idea of the origin of life being aquatic - that life arose from water. It has been established beyond doubt

today that all living cells are mostly made up of water, the essential substance for the existence of life as we know it. Water is the basic biological substance of living matter. Cells are largely made of water. For instance as much as 80 percent of the cytoplasm (basic cell material) of a standard animal cell is made up of water, so that even to live, living things need a constant supply of water. Else they would perish. In other words there can be no life without water. In fact, the first thing that scientists look for when searching for life on another planet is the presence of water - *the stuff of life*.

This idea of all living creatures having their ultimate origins in water was affirmed by the Qur'an over 1400 years ago and only now with the advancement of science are we coming to realize the veracity of this unique statement. The invention of the microscope established it beyond question. But don't you think it's strange that this idea should have originated in the deserts of Arabia. That's perhaps the last place that someone would guess that all life came from water. And while we're at it do you know that scientists are still at a loss to explain how water formed on earth? The favourite theory is that the water we have on earth covering over two thirds of the globe was delivered by comets or asteroids, something like saying that the water in your swimming pool came from a lump of hail falling from the sky.

Further the Qur'an tells us:

And we have created all things in pairs
(The Scattering Winds: 49)

We now know that not only animal and plant life possess pairs, but also non-living matter -in the form of atoms. The atom is the basis of all matter in the universe and in it too we find pairs. We now know that the constituents of elementary particles are not limited to protons, neutrons and electrons. A proton has its anti-proton, an electron is coupled with a positron, and a neutron possesses an anti-neutron, a scientific discovery made only modern times. It is even found in the subtle forces of nature like positive and negative energy, the magnetic forces of attraction and repulsion and even the force of cohesion which draws molecules together so we have solids and the opposing force of heat motion which makes them fly apart so we have gases!

The Qur'an also informs us:

Now let man but think from what he is created! He is created from a gushing fluid emitted proceeding from between the loins and the ribs
(The Night Star: 6-7)

We know now that the semen of the male is emitted, not from the testes as is widely supposed, but from the prostate and seminal vesicles which are exactly in the area between the loins and the ribs.

The Holy Book further says:

He created in pairs, male and female; from a seed lodged (in its place)
(The Star: 45-46)

We now know that the sex of a foetus is determined by the nature of the sperm and not the ovum. The sex of the child, whether female or male, depends on whether the 23rd pair of chromosomes is XX or XY respectively which is ultimately decided by the male's sperm and not the female's ovum. Male chromosomes are defined as XY and the female ones as XX. The chromosomes are split during ovulation into two each, containing an X chromosome. Some sperms contain X and some Y chromosome. If an X chromosome unites with an X chromosome in the woman's egg, the sex of the child to be born will be female, while a Y chromosome in the man uniting with an X chromosome in the woman means the offspring will be of the male sex. Therefore the sex of a child is entirely dependent on the arrival of an X or Y chromosome from the sperm, a fact that has only been established very recently.

We also find the Qur'an describing the embryological development of humans in a manner that could not have been known until the 19th century with developments in embryology. The Holy Book tells us that God created man from '*a tiny thing that clings*'. This term *alaq* used here literally means a leech or a tiny creature having the ability to attach itself by one of its ends to a surface. There is perhaps no better description than this of the process by which the fertilized ovum implants itself in the uterus. The Holy Book describes the growth of the human embryo as follows:

Man We created from a quintessence (of clay); then We placed him as (a drop of) sperm in a place of rest, firmly fixed. Then We made the sperm into a thing that clings and from that a chewed lump (of flesh) and We made out of that lump bones and we clothed the bones with flesh. Then we brought forth out of it another creature.So blessed be God, the Best of Creators
(The Believers 12-14)

This very aptly describes the development of the embryo shortly after the process of implantation when it develops into a sort of clinging thing, like a leech which is what *alaq* means. If you were to take a picture of a human embryo and a leech, you will see how closely they resemble each other. Not only is the similarity confined to appearance, but also to function, for does not the embryo draw nourishment from the mother's blood like the leech which feeds on our blood? What is so remarkable about this description is that the human embryo at that stage is very tiny, so tiny indeed that it cannot be seen with the naked eye, but only through an advanced microscope. Thus there is no way such knowledge could have been known even a hundred years ago, let alone a thousand years ago.

But that's not all, the Qur'an continues to say that the embryo develops further into something like *a chewed lump (of flesh)* for which it employs the term *mudghah*. The word literally means a chewed substance and this is exactly how the embryo looks in its later stage. In fact if you were to chew a piece of gum and take it out with its teethmarks, you will find it closely resembling the embryo at this stage because of the somites or cells forming the vertebrae at the back of the embryo.

Another curious aspect of embryology is given in the Qur'an:

He creates you in the wombs of your mothers, in stages, one after another, in three veils of darkness
(The Crowds:6)

It has been scientifically proven today that the development of the foetus in the mother's womb passes through three veils of darkness which are: the first darkness- the darkness of the anterior abdominal wall; the second darkness- the darkness of the uterine wall and the third darkness- the darkness of the amnio-chronic membrane or of the placenta and its membranes. These three layers are known to protect the embryo from external injuries. This description too is remarkable considering the fact that such data relating to embryology have been acquired only in the recent past, certainly not before the nineteenth century.

Yet another interesting fact is that the faculty of hearing is mentioned before sight:

Has there not been over man a period of time when he was nothing – (not even) mentioned? Verily We created man from a drop of mingled sperm in order to try him. So We gave him (the gifts) of Hearing and Sight
(Man:1-2)

It is today established that in the human embryo, the hearing organs develop before the eyes which in fact first perceives the world around it only after it is born. Besides the eye needs light to see while hearing does not. But that's not all. The Holy Book contains an interesting description of zoological phenomena:

Your Lord inspired the bee: "Build dwellings in the hills and the trees, and in the abodes of men. Then eat from every kind of fruit and find with skill the paths of your Lord."
(The Bee: 68-69)

Here we find God addressing the females of the species, where the verbs 'build' 'eat' and 'travel' are all in the feminine form in Arabic. Thus *anittakhidhi* 'to build' or *thamaraati* 'to eat' are in the feminine. Now, we know that a colony of bees comprises of three classes, a queen who lays the eggs, the female worker bees with underdeveloped sex organs who collect honey and build the hive and the male drones whose sole purpose is to impregnate the queen. The phrasing of this command is remarkable as it is in complete agreement with the fact that it is the females who build hives and produce honey from the nectar of flowers, a phenomenon that was discovered only recently by modern science. In fact this female dominance of bees was not known until about 300 years ago, since it takes a real specialist to identify the sex of bees. If you were to read Shakespeare's play Henry the Fourth, you will find mention of bees having a king with soldiers serving him. So rooted was the belief in the male domination of bees until a few centuries ago.

Yet another zoological phenomenon is described as follows:

Verily, in cattle there is a lesson for you. From what is within their bodies, between excretions and blood, we produce for your drink, milk, pure and pleasant to those who drink it
(The Bee:66)

We know today that milk is formed exactly like this, at the conjunction of the intestinal walls and bloodstream, when the cow's digestive enzymes turn its food into excretions that flow through the intestines which are then absorbed by bloods vessels

which in turn convey it to the creature's mammary glands to produce milk. This phenomenon was only recently discovered as a result of advances in biology and zoology in very recent times.

The Qur'an also also provides us with some fascinating botanical information which the men of those times to whom it was revealed were not at all familiar with, such as when it speaks of plants being created in pairs:

He who has made for you the earth like a carpet spread out, has enabled you to get about by ways, and has sent down water from the sky, with it have we produced diverse pairs of plants each separate from the others
(TaHa:53)

The word used here for pairs is *azwaaj* which means 'pair', 'couple' and is even used of spouses. We now know that plants like animals have reproductive apparatuses in the form of male stamens and female pistils which is how plants reproduce themselves by means of fruits to scatter their seed.

Also telling is the Qur'an's description of our environment, which science has only recently discovered. Take the passage that describes cloud formation and the rain and hail that emerges from it:

Seest thou not that God makes the clouds move gently, then joins them together, then makes them into a heap? – then wilt thou see rain issue forth from their midst. And He sends down from the sky mountain masses (of clouds) wherein is hail. He strikes therewith whom He pleases and He turns it away from whom He pleases.The vivid flash of its lightning well-nigh blinds the sight
(The Light:43)

This is exactly what happens in our skies when Cumulonimbus clouds form to produce rain and hail. The wind pushes smaller cumulus clouds to converge in a large cumulonimbus cloud. As the smaller clouds join together, the updrafts within the larger cloud increase, causing it to grow vertically as if stacked up. This heap as the Qur'an calls it causes the cloud body to reach higher into the cooler regions of the atmosphere where water droplets and hail form, becoming larger and larger, so that when they are too heavy to be held by the updrafts, they fall to earth as rain and hail. It is only recently that meteorologists, with the aid of satellite images and observation balloons and other modern gear, have come to conclude thus. It is also a curious fact that the Qur'an should describe the water cycle as follows:

See you not that God sends rain down from the sky and leads it through springs in the earth? Then he causes to grow, therewith, produce of various colours
(The Crowds:21)

Here we would find the Qur'an describing the manner in which springs are fed by rainwater. Although this seems quite logical to us today, we must bear in mind that it was not until the sixteenth century with the findings of Bernard Palissy that we gained the first logical description of the water cycle. The dominant belief until then was that the waters of the oceans were thrust toward the interior of the continents by

the force of the winds and that they then condensed in mountain caverns to form underground lakes that fed springs.

We know now that it is the infiltration of rain water into the ground that is responsible for this phenomenon as the Qur'an describes, and to think it was unknown even to such a great thinker as Descartes who lived well after Palissy but held on to the older theory proposed by Aristotle.

Also revealing is the process of photosynthesis described in the Qur'an:

And I swear by the night when it draws in, and by the dawn when it breathes
(The Folding Up:17-18)

Here we have the Qur'an describing the dawn breathing, which is exactly what happens during photosynthesis which involves plants absorbing energy from sunlight to grow by taking in carbon dioxide from the air and giving off oxygen This is similar to the breathing process of humans who take in oxygen and give our carbon dioxide. In the case of plants too, it is a sort of breathing that takes place. This process begins at dawn and declines by noon. It obviously cannot be observed with the naked eye and was discovered by Swiss Botanist Jean Senebier only in 1796. However, over 1400 years ago, the Qur'an used the word *tanaffasa* to describe this process of 'breathing' when describing the dawn which is further stressed by the fact the God swears upon it. And to think the Holy Book described it in such simple beautiful terms over a thousand years ago.

Another interesting natural phenomenon described in the Qur'an is the unseen barrier of ocean waters which has only recently been acknowledged by modern science:

He it is that has let free the two bodies of flowing water, one palpable and sweet, and the other salt and bitter. Yet has He made a barrier between them,
and a partition forbidden to be passed
(The Criterion:53)

Oceanographers have of late observed a phenomenon known as surface tension which prevents the waters of different seas from mixing and losing their properties in one another due to density differences as if an unseen wall were coming between them. This holds true of many seas that come together such as the Mediterranean Sea and Atlantic Ocean which meet at the strait of Gibraltar. These two seas should show similar characteristics at the juncture they meet and yet each retains its own temperature, salinity and density peculiar to itself as if some unseen barrier were preventing them from coming together in spite of the tides, waves and strong currents in these seas. This aspect, invisible to the naked eye and in conflict with the properties of water then known to man, was first revealed in the Qur'an fourteen hundred years ago. Yet another remarkable natural phenomenon is described in the Qur'an. Here the state of the unbelievers is said to be:

Like the depths of darkness in a vast deep ocean, overwhelmed with billow topped by billow, topped by clouds. Depths of darkness, one above another. If a man stretches out his hand, he can hardly see it!. For any to whom God gives not light, there is no light!
(The Light:39-40)

We now know that at a depth of 200 meters from the surface of the sea, darkness takes over so that if a man stretches out his hand, he can hardly see it. It gets more darker at the bottom of the seas and oceans. This fact could hardly have been known in the 7th century when the Qur'an was revealed. It was in much later times with the invention of submarines and the like that men discovered that darkness reigned deep in the oceans. But that's not all, the verse speaks of wave upon wave, and you might wonder what it's all about. It was only very recently that scientists discovered that there are indeed two sets of waves, the surface ones that we see and internal ones which occur at interfaces between two layers of water of different densities in the deep seas. Although they cannot be seen by the naked eye, they can be detected through changes in temperature or salinity in a given area. The geological details contained in the Qur'an are also remarkable when we consider the fact that these came to be only recently discovered:

Have We not made the earth as a bed and the mountains as pegs?
(The Great News: 6-7)

The Qur'an here describes the mountains as pegs, in other words, like pegs driven into the ground like those used to pitch a tent. This is a good description of the geological folds which form mountain ranges. This process of mountain formation by folding thrust the earth's crust deeper down into the lower layers and provided foundations for the mountains. These roots are several times their elevation above the surface like the tip of an iceberg. Take for instance Mount Everest, it has a height of 9 km above ground, but did you know its roots go as deep as 125 km. It was only in 1865 that Astronomer Royal Sir George Airy proposed that mountains have roots

But that's not all. Mountains play an important role in stabilizing the earth's crust as it helps prevent its tremors originating deep in the bowels of the earth:

And He has set up on the earth mountains standing firm,
lest it should shake with you
(The Bee:15)

It was only with recent developments in plate tectonics theory in the 1960s that it was found that mountains act as stabilizers of the earth. And to think that an Arab from the desert knew about this over 1400 years ago. Yet another astounding revelation of the Qur'an is its statement:

We sent down iron in which is (material for) mighty war,
as well as many benefits for mankind
(Iron:25)

The word used here to describe how iron came to be on earth is *anzal* meaning 'sent down'. So God is telling us that He sent down iron to the earth, making it clear that iron is not an earthly material. So is it a surprise when modern science tells us that iron is not natural to the earth and that it came from outer space when the earth's surface was struck by meteorites carrying iron from distant exploding stars. That iron could have come down to earth from outer space is something that no scientist, let alone an ordinary man living in the 7th century, could have known.

More remarkable are the vivid descriptions of the origins of the universe including what may be taken as an indication of the Big Bang Theory which holds

that the universe started off as a singularity, an infinitely dense, super-condensed ball of matter and energy that burst forth, expanding to become what we know as the universe with its myriad of planets, stars and galaxies. In the Qur'an we come across a verse that bears testimony to this cosmic event:

Do not the Unbelievers see that the heavens and the earth were fused together before We clove them asunder?
(The Prophets:30)

But that's not all, we also read in the Qur'an:

With power did we construct the heaven,
Verily We who are expanding it
(The Scattering Winds: 47)

What this verse says is that not only was there a Big Bang which started it all, but also that the universe is constantly expanding. The word used here for this phenomenon is the plural present participle *musi'una* of the verb *aus'a* 'to expand'. What this tells us is that the universe is still expanding. Scientific observations now make it clear that galaxies are in fact expanding, and moving away from each other at a constant rate. Even in the time of Einstein about a hundred years ago, scientists claimed that either the universe had its confines or that it was an endless space, but none of them ever conceived of the cosmos as an expanding universe. It was only in 1929 that Edwin Hubble, using a powerful telescope, was able to demonstrate that the universe was expanding *like an inflating balloon*. Indeed until the revelation of the Quran no other source had made such an assertion. And all this was written in the Qur'an 1400 years ago. But that's not all. It further says:

He comprehended in His Design the heavens, and it had been smoke. He said to it and the earth: "Come ye together, willingly or unwillingly." They said, "We come (together) in willing obedience. So He completed them as seven firmaments
(Expounded:11-12)

The word used for this primeval gaseous state, *dukhan* is an Arabic term for smoke, vapour and gaseous matter. Thus it appears from the Qur'an that the universe was a gaseous mass before it reached a state from which the universe and the earth emerged. We now know that the earth, the sun and the stars did not come about immediately after the primeval explosion, but that before this there existed primary nebulae in space, interstellar clouds of gas and dust that clumped together to form stars and planets, confirming what the Qur'an has to say about it. Nowhere before the Prophet's day was such a theory asserted, nay not even a thousand years afterwards. This was only a recent discovery with the development of advanced instruments to study heavenly phenomena by modern man. Even if we are to apply it, as the Qur'an implies, to the more specific case of our earth whose atmosphere is like a skin of air around it, we will still find it valid since the earth's gravity could have captured such free floating gases to form our atmosphere. If not for gravity such gases would have quickly diffused into space. Scientists theorize that earth's early atmosphere was probably formed from the gases given out by volcanoes, but it's more likely it formed when the early earth came into contact with interstellar gas clouds while orbiting the sun.

The Qur'an also knows of the orbits of the planets:

It is He who created the night and the day, and the sun, and the moon;
each of them floating in an orbit
(The Prophets:33)

The Arabic word which expresses this movement is the verb *yasbahuna* which implies the idea of motion produced by a moving body, whether it is the movement of one's legs running on the ground, or the action of swimming in water. In the case of a celestial body, one is forced to translate it, according to its original meaning, as 'to travel with its own motion'. The Arabic word *sabaha* used here should be conceived as a motion in a self-generating act. The moon rotates around its axis within a space of time equal to its revolution around the earth; that is 29.5 days. So what we see is always the same face of the moon. The sun turns about its axis within 25 days approximately. The word *sabaha* that describes the motions of the sun and the moon therefore agrees with scientific facts. This fact could not have been known by a man living in the 7th century, regardless of his erudition.

The Qur'an's description of the sun and moon are also in conformity with what we know today of these heavenly bodies:

See ye not How God has created the seven heavens One above another, And made the moon a light in their midst, and made the sun as a (Glorious) Lamp?
(Noah:15-16)

Here the sun is called a lamp and the moon described as giving out light. The sun's comparison to a *siraj*, a lamp or torch, is fitting as it is a star in a permanent state of combustion producing both light and heat. That such a simile is not used for the light of the moon is in the fitness of things since the moon is an inert body that simply reflects the light of the sun. Also interesting is the fact that the word 'star' in the Qur'an is accompanied by an adjective *thaqib* which indicates that it burns and consumes itself as it pierces through the shadows of the night. It was discovered only much later that the stars are heavenly bodies producing their own light like the sun. The Qur'an has a different word, *kawkab,* which it uses to refer to the planets which are celestial bodies that reflect light and do not produce their own light like the sun as in the verse: "*We have adorned the lowest heaven with ornaments, the planets"* (Those Ranged in Ranks:6).

More remarkable is the fact that the Qur'an describes the earth as a spherical object, in the verse: *He made the earth egg-shaped.* The Arabic word *dahw* used here refers to rotundity like that of the ostrich's egg. The word *'dahw'* means *to spread out, giving (something) a round shape*. Despite the meaning of rotundity concealed in words derived from the word *dahw* there have been translators for whom a spherical earth was difficult to conceive, who had to translate it as "to spread out". Therefore, the Quran's statement to this effect failed to be grasped. Men believed that the verse referred to the plenitude of the earth, ignoring the sense of rotundity it conveyed. And indeed, the actual shape of the earth does have the shape of an ostrich egg as described in the Qur'an. This is remarkable considering that even the books written centuries afterwards likened the shape of the earth to a tray and had various other fanciful notions as to its shape.

Also interesting is the fact that the Qur'an describes the alternation of night and day in the following terms:

He wraps the night around the day and He wraps the day around the night
(The Crowds:5)

We would find that the Arabic verb *kawwara* 'to coil or wrap around' used here to describe the alternation of night and day has the same root as the Arabic word for 'ball' and possesses the connotation of wrapping or winding something around a spherical object, like to coil a piece of cloth around the head. It was not until a few decades ago that its true meaning became apparent when space travelers observed that the earth spinned on is axis with the dark half of the globe appearing to wind itself around the light of day and the light half appearing to wind itself around the dark of night.The verse also clearly implies the sphericity of the world, yet another modern discovery.
Another remarkable revelation of the Qur'an is its statement:

We made the sky a protective ceiling. And yet they are turning away from Our Signs
(The Prophets:32)

The protective properties of the sky were discovered only in the 20th century and to think this statement was made in the 7th century when men looked upon the sky as a sort of stone vault or dome held high by pillars of some sort. Today, we know the atmosphere not only envelops the earth with life-sustaining gases, but also has several protective properties including what we call the Ozone layer which protects the earth from the lethal rays of the sun. If it did not exist solar radiation would have wiped out all life on earth a very long time ago, nay not have allowed it to come into being in the first place.

But just as it blocks the most harmful rays, it also allows a certain amount of ultraviolet rays just enough for life to thrive to pas through. It also insulates earth against extremes of temperature by limiting both incoming solar radiation and the escape of re-radiated heat into space, somewhat like a thermostat. The sky also serves as a blanket wrapped around the earth, protecting it from the freezing cold of space where the temperature just above the sky is – 2700 C. If ever such a cold temperature reached earth, we would have frozen over instantly. In short the sky serves as a giant greenhouse, warming the earth's surface by soaking up heat and protecting life as we know it.

And if that's not enough my friend, come tomorrow and I'll tell you more about it. So go in peace. I see you're quite dazed, sort of star struck!

9th Night

Johnny: Salams Sheikh. Last night was indeed a long one, and I guess I was sort of dazed by what you said as well. It's surprising that your Holy Book should contain such scientific facts. I have never read of this sort of thing in any other scripture. Certainly not in the Bible which contradicts established scientific facts, like when it says that God created day and night before the creation of the sun as we read in Genesis. But do tell me:

Are there any prophecies mentioned in Muslim Scripture?

The Janissary: Yes certainly. One is that Islam will prevail over all other faiths of the world, a fact that is fast coming true. The early Muslims despite severe oppression at the hands of the Meccans were given this good news from God:

God has promised those who have believed among you and done righteous deeds that He will surely grant them succession (to authority) upon the earth just as He granted it to those before them and that He will surely establish their religion which He has chosen for them and that He will surely put in place of their fear, security, (for) they worship Me, not associating anything with Me
(The Light: 55)

How such a promise from Almighty God would be fulfilled to the oppressed Muslims in Mecca seemed impossible to imagine at the time it was made. But it was not very long before it came to pass, when the Prophet and his followers, to escape the oppression of their Pagan townsfolk migrated to Medina where he was able to unite the two tribes of Aws and Khazraj and form the first Islamic city state. This city state would in the years to come extend its sway not only to Mecca whence its earliest followers had been driven out, but over the whole of the Arabian Peninsula. But that's not all, Islam was not to be confined to Arabia, it was to expand far and wide to become a universal faith that would prevail over all others. As God Himself promised the believers:

It is He who has sent His Messenger with the guidance and the religion of truth, that he may make it prevail over all religion, though the polytheists dislike it
(The Battle Array:9)

In keeping with the Divine Decree, the early Muslims to whom these verses were addressed were within a short period of time after the death of the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) able to overcome both the Persian and Byzantine empires, the superpowers of the day, taking full control of Persia and its province of Iraq and depriving the Byzantines of some of their fairest provinces such as Syria, Jordan and Palestine. Within just twelve years of Muhammad's death, the Holy Islamic Empire extended from Persia in the East to Egypt and beyond to Cyrenaica in Libya in the West. It took upon itself the role of the two earlier superpowers of Persia and Byzantium, becoming a superpower in it own right, to advance still further under dynasties such as the Umayyads, Abbasids and the Ottomans.

This zeal for conversion to Islam is not a new thing. It has been an ongoing process. As you know Islam began in Arabia, but today only about 15 percent of all believers in Islam are Arabs with over 80 percent of Muslims living outside the Arab world. Did you know that Indonesia in South East Asia, which is the largest Muslim country in terms of population became Muslim only after the 10th century. Bosnia

was Islamized only in the 15th century while Albania became so only around the 19th century. Today there are more Muslims in Germany than in Lebanon and more in China than in Syria and these Muslims are not Arabs, but rather Turks and other Non-Arab peoples. Muslims form about 12 percent of the population of Russia, 8 percent in France, 5 percent in Germany, Netherlands and Switzerland and 4 percent in the United Kingdom.

Not only is Islam the second largest religion in Europe, but it is the fastest growing religion there, growing even faster than Christianity. It is the same in the US where as Geraldine Baum, Religion Writer of Newsday wrote: "*Islam is the fastest growing religion in the country*". In the 20th century we saw some prominent people embracing Islam including American Boxer Muhammad Ali the boxer who was Cassius Clay before he embraced Islam and British Pop Singer Cat Stevens who took on the name of Yusuf Islam when he became Muslim. But in this 21st century we live in, the pace has only accelerated with many westerners discovering Islam and embracing it gleefully, the majority of them women.

Indeed, Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world today with Christianity lagging well behind. According to the *Guinness Book of World Records*, Islam is the world's fastest-growing religion by number of conversions each year. As American diplomat Herman Frederick Eilts observed before the US Congress in 1985: "*Islam today is the fastest growing religion. This is something we have to take into account. Something is right about Islam. It is attracting a good many people*.". In fact from 1990 to 2000, around 12.5 million more people converted to Islam than to Christianity. France has over 100,000 converts while in the UK around 6,000 people convert to Islam each year, the majority of these new Muslim converts being women. In the UK, the first decade of the 21st century from 2001 and 2009 saw the Muslim population increasing ten times faster than the rest of the population. The latest research study done by the Pew Research Center shows that the number of Muslims worldwide will equal the number of Christians by 2050, possibly for the first time in history, and that they will outnumber Christians around 2070.

But need we look to the future? Today we are often told that Christians are the world's largest religious group, but did you know that although there are more professing Christians than professing Muslims, there are more practicing Muslims in the world than practicing Christians, even if you were to define such a Muslim as one who offered his daily prayers five times a day and such a Christian as one who attended church once a week. Even in the UK, there are more practicing Muslims than there are practicing Anglicans, with the number of Muslims visiting a mosque at least once a week exceeding the number of Sunday churchgoers. So as it is, Muslims already seem to have outnumbered Christians!

Now isn't it strange that the world's youngest major world faith that begun only 1400 years ago should grow to be the largest, when there are other major faiths that are much older which we should naturally expect to have superseded Islam. What this proves is that Islam's claim to be a universal faith is true and that God's Promise to establish it far and wide so as to supersede all others that came before it is being fulfilled to the letter.

Another such prophecy is contained in the Qur'anic Chapter titled The Romans or in Arabic *Al Room*: *The Romans have been defeated in the lowest part of the earth. But after defeat they will soon be victorious. Between three or nine years. God's is the imperative first and last. On that day the believers will rejoice (30: 2-4).* At the time these verses were revealed the Romans, that is the Romans of the Byzantine Empire, who were Christians were defeated by the Zoroastrian Persians. The Persians

conquered Damascus in 611, Antioch in 613, Jerusalem in 614 and Egypt in 616. Christians were ruthlessly massacred and their churches burnt by the Persians who were assisted by crowds of Jews. The Pagan Arabs like the Jews sided with the Persians, hoping that the destruction of Christendom would also be a setback for the Prophet's mission as the natural successor to Jesus. In contrast, the young Muslim community was grieved to hear the news that the fire-worshippers had prevailed over their fellow monotheistic Christians. However, the Qur'an predicted that the Romans of Byzantium would soon emerge victorious and that the believers would rejoice.

This was at a time when all hope seemed to be lost for the Byzantines. So dreadful was the defeat that it was thought that the empire would never recover. Emperor Heraclius' position was so bad that he collected and melted all the gold and silver of the churches to meet the expenses of his army. The Persians had already occupied Mesopotamia, Cilicia, Syria, Palestine, Egypt and Armenia, all places that had once been under the domination of the Byzantines. It was in such a time of despair that the Qur'an predicted that the Byzantines would triumph within three to nine years.

The prophecy came true when Byzantium won a victory over the Persians somewhere near the ruins of Nineveh in 622 AD, about nine years after the revelation of the prophecy. No prophesy it is said could have been more distant from its accomplishment. But then something wonderful happened. Heraclius who was earlier thought of as a good for nothing impotent sloth suddenly changed. Taking on the mantle of a do or die hero, he set sail quietly into the Mediterranean with a band of soldiers and landing on the shores of Syria, defeated the Persian forces. His troops quickly marched on with victory after victory as far as the royal cities of Casbin and Ispahan, which had never been approached by a Roman emperor before. There, he faced the largest Persian army ever.

Although he knew nothing of the prophecy foretold in the Qur'an a few years earlier, Heraclius addressed his commanders: "*Do not be terrified by the multitude of your enemies. With the aid of Heaven, one Roman may triumph over a thousand barbarians*". Also interesting is the fact that the verse in question speaks of the defeat of the Romans at the lowest part of the earth. The Arabic expression *adna al ard* literally means the lowest part of the earth which has been translated by some commentators as "land close by" for want of a better rendering of the Arabic expression used in the Qur'an. The region where the Byzantines suffered defeat was the Dead Sea, a place that is approximately 400 meters below the sea level and indeed is *the lowest spot on earth*, a fact that could only be verified with the measuring techniques man had perfected only in the last century.

The Qur'an also foretold that the body of the Pharaoh would one day be discovered. This was the tyrant who tormented the Children of Israel. God sent Moses to him with the mission of inviting him to believe in One God and allow the enslaved Israelites to leave Egypt with him. The Pharaoh refused but one night Moses succeeded in marching towards the frontier with his people and Pharaoh set out to pursue them. When Moses reached the Red Sea, he touched it with his staff, and a furrow opened across the sea. Pharaoh attempted to follow him, but was engulfed with his legions. The Bible in Exodus 14:28-29 would have us believe that Pharaoh was drowned when the sea closed in on him and went to the bottom of the sea. Not so the Qur'an. While narrating this event, the Qur'an made a prediction:

We took the Children of Israel across the sea. Then Pharaoh with his hosts pursued them in rebellion and hostility until, when he was overwhelmed by the flood, he said: "I believe there is no god except the one in whom the Children of Israel believe, and I am of those who surrender to him". (God said): "What- now, after you rebelled

and caused mischief ?This day shall We save you in your body so that you may be a sign for those who come after you"
(Jonah: 90-92)

The Qur'an's reference to the saving of the Pharaoh's body is remarkable as it refers to the ancient Egyptian practice of mummifying their deceased monarchs which was unknown in the days of the Prophet. The Pharoah of the Exodus referred to in the Qur'an was either Rameses II who could not build a tomb for himself in spite of being a great builder, perhaps because his death was so sudden, or his son and successor Merneptah, whose mummified body was discovered only in 1898 in the Valley of the Kings at Thebes. A medical examination of this mummy, has, shown that the body could not have stayed in the water for long, because it does not show signs of deterioration due to prolonged submersion. Thus it would appear that the the body of the Pharoah was retrieved from the sea by his followers shortly after he had drowned and subjected to mummification, which agrees with the Qur'anic account but conflicts with the Biblical account that he was engulfed by the sea.

Yet another prophecy the Qur'an tells us about is the dangers of trying to 'play God' and change the fair nature He has created. These come by way of a warning it records as coming from the mouth of the most evil one, Satan himself when he tells God how he intends leading astray the children of Adam:

"I will mislead them, and I will create in them false desires, I will order them to slit The ears of cattle, and to deface the (fair) nature created by God"
(The Women:119)

Here we have a foreboding of the frightening scientific advances in Genetic Engineering also known as Gene Splicing where the genetic material of one organism is transplanted to another, effectively changing the fair nature created by God and subverting it to man's perverse inclinations. This is nothing but the devil's handiwork, working through the agency of evil men trying to play God. And to think of it, the Qur'an warned us about it over 1400 years ago.

10th Night

Johnny: Salams Sheikh. I'm really beginning to enjoy your company. I must say, it's really fascinating, this holy book of yours, the Qur'an. I learned quite a lot last night and I must admit I'm quite impressed. Now to get on to my next question:

Why is Islam so opposed to idolatry?

The Janissary: Idolatry is the greatest sin in Islam, my friend, and here I don't mince my words. It is impossible that the limited mind of man can ever conceive, represent or picture the infinite perfection of God. Any endeavour to visualize Him, to reduce him to our finite comprehension, beggars His Greatness and flies in the face of all that is Godly. All that we can say of Him is what He has revealed of Himself through the Ages through His Messengers and the Signs of His Existence we see everywhere around us showing the work of an Intelligent Will absolutely perfect in Goodness.

Since God is beyond our imagination, how can we make images of him or anything representing him? We simply cannot. Islam, by virtue of its uncompromising stance on monotheism, has been able to preserve itself from this great scourge which has corrupted almost every faith on the face of the earth. Just look at the different religions you see around you and see for yourselves how many have sunk into crude forms of idolatry, taking objects created by human hands as objects of worship. What are they but sticks and stones and other worthless things that have no life or power, fashioned by the hands of foolish men mislead by the devil, men whose minds have distorted the transcendent beauty of God, giving the gods of their imagination fanciful forms as flimsy as clay in a potter's hands, relegating lofty spirit to base matter.

Look at the low level to which man has sunk worshipping these objects of his own making, so hideous and monstrous that their very existence is an affront to man's dignity, created as he is in the *Best of Moulds* and in the *Image of God* as He Himself tells us. Little wonder that Islam deems it a fall from grace, or to put it in the words of God:

Shun the abomination of idols and the false word, being true in the way of God and not of those that associate partners with Him, for whoso ascribes partners unto God, it is as if he had fallen from heaven and been snatched up by birds or the wind had swooped (like a bird on its prey) and blown him to a far off place.
(The Pilgrimage:30-31)

Yes, the one who indulges in idolatry is indeed lost and far, far away from the truth. I ask you, can science explain why idolatry is so rampant among men, even the seemingly intelligent ones among them? Nay even science cannot explain this peculiar trait that has been the bane of humanity through the ages. Science cannot, but Islam can - what else but the handiwork of the devil.

Moreover, idolatry is an affront to God, the Most High, who created all that is in the heavens and the earth including the very substances these worthless objects of veneration have been made of. It bestows on these created objects the reverence due to God alone as the Creator. To compare God with His creation is a villainy of the highest order as it has the effect of lowering the esteem due to Him from His worshippers. It is an affront to His Supreme Overlordship and an insult to His boundless attributes. Quite naturally, it provokes His Anger and kindles the fire of His wrath. What's more idols can be desecrated; they can be broken and thrown,

kicked and licked. Why, because they are made using created material things. Could we say the same of the One True Transcendant Deity above us? To say that such idols contain or represent a deity is therefore the highest folly.

You may wonder why God is so hard on those who deny him or associate partners with him? Let's look at it this way: When you deny him, as far as you are concerned, you are, in your mind, negating him, just as when you commit suicide, as far as you are concerned, you annihilate mankind with you. Would it then be unreasonable on the part of God who created you and still sustains you, to have nothing to do with you and put you away just as you put him away?

Now suppose you go one more and takes other gods besides Him. Would it cool his wrath or kindle it? It will kindle it further of course! Why, you are now taking as gods, as creators and sustainers, others besides the one who created you. Suppose you have a child and nurture him and nourish him and pour all your love and affection on him, and in spite of all this he claims another who did not do a thing for him as his father. Now, not only is he annihilating you as his father, but he is bestowing the title on another who has absolutely no right to it. Chances are pretty high that you will tell him to *go to hell!*

This is why God has Abraham rhetorically ask the pagans in the Qur'an:

Do you Worship that which you have (yourselves) carved?
But God has created you and your handiwork!
(Those Ranged in Ranks: 95-96)

And He Himself answers their folly:

Those whom they invoke besides God create nothing and are themselves created.
(They are) dead, lifeless
(The Bee:20-21)

And even puts forth a parable to strike some sense into them:

Those on whom, besides God, you call, cannot create (even) a fly, if they all met together for the purpose! And if the fly should snatch away anything from them, they would have no power to release it from the fly
(The Pilgrimage: 73)

Let me relate the story of Abraham as told in the Qur'an just to show you the kind of logic these foolish idolaters resort to. When Abraham asked his father and his people: "*What worship ye?*" They said: "*We worship idols, and to them we are ever devoted*." He said: "*Do they hear you, when you call (on them)? Or do they benefit you or do they harm (you)?*" They said: "*Nay, but we found our fathers doing so*" (The Poets: 69-74). The foolish talk of foolish men. Even the prattle of children is better than the pathetic bleating of this herd.

The fearless iconoclast he was even at that young age, Abraham wanted to teach his people a lesson and so reduced all their idols to fragments, except the chief of them. These so-called gods did not even have the power to save themselves from destruction. When the temple priests returned, they were shocked to see the sacrilege, and were wondering who could have done this to their idols. Then someone mentioned the name of Abraham, explaining that he used to speak ill of them. When

they called him to their presence, Abraham asked: "*Worship ye that which you yourselves have carved ? But God has created you and your handiwork!"*. Angry, they asked him: "*Is it you who has done this to our gods, O Abraham?*".

However Abraham who had left the largest idol untouched promptly replied: '*But this, their chief has done it. So question them, if they can speak!*". When Abraham challenged them, they were cast into confusion. They said: "*Indeed you know well these speak not!*" And Abraham replied: "*Worship you then instead of God that which cannot profit you at all, nor harm you? Fie on you and all that you worship instead of God! Have you then no sense?*". As they had no answer, these misguided fools were furious and condemned the young Abraham to be burned alive. Abraham was undeterred. He did not lose faith nor flinch in the face of a fiery fate even at this tender age. God had however willed otherwise. He said: "*O fire, be coolness and peace for Abraham*" and he was spared the fury of the fire by God's Grace (The Prophets: 51-69; Those Ranged in Ranks 95-96).

Abraham's descendants through his son Isaac and grandson Jacob, the children of Israel for long kept the covenant with God that they were to worship none but Him, but there were times they relapsed into idolatry such as when Moses delayed to come down from the holy mount, when they made a molten calf to worship. The less enlightened folk among them probably conceived of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as "*their God*" who laid no claim to universal rule and it is possible that this was one of the reasons why they so easily fell into idolatry, for if they could have 'their God', others could have 'their god' as well, hence entertaining the idea of a plurality of gods. This is why Islam focuses so much on the universal character of God as the Master of the Universe.

The Old Testament revealed to the Children of Israel is very clear in condemning idolatry. You are of course familiar with the Ten Commandants. You well know the First Commandment reads: "*Thou shall have no other gods before me*". And I'm sure you know what the Almighty has to say after this, in His Second Commandment: "*Thou shall have no other gods before me. Thou shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God*".

He does not stop at that. He speaks about his Oneness and His Peerlessness in very strong terms, showing that He cannot be captured by the minds of men to be represented as an idol: "*I am God and there is none else. I am God and there is none like unto Me*" (Isaiah 46:9) and His right to be worshipped like no other: "*There is no other God beside me, a just God and a Saviour; there is none besides me. Turn to me, and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear*" (Isaiah 45:21-23). He plainly tells us that idols cannot take his place in the minds of men: "*I give My Glory to No One Else*" He said through the Prophet Isaiah "*Nor My Praise to Graven Images*" (Isaiah 42:8).

You will also find a beautiful psalm exposing the folly of the idolators: "*Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths but do not speak, eyes but do not see. They have ears but do not hear, noses but do not smell. They have hands but do not feel, feet but do not walk*" (Psalm 115: 4-7). In like manner, the Qur'an challenges those who call upon others besides God, asking of their deities: "*Have they feet to walk with? Or hands to hold with? Or eyes to see with? Or ears to hear with?*" (The Heights:195). It even tells us how close they are to their false idols: "*Many are the jinns and men We have made for Hell. They have*

hearts wherewith they understand not, eyes wherewith they see not, and ears wherewith they hear not" (The Heights:179). It is such men who are truly blind, whose heads are stone and whose eyes two holes in it, like the idols they adore.

The Biblical rule against idolatry good Christians are bound to follow as much as the Jews, the descendants of the children of Israel. After all did not Jesus (Peace Be Upon Him) declare that worship should be directed to God alone as seen in the Gospel of Matthew. Further did not he say in the Gospel of John: "C*hildren, guard yourselves from idols*". Indeed history provides many instances of how good Christians opposed idolatry tooth and nail. When Constantine V summoned the Council of Hieria 754 which concerned itself primarily with religious imagery, well over three hundred bishops declared "*the unlawful art of painting living creatures blasphemed the fundamental doctrine of our salvation" and "If anyone shall endeavour to represent the forms of the Saints in lifeless pictures with material colours which are of no value (for this notion is vain and introduced by the devil), let him be anathema."* .

The *Libri Carolini* composed by command of the Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne around 790 very harshly condemned the idolatry that had crept into the Orthodox church as *folly* and as *an old and outmoded pagan misunderstanding*. It was also this attitude that one sees about the same time in the iconoclastic fervour of the Byzantine Emperors like Michael II, Leo III and Constantine V who forbade veneration of images and spared no pains destroying them. Some of these men were subjected to ridicule for their stance. So it is we have last great Iconoclast, the Patriarch of Constantinople, John VII been depicted by an opponent as rubbing out a painting of Christ. Poor John is caricatured with untidy hair sticking out in all directions meant to portray him as wild and barbaric. There are some who say that Islamic influence had a role in this. Well, who knows? But even many centuries later in the sixteenth century and after the same zeal was seen in the Protestant Reformation when men like Huldrych Zwingli and the Swiss Anabaptists railed against religious imagery as heresy. This is because they realized that true Christianity did not accept idolatry in any form.

But what do we see today even in many of their churches where statues and icons are prayed to as if they were God, not very different from the paganism of old. This cancer is widespread in the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches where devotees even kneel before the statues of Christ and the Saints in the belief that by doing so they are really adoring Christ and venerating the Saints whose likenesses they are. It is nevertheless heartening to me as a Muslim to see many of your Protestant Churches prohibiting statues and other religious images in their churches in keeping with the true teachings of Jesus. Remember the Puritan groups such as those that settled in the New World denounced all forms of religious objects, not the least the cross. The Amish Christians who live in America are even more strict, forbidding animate objects of any sort, and not just religious images, so that even children's dolls have blank faces.

Even early Hinduism was not in favour of idols. The Yajur Veda says of God: "*Na Tasya Pratima Asti*" (There is no likeness of Him) (32:3) which is remarkably similar to what the Qur'an has to say about Him: *Laysa kamithlihi shay'un* (*Nothing whatsoever is like Him)* (The Consultation:11). That's not all, the Veda goes on to declare: "*They enter darkness, those who worship natural things*" and adds "*They sink deeper in darkness those who worship created things*" (40:9). The Shvetashvatara Upanishad in like vein pronounces: "*Na Samdrshe Tisthati Rupam*

Asya, Na Chakshusha Pashyati Kashcanainam" (His form cannot be seen; None sees him with the eye) (4:20).

Unfortunately, in later times Hinduism became saturated with idols, from the elephant-faced pot-bellied Ganesh to the monkey god Hanuman who led his tribe against the ten-headed demon-king Ravana. It's also big business. Indian politicians for instance go to a temple known as Tirupati Kovil where they make a vow that if they win an election, they will donate gold to the weight of their bodies to the temple. In fact many unscrupulous folk in such countries find it good business to set up a temple for people to make vows in fulfilment of which they enrich the coffers of its owners.

And if that were not enough, despite the Buddha's preachings against any visual representations, even of himself, we find his votaries in South Asia not only making statues of the Indian sage which they worship by offering flowers, but also go to the extent of worshipping his relics like teeth and footprints for which they have constructed magnificant temples.

This is in spite of the fact that the Buddha detested any visual representations of himself or others. We read in the Samyutta Nikaya that an old disciple of his named Vakkali, while on his deathbed, was very eager to see the teacher in person. The Buddha came to him and said "*O Vakkali, why do you crave to have a look at this body of impure matter*". The Buddhist treatise Majjhima Nikaya went further, declaring that the form of the Buddha after his death has been discarded and uprooted, and thus he is free from being denoted by a material shape for which it uses the telling words *rupa sankhavimutto*. It was due to this teaching against animate objects that early representations of the Buddha in temple art such as in Bharhut and Sanchi were aniconistic, with the Buddha being represented by symbols but never in human form, for instance the nativity by a lotus flower and the enlightenment by an empty seat. Buddha images grew in popularity only from about the first century after Christ due to Indo-Greek influence coming from North West India which even changed how he would have really looked like as seen in the voluminous drapery with heavy pleats and short peppercorn curls on the head of these statues. The true Buddha in contrast wore minimum clothing and had his head shaved. In fact Buddhist iconography to this day shows him with finely chiseled features that bear a close resemblance to old Greek statues of Apollo.

Fortunately Islam was saved from the great scourge we call idolatry. When the Prophet set out to conquer Mecca at the head of a large army numbering 10,000 men in the year 630, he did not go there to punish the Quraysh who had for so long persecuted his followers and even made an attempt to take his life, but to abolish the idolatry that had taken root in the holiest of holy places there, the Ka'aba, an ancient temple dedicated by Abraham and Ishmael to the One True God. The scourge of idols had not even spared this sanctum, for it had around it as many as 360 idols, one each for every day of the year. He rode round the Ka'aba seven times, touching the black stone each time and crying '*God is Great!*' The shout was echoed by his 10,000 soldiers and soon the whole city was resounding with these words. He immediately turned his attention to the idols and smashed each and every one of them saying: "*Truth has come, and falsehood has vanished; surely falsehood is certain to vanish*" (The Night Journey:81).

He spared just two, the images of Jesus and Mary, simply out of reverence for these two great servants of God, not because he condoned idols of any form. When the Prophet became ill, some of his wives talked about a church called Mariya which they had seen in Ethiopia. Umm Salma and Umm Habiba had been to Ethiopia, and

both of them narrated its beauty and the pictures it contained. The Prophet raised his head and said:

Those are the people who, whenever a pious man dies amongst them, make a place of worship at his grave and then they make those pictures in it.
Those are the worst creatures in the Sight of God
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

How well meant indeed. When we consider the history of the church we can easily see how such misplaced veneration has lead to idolatry. This was mainly a result of the idea of intercession, where votaries believed that in order to obtain Divine favour one ought to pray to those deemed near and dear to God in the hope that the ones prayed to would intercede with the Almighty on their behalf. With time all that which became associated with these saints including their images, relics and places of rest would be venerated and even prayed to, eventually degenerating into worship not of God, but of man.

It is for reasons such as this that the Prophet left no stone unturned in his mission against idolatry, going so far as to command his followers to disfigure images of living things and even level graves so that they are only a few inches high as to be recognizable: "*Do not leave any figure without mutilating it or any grave without leveling it"(Saheeh Muslim)*. You have only to look at the monuments left behind by the men of old to realize how many of them have been dedicated to the dead, kings and popes and nobles, at great cost to the ordinary people who had to bear the brunt of it all, with their blood, sweat and tears.

You may feast your eyes upon the pyramids, but what are they but tombs of the pharaohs, painstakingly built over years using slaves, many of whom perished in the process, a tomb for one man and a graveyard for thousands. What more greater monument of oppression than these?

It was in the same iconoclastic spirit of our Prophet that Jesus condemned the Jews of his day:"*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous*" (Matthew 23:27–29).

But our Prophet did not stop at just humbling the monuments of oppression, he warned his followers of Divine Retribution:"*On the Day of Judgment, part of the hell fire will come forth with two eyes with which to see, two ears with which to hear, and a tongue with which to speak, saying, 'I have been ordered to deal with three: he who holds there is another god besides God, with every arrogant tyrant, and with makers of images*" (Tirmidhi).

Such sentiments expressed by our Prophet ensured that Muslims would never stoop to idolatry or erection of monuments to the dead. Death is, after all, a great leveler and equalizer. It is common to all, and so the place of death must stay that way, distinguishing neither between prince and pauper or patrician or plebe. To raise it to a height is to idolize the dead. It is idolatry in another form.

You will never find idols in a mosque nor animate images of any kind. We Muslims are taught that we have to be ever wary of idolatry for it is as inconspicuous as a black ant crawling on a black rock in the pitch darkness of a moonless night. You only have to see the fate of the other faiths to realise the truth of this.

Finally let me end with a little known quotation from that well known Italian orientalist Dr.Laura Veccia Vaglieri who wrote in Apologia dell Islamismo: "*Thanks to Islam, Paganism in its various forms was defeated. The concept of the universe, the practices of religion and social customs were each liberated from all the monstrosities which had degraded them, and human minds were made free of prejudices. Mankind finally realised its dignity and humbled itself before the creator, the Lord and Master of all mankind. The spirit was liberated from prejudice. Man's will was set free from the ties which had kept him bound to other men or other so-called hidden powers. Priests, false guardians of mysteries, brokers of salvation and all those who pretended to be mediators between God and man and consequently believed that they had authority over the will of other people, fell from their pedestals. Man became the servant of Allah alone and towards other men he had the obligations of one free man towards another free man*".

11th Night

Johnny: Salams Sheikh. I guess you had a point as to why Islam is so opposed to idolatry. It makes sense, but why take it to an extreme, which brings me to my next question:

Why are images of living beings that are not even idols prohibited?

The Janissary: Images of living things like humans, animals and even representations of imaginary beings are as a rule prohibited in Islam. This means that we Muslims cannot draw or sketch or paint or engrave or carve any objects of animate beings nor display them in our homes. This prohibition applies equally to two-dimensional representations like paintings as they do to three-dimensional images like statues or figurines.

The prohibition is based on the teachings of our beloved Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him). A man once came to a Companion of the Prophet named Ibn Abbas and said; "*My sustenance is from my manual profession and I make these pictures*". The companion said, "*I will tell you only what I heard from God's Apostle. I heard him saying, 'Whoever makes a picture will be punished by God till he puts life in it, and he will never be able to put life in it*'" Hearing this, the man heaved a sigh and his face turned pale. The companion said to him: "*What a pity! If you insist on making pictures I advise you to make pictures of trees and any other inanimate objects*" (Saheeh Al-Bukhari).

The Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) also made it clear to us that angels do not like pictures of animate things. It once happened that the archangel Gabriel promised to visit him but delayed, so that the Prophet got worried about it. At last he came out and found Gabriel and complained to him of his grief (for his delay). Gabriel said to him: "*We do not enter a place in which there is a picture or a dog*" (Saheeh Muslim). Now you may wonder why our faith is so rigid when it comes to representations of living beings apart from idols that are worshipped. Let us hear what the Prophet (Peace Be upon him) had to say what God Almighty Himself thought of it. He said: "*God says: 'Who does more wrong than the one who tries to create something like My creation; let him create a grain of wheat or an ear of corn.'*" (Saheeh Al-Bukhari). Thus God Himself makes it clear to us that He does not take kindly to our creating a likeness of His living Creation.

But there are other good reasons why even non-idol images are looked down upon by Muslims. Carving images has often been was closely associated with idolatry. People in the olden days - and indeed even today - were in the habit of carving images for the sake of worship. Thus images, known in Arabic by the general term tasweer (which can refer to a picture, image, statue etc) were deemed anathema by the earliest followers of Islam and faithfully followed by Muslims throughout the ages.

But that's not all. images themselves can lead to idolatry. Who knows, ignorant people who come across an image might be led to believe it's a deity being represented and start worshipping it. But that's not all, it can also lead to hero worship and to the provocation of sexual desire leading to immorality. How many young people today have pictures of their pop heroes or sports heroes or pin up girls in seductive poses given pride of place in their bedrooms? Isn't this a form of idolatry? Little wonder that even a music show has to have a title like American Idol to capture these foolish young minds. The same holds true of portraits of rulers, chiefs, despots and monarchs with bloated egos which majestically hang on walls and tower over you as if watching over you like a divinity would. What arrogance

and still people don't see through it all. Undue reverence for men is the first step towards idolatry and all that is hateful to God.

Statues of living beings, even though they be dead, are even worse than portraits as they more closely resemble living objects even to the extent of casting shadows and because of the undue respect and reverence people pay to them. Have you not noticed how such statues are often depicted larger than life as if to give an aura of divinity to the personage so depicted. Is there really a need to perpetuate the memory of the dead in this manner? Why not write about their feats and deeds rather than glorify them in this crude manner which only appeals to the baser instincts in man. Islam on the other hand gives dignity to man. It gives respect and self-esteem to each and every one of us.

All men are equal before God, which is why it abhors excessive glorification of people, no matter how great they may have been. Men are created differently and some are more capable than others. Finally all that they accomplish is by the Grace of God. God alone knows the secret and the hidden as much as he does the manifest. Men are forgetful but not God. How many a pious person would have passed away unsung and forgotten? But God never forgets and will give them the gift of immortality which the unbelievers with bloated egos yearn to achieve through statues and their like in order to be remembered by their fellow men.

On the other hand neither our Prophet or the Caliphs who succeeded him or the pious saints among Muslims were ever 'immortalized' in statues. Their deeds are well known though, not by erecting statues, but by oral lore passed from parent to child or written record from teacher to student or at meetings or gatherings of the believers whose hearts and minds are filled with inspiration on hearing their achievements. Just ask yourself how has the life story of our beloved Prophet been preserved. Every single word and deed so faithfully recorded and passed down to posterity without resorting to visual representations of any sort. Even his beautiful countenance has been preserved for us, a fair man with broad head, aquiline nose and a kindly disposition, so that we can only imagine in our mind's eye what he would have looked like, but even that is stretching it a bit too far.

Once, when his Companions wanted to stand up to greet him out of respect, the Prophet (Peace Be Upon him) forbade them, saying:

Do not stand up as the Persians do, some people honouring the others
(Aboo Dawood)

On another occasion he said:

Do not praise me as the Christians praise the son of Mary, for I am but the servant of God and His Messenger
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

Thus how can a religion which does not even allow us to be lavish in glorifying even the Messenger of God (Peace be on him) tolerate the erection of statues meant to venerate people?

Although some might argue that statues are meant for mere ornament or for remembering the dead, and not worship, they do not realize that ideas change with time, and that what seems unlikely in one environment can become acceptable in another. Could not idol worship have originated when men began making statues of their fathers and forefathers to remember them; before long they would have given them undue reverence, placing flowers at their feet and bowing before them and as

one generation followed another the veneration would have turned into worship so that these statues themselves came to be worshiped as deities to be feared and at the same time implored for help. People's memories after all are short and is n't it possible that with the passage of time it will all be forgotten? So the further we are removed from the practice of the idolaters, who fashion and bow down to objects of their own creation, the better. Thus you will find that there is great wisdom behind Islam's prohibition of animate representations, not the least among them, blocking every possible pathway through which idolatry can creep into the hearts and minds of men.

Statuary is also a most unproductive and time-consuming affair as nothing is served in it except glorifying one's fellow man which is even worse than its not serving any purpose. Sculptors often tend to feel pride in their work, as if they had created something out of nothing and in doing so arrogate to themselves a prerogative that belongs to God and God alone. Furthermore statues are even today symbols of a luxurious, nay decadent lifestyle. Have you not seen how selfish affluent folk having nothing else to do fill their palaces or houses with these statues just to show that they have a fine taste for art? Have you seen how even the poorest of nations spend stupendous sums of money to put up statues of their heroes, like the statue recently dedicated to Vallabbhai Patel in India supposed to be the largest in the world and costing a mind-boggling 440 million US Dollars. All this at a time when their poor are suffering for want of basic needs. Why is it that nobody calls it a *crime against humanity*, when in fact it is!

It is nevertheless permissible to keep statues that have had their heads broken off as they would then be deemed a lifeless object and not generate any feelings of respect, but rather ridicule which goes well with Islam's strong sense of iconoclasm. It is said that the angel Gabriel once refused to enter the house of the Prophet because there was a statue by its door. The Prophet tells us: "*Gabriel came to me and said: I came to you last night and was prevented from entering simply by the fact that there were statues at the door, and there was in the house a curtain with images. So, order that the head of the statue which is in the house be cut off so that it may become like the form of a tree; order that the curtain be cut up and made into two cushions spread out or use it as a floor-mat*" (Aboo Dawood).

However, there is nothing wrong in having pictures or even three-dimensional representations of inanimate things like trees, flowers, fruits, houses, castles, mountains, lush scenery, ships in the sea and so on where no humans or animals are shown. This is why you will find in many Muslim households beautiful pictures of such scenes so pleasing to the eye. If you look closely, these are much more pleasing than pictures depicting people or other life forms. Muslims also resort to geometrical ornamentation and calligraphy to give beauty to their surroundings, especially in mosques.

At the same time the prohibition against depicting living beings need not apply to photographs or children's toys or cloth used in day to day life. Photographs because this is a mere captured image, a reflection much like a mirror image, of a being that has already been created by the Almighty Himself so that the question of creation does not arise. A word of caution here though, for the use of photographs depends on the intention of the one using it. Thus photographs of one's 'heroes' whether they be leaders or pop stars who one glorifies or holds in great esteem hung on the walls of homes and offices go against the spirit, not only of the Islamic prohibition of pictures, but against the very spirit of Islam itself and hence may be deemed prohibited.

The other exception is toys because these are meant for children in an age of innocence when Satanic influences cannot take hold. Such playthings like dolls or soft toys are not meant to be accorded adoration as statues are and are merely items of amusement that are played with and even thrown about. Further they have a tendency to nurture loving instincts even in little children. Thus they are permissible. By the same token it may be argued that animated illustrations in storybooks or television cartoons meant for children are also permissible.

The Prophet's wife Ayisha relates: "*I used to play with dolls in the house of the Messenger of God (Peace be on Him) and my friends would come over to play with me. They would hide when they saw the Messenger of God approaching, but he was in fact very happy to see them with me, and so we played together*" (Saheeh Muslim). On another occasion a gust of wind raised a curtain hung in front of a store-room belonging to Ayisha, revealing some dolls which belonged to her. The Prophet asked: "*What is this?*" She replied: "*My dolls*". Among them he saw a horse with wings made of rags, and asked: "*What is this I see among them?*" She replied: "*A horse*". He asked: "*What is this that it has on it?*" She replied: "*Two wings*". He asked: "*A horse with two wings?*". She replied: "*Have you not heard that Solomon had horses with wings?*" Thereupon the Prophet laughed so heartily that she could see his molar teeth (Aboo Dawood). This concession even the Bible does not allow and if you go by a literal interpretation of the Bible your kids will not even be able to enjoy their favourite Walt Disney characters.

12th Night

Johnny: Salams Sheikh. Thanks for your explanation last night. It's quite interesting, this view that even non-idolatrous images can have evil consequences. That's something I never thought of. Now to my next question:

What's so important about the mission of the Prophets?

The Janissary: The prophets are basically messengers of God chosen by Him to convey His Message to humans and to guide them on the straight path. They are in a sense God's ambassadors on earth.

But before we deal with the importance of their mission, let us briefly ponder on what happened in their absence, when men followed their fancies and strayed far, far away from the truth. Some worshipped the sun, others the moon and yet others the heavenly bodies; yet others worshipped in their folly idols of their own making. Just look at the diversity of these divinities; such a multitude that even the heavens cannot hold them; so many that our very universe would be in disarray if they existed. Nay, they existed only in the minds of men; men who sought guidance from their own fanciful imaginations; men whose empty minds the devil had made his workshop turning out monstrosity after monstrosity. It's easy for the devil to step in when there's no prophet to guide men.

God, speaking directly through the Prophet Muhammad, tells us that he created people as *hunafa*, or those having a natural belief in Him, the singular form of which *haneef* is applied to Abraham, who as the Qur'an says was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but a *Haneef* or primordial Muslim (Family Imraan:67).

I created people as those having faith (in Me). Then the evil ones came to them and led them astray
(Saheeh Muslim)

Take the case of Moses' people. He led them out of slavery in Egypt and God parted the Red Sea for them so that they may escape from Pharaoh's army. They were told: "*When you look up to the heavens and behold the sun or the moon or any star among the heavenly hosts, do not be led astray into adoring them and serving them. These the Lord, your God, has let fall to the lot of all other nations under the heavens, but you he has taken and led you out of that iron foundry, Egypt, that you might be his very own people, as you are today*" (Deuteronomy 4:19-20).

But as soon as Moses was away from them for a short while, the devil took hold of them, so that they melted down the golden earrings of their women and made a golden calf which they worshipped. How many such foolish folk like them strut the world in their ignorance and arrogance even today. The Pharoahs of Moses time claimed divinity 'tis true, but then again how far is modern man away from such folly when we consider how many young people today hero-worship what they call their 'idols'; or how the Tibetans even to this day worship the Dalai Lama as 'the living god'; or how in Nepal, a young girl is worshipped as a 'living goddess' for a year, after which she is cast away without even having a chance to marry when she grows up. Indeed, would you believe it if I were to tell you that a young Hindu widow named Roop Kanwar was made a goddess by her people because she jumped into the funeral pyre of her husband and burnt to her death in a show of wifely devotion, and as if that were not enough, the site of her suicide in Rajasthan was made into a Hindu shrine guarded by sword-wielding Rajputs. By the way, this happened not thousands of years ago, nor a hundred years ago, but in the 1980s.

It's that easy for Satan to make hell on earth with his mischief. Look how he has poisoned men's minds with his venom, demanding terrible sacrifices, so that all those driven mad by him are even willing to sacrifice their own kind, nay even their very children to him. Take the Canaanites and the other Pagan nations mentioned in the Bible who sacrificed children to their god Molech by slaying the little victims and then cremating them. "*They offered to their gods every abomination that the Lord detests, even burning their sons and daughters to their gods*" (Deuteronomy 12:31).

Take the Gauls of France who until about 2000 years ago offered bloody human sacrifices to their gods. Take the Aztecs of Mexico who until 500 years ago were in the habit of sacrificing men, women and even children to their bloodthirsty gods. Take the Thugees of India who until about a hundred years ago strangled their unsuspecting victims as a sacrifice to their black goddess Kali. Such carnage has taken place in almost every age and in almost every culture. These bloody sacrifices were done away with only because the followers of the Divinely-inspired prophets had their way. Like the British who did away with the Thugees or the Islamic preacher Yusuf Al Barbary who stopped the sacrifice of a virgin girl by the then Buddhist Maldivians, prompting the King and the people of those islands to embrace Islam.

Today, although we don't find many cases of human sacrifices, the needless sacrifice of millions of animals continues in many parts of the Hindu East. In Nepal, for instance millions of animals including buffaloes, goats and chicken are sacrificed yearly at temples in honour of the Hindu goddess of power Gadhimai, with the carcasses of the animals allowed to rot in fields and other places without being eaten by men. That of course did not prevent the country being hit by a powerful earthquake that took thousands of lives recently. Despite this, they still persist in their folly, not knowing that behind it all is the accursed devil himself.

We Muslims believe that God Almighty sent numerous prophets to guide men on the straight path. These guides were sent to every nation at different periods of time, inviting their people to tread the way God had chosen for them, worshipping Him and Him alone, enjoining what is right and prohibiting what is evil. The prophets were often sent to their nations in the worst of times, when the state of their people had sunk to the lowest depths imaginable. Thus Abraham came at a time when his folk were lost in the fog of idolatry; Moses came at a time when his people had no idea of who their God was, bound as they were in the chains of slavery; Jesus came at a time when his tribe had become so arrogant as to look down upon the gentiles and to change God's Word at their whim and fancy and Muhammad came at a time when his nation had become all this and more to the point of burying their newborn daughters alive.

Our Islamic tradition holds that there were 124,000 such prophets sent to mankind beginning with Adam and ending with Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Them). This differs from the Biblical tradition that assumes that prophets were sent only to Israel as they alone were the *Chosen People* and had to be guided aright, which is why we find in the Bible some ridiculously racist passages like "*There is no God in all the earth, but in Israel*" (Kings 5:15).

Our Holy Book, the Qur'an mentions only 25 prophets by name, though it also mentions those whose stories have not been told, implying that there were many, many more:

Verily, We have inspired you (O Muhammad) as We inspired Noah and the prophets after him; We inspired Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and the tribes, Jesus, Job, Jonah, Aaron, and Solomon, and to David We gave the Psalms. Of some

Messengers We have told thee the story; of others We have not
(The Women: 163-164)

Among the Prophets mentioned in the Qur'an who also find mention in the Bible are Adam, Noah, Abraham, Lot, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Job, Moses, Aaron, David, Solomon and Jonah. Besides these prophets of the Bible we find mention of Ismail or Ishmael as he is known in the Bible. The Bible speaks of him as the elder son of Abraham through his Egyptian wife Hagar but does not regard him as a Prophet, but we Muslims do. In fact Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) is himself descended from Abraham through this elder son Ishmael (Peace Be Upon them) just as much as the Arabs of the Hijaz, Najd, Nabataea and Palmyra, a vast region encompassing the Arabian Peninsula, Syria and Jordan.

The Prophet's clan, the Quraysh who inhabited the Hijaz region was directly descended from Ishmael. However Islam, unlike Judaism, recognized the Hebrew Prophets as well including among them Isaac, the younger son of Abraham, his son Jacob who was also called Israel and the many prophets sent to his offspring known as the Children of Israel, including among others Joseph, Moses, David and Solomon. There were others such as Lot who was sent to warn the folk of Sodom against their unnatural sexual acts and Job, the epitome of patience whom the Bible does not regard as prophets, but the Qur'an does. The reason they were not recognized as Prophets in the Old Testament was simply because they were not Jews, for the Jews who thought of themselves as the *Chosen People* could not brook the idea of a Non-Jew being a prophet. For example. Job was a man who lived in the land of Uz and is thought to have been an Edomite, a descendant of Isaac's son Esau who espoused a daughter of Ishmael.

Not only did Islam recognize the Hebrew prophets, but the prophets of the New Testament as well whom the Jews, the modern-day descendants of the Children of Israel do not acknowledge- Zachariah, John the Baptist and Jesus.

There are also a number of other prophets mentioned in the Qur'an who are unknown to the Bible such as Hood, Saalih and Shu'ayb. The Prophet Hood was sent to the tribe of Aad, Saalih to the tribe of Thamood and Shu'ayb to the people of Madyan. There are others mentioned in the Qur'an whose identity as prophets is disputed including Luqmaan, a great sage known for his words of wisdom and Dhu'l Qarnayn who built a wall of iron against Gog and Magog. Although not mentioned in the Qur'an by name, Zarathustra, the founder of Zoroastrianism, the faith of the ancient Iranians, would have very likely been among the Divinely inspired prophets. The Qur'an mentions the Magians, that is Zoroastrians, along with the Jews, Christians and Sabians in contrast to the polytheists.

God guides whom He Wills, those who believe (in His Revelation), those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Sabians, Christians, Magians and Polytheists. God will judge between them on the Day of Judgement, for God Witnesses all things
(The Pilgrimage: 16-17)

Our Prophet also said that the Magians should be treated according to the tradition applicable to the People of the Book, which is the Jews and Christians who were given a scripture. Further a well known companion of the Prophet Ibn Abbas has said "*When the Prophet of the Persians died, Iblees wrote for them the lore of the Magians*" (Aboo Dawood). This Islamic tradition would have us believe that after the Prophet Zarathustra had died, Satan inspired those who followed him to move

away from the Unitarianism which he taught to Dualism with its belief in creation and counter-creation and the worship of fire.

Thus you will see that unlike the Judeo-Christian tradition, Islam holds that each and every nation was sent prophets to guide men on the path to God. To say that the Prophetic mission be confined only to one nation, is to deny God's Universal Providence. This is obvious to any one of us today, but such a statement was unique when it was promulgated fourteen hundred years ago.No other faith before it ever showed such large heartedness in regarding all earlier teachers of mankind as messengers of God. By doing so, Islam recognized that all humanity as children of Adam were shown the divine light, though whether they wished to follow it or not was up to them. This again shows the universality of Islam, that it has to be the final and universal faith, regarding all previous revelations as God-Given to particular peoples, which it must eventually and necessarily supersede by uniting man into One Nation Under God.

Some of the prophets sent by God to their people are known to us and others unknown, divinely inspired men whose names have been lost in the mists of time. You may wonder why this is so, how is that so important a missionary like a prophet could simply fade away from the annals of history. Just think about it, in a world given to idolatry and mundane desires, to wine, women and song, would the memory of prophets last long ? Why is it that throughout human history we find poems, epics and sagas of monarchs and military leaders and other such powerful people, but hardly any mention of prophets. Sad to say, but true, prophets have never been welcome to the people they were sent. Just see how the ancient Jews treated theirs. You don't have far to look. Hear what Jesus had to say about them: "*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing*"(Matthew 23:37). Is n't it a fact that Jesus was rejected by the Jews and it were other nations that kept up his memory?

As God Almighty says in our Holy Book, the Qur'an:

Verily, we have sent among every nation a messenger (proclaiming)
"Worship God (alone) and keep away from the false deities"
(The Bee: 36)

We sent aforetime Our Messengers with clear proofs, and sent down with them
the Book and the Balance that mankind may keep up justice
(Iron:25)

By accepting the prophets sent to all nations, Islam, unlike other faiths, affirmed both God's universal character and the universality of the religious experiences of man, pointing above all to God's Unity and the Brotgherhood of man over space and time. Many were the prophets of old who preached this truth, like the Prophet Elijah - known to us Muslims as Ilyas – who told his people:

Will you call upon Baal and forsake the Best of Creators – God, Your Lord
and Cherisher and the Lord and Cherisher of your fathers of old ?
(Those Ranged in Ranks: 125-126)

This was the primary mission of the Prophets. But that's not all. Prophets were also sent to warn men not to stray from the straight path. The Prophet is spoken of as

A Warner of the (series of) Warners of Old!
(The Star:56)

Indeed, We have sent you with the truth, as a bearer of glad tidings and a Warner: for there never was a people without a Warner who lived among them
(The Originator of Creation:24)

God makes it very clear in the Qur'an that it is only those who reject His Messengers after they have warned them, who would be visited by His Punishment:

Your Lord would not destroy men's habitations for their wrong-doing while their occupants were unwarned
(The Cattle:131)

And We sent forth Our messengers, one after another: every time their messenger came to a community, they accused him of lying: and so We caused them to follow one another and let them become (mere) tales: So away with a folk who would not believe!
(The Believers:44)

We sent messengers before you, among the sects of old. But never came a messenger to them but they mocked him. Even so do We let it creep into the hearts of the sinners that they should not believe. But the ways of the ancients have passed away. Even if we opened out to them a gate from heaven and they were to continue ascending, they would only say: "Our eyes have been intoxicated. Nay, we have been bewitched by sorcery
(The Rocky tract:10-15)

See they not how many of those before them We destroyed? Generations We had established on the earth; in strength such as We have not given to you, for whom We poured out rain from the skies in abundance, and gave streams flowing beneath (their feet). Yet for their sins We destroyed them, and raised in their wake fresh generations (to succeed them)
(The Cattle:6)

Yes, the arrogance of the nations of old is evident everywhere. The ruins and rubble of the civilisations of old that had dared transgress the bounds. As God asks:

Do they not travel through the earth, and see what was the end of those before them? But the Home of the Hereafter is Best
(Joseph:109)

How many populations have We destroyed, which were given to wrongdoing? They tumbled down on their roofs. And how many wells are lying idle and neglected, and castles lofty and well built? Do they not travel through the land, so that their hearts may learn wisdom and their ears may learn to hear? Truly it is not their eyes that are blind, but their hearts which are in their breasts
(The Pilgrimage: 45-46)

So much for those who denied God. Even the ephemeral existence of this world was denied them. Among the nations that denied their messengers were the People of Noah, the Companions of the Rass, the Thamud, and Aad, Pharaoh, the Brethren of Lot and the Companions of the Wood (Qaf:12-14). All of them, needless to say, had to pay a heavy price for their arrogance, like the people of Pharoah in the days of Moses:

We punished the people of Pharoah with years (of drought) and scarcity of crops, that they may receive admonition. But when good (times) came, they said: "This is due to us". When gripped by calamity they ascribed it to the evil omens connected with Moses and those with him! Behold! In truth the omens of evil are theirs in God's Sight, but most of them understand not! They said (to Moses): "Whatever be the Signs you bring, to work therewith your sorcery on us, we shall never believe in you". So We sent (plagues) on them wholesale Death, locusts, Lice, Frogs and Blood. Signs openly self-explained, but they were steeped in arrogance, a people given to sin. Every time the penalty fell on them, they said: "O Moses! On our behalf call on your Lord in virtue of His Promise to you. If you remove the penalty from us, we shall truly believe in you, and we shall send away the Children of Israel with you". But every time We removed the penalty from them according to a fixed term which they had to fulfil – Behold! They broke their word! So We exacted retribution from them. We drowned them in the (Red) Sea, because the rejected Our signs, and failed to take warning from them. And We made a people considered weak inheritors of lands in both east and west, lands whereon We sent down Our Blessings (The Heights:130-137)

God also visited his punishment on the people of Noah who rejected their prophet and were drowned with the deluge:

So we opened the gates of the sky, with water pouring forth, and We caused the earth to gush forth with springs, so that the waters met to the extent decreed. But We bore him (Noah) on (an ark) made of broad planks and caulked with palm fibre – she floats under Our Eyes. A recompense to one who had been rejected (with scorn) (The Moon:10-14)

Others so punished included the Companions of the Wood to whom the Prophet Shuayb was sent, preaching that they fear God and do not defraud men. But nay, they would not listen, and challenged him: "*Cause a piece of the sky to fall on us, if you are truthful!*". Before long the penalty came, a day of overshadowing gloom (The Poets:176-189). So were the people of Aad to whom the prophet Hood was sent. They persisted in their idolatry and one fine day saw a cloud traversing the sky coming to meet their valleys. "*This cloud will give us rain*" they rejoiced. But nay, it was not to be. It was a wind carrying destruction on its wings. When the morning dawned, nothing was to be seen but their houses (The Winding Sand Tracts:25). They were simply swept away from the earth:

We sent against them a furious wind, in a Day of violent disaster, plucking out men as if they were roots of palm trees torn up (from the ground) (The Moon:19-20)

And then there were the Thamood who sought to monopolise the water sources and hamstrung a she-camel sent by God as a Sign:

We sent against them a single Mighty Blast, and they became like
the dry stubble used by one who pens cattle
(The Moon: 27-31)

Not to mention the people of Sheba in Southern Arabia:

There was for Sheba aforetime a sign in their homeland – two gardens to the right and to the left. Eat of the Sustenance (provided) by your Lord, and be grateful to Him, a territory fair and happy, and a Lord Oft-forgiving! But they turned away (from God) and We sent against them the flood from the dams, and We converted their two garden (rows) into gardens producing bitter fruit, and tamarisks and a few Lote trees
(Sheba:15-16)

Human history is replete with stories of floods and earthquakes and disasters of all kinds which we may suppose to be the doing of God after his prophets had been rejected by their people. One may even conjecture whether not the dispersal of the Indo-European peoples from their early homeland in Southern Russia and Ukraine sometime around 3000 BC was the result of some pestilence or visitation after they had refused to revert to their original monotheism preached by some unknown prophet of their nation.

Memories of such divine visitations have also been preserved in the legend of Atlantis, the lost continent. Plato who records their story gives the Atlanteans as a very advanced race. However they grew arrogant and before long invited divine wrath, their entire realm going down in a single day and night with frightening earthquakes, torrential rains and enormous waves taking it all down into the sea. Likewise the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh speaks of a great flood lasting seven days, as does the Akkadian Epic of Atrahasis, both in the region of Mesopotamia.

In the New World too we hear of similar legends The Chippewas of the Great Lakes Area of North America believed the world was created by Kitchi-Manitou 'Great Spirit' who when the people became evil and upset the balance between themselves and the environment sent a great flood that destroyed everyone except Nanobozho whom he sent to the world and who survived with some animals by floating on a log. The Apache held that the Great Spirit known as Usen or Life-Giver, displeased with people for not knowing him and instead adoring the hactcin or spirits of the earth, sent a flood where most of the world perished, some people and animals saving themselves by climbing White Ringed Mountain in New Mexico.

Even South America knew of such deluge stories. One such, found among the Incas and related tribes had to do with the great creator god Viracocha. He gave them a precept which they were to observe on pain of being confounded if they broke it. But when pride and covetousness arose among them, they transgressed the precept and he confounded and cursed them. There then came a great flood which they called *unu pachacuti*, which means 'water that overturns the land'. They say it rained sixty days and nights, that it drowned all created things, and that there remained some vestiges of those who were turned into stones, as a memorial of the event, and as an example to posterity. A few were saved from this flood to leave descendants for a future age. Stories of such great floods are rife among many peoples and very often you will find

that it had to do with men becoming arrogant and rebelling against God's commandments.

Among the Prophets there are four who occupy a very special place in Islam as they were not only divinely inspired men sent to warn their nations, but were also handed down scriptures revealed by God Himself. These were Moses to whom was given the Torah, David to whom was given the Psalms, Jesus to whom was given the Gospel and Muhammad to whom was given the Qur'an. These Divinely revealed books find mention in the Qur'an on numerous occasions:

It was We who revealed the Torah. Therein was guidance and light. By its standard have been judged the Jews, by the prophets who bowed to God's Will
(The Repast:44)

And in their footsteps We sent Jesus, son of Mary, confirming the Torah that had come before him, and We gave him the Gospel in which was guidance and light
(The Repast:46)

The Qur'an was revealed to Muhammad in the same fashion as the other messengers:

Verily, We have inspired you (O Muhammad) as We inspired Noah and the prophets after him; We inspired Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and the tribes, Jesus, Job, Jonah, Aaron, and Solomon, and to David We gave the Psalms. Of some Messengers We have told thee the story; of others We have not
(The Women: 163-164)

However, the mission of all these messengers was confined to their respective nations except for Muhammad who was sent for all humanity and is thus the last of the Prophets. That Muhammad is the Last of the Prophets, the final prophet in a long chain of prophets sent to mankind is told us by God Himself:

Muhammad is the Messenger of God and the Seal of the Prophets
(The Confederates:40)

The Prophet himself humbly declared:

My example and the example of the prophets before me is like a man who built a house, which he built and perfected except for the space of one block. People would go round the house and state in awe at its perfection and say: "Had it not been for this space!". I am that brick, I am the last of the Prophets"
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

His mission unlike that of the earlier prophets was not to be restricted to any particular nation but was to embrace all mankind. Muhammad is told by God to proclaim thus of his universal mission:

"*O men, I am sent unto you as the Messenger of God, to Whom belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth; there is no God but He. It is He Who gives both life and death. So believe in God and His Messenger, the unlettered Prophet who believes in God and His Words. Follow him that you may be guided*"
(The Heights:158)

The Prophet himself made this clear when he said:

"*Every prophet used to be sent to his nation only,*
but I have been sent to all mankind"
(Saheeh Bukhari)

Although we believe in Muhammad as the last and universal messenger, belief in the other prophets is so important that it forms an article of faith of a Muslim. The message they brought their people was one and the same. As God says in His Book:

The same religion has He established for you that which He enjoined on Noah.
That which We sent by inspiration to you, and that which We enjoined
on Abraham, Moses and Jesus
(The Consultation:13)

All prophets after all constitute a spiritual fraternity of brothers, though of different mothers. Our Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) summed this up aptly when he said:

I am the closest of all people to the son of Mary (Jesus). The prophets are
paternal brothers, their mothers are different, but their religion is one
(Saheeh Muslim)

All prophets are in a sense 'rays' emanating from the same spiritual 'Lamp'. Their central message throughout ages has been to worship God and God alone. This is why Islam views denying a single prophet as if it were the same as denying them all.

Indeed, those who deny God and His messengers, and wish to separate God from His messengers, saying: 'We believe in some but reject others' and want to pursue a path in-between - it is they, they who are truly denying the truth: and for those who deny the truth We have readied shameful suffering. But as for those who believe in God and His messengers and make no distinction between any of them - unto them, in time, will He grant their rewards (in full). And God is indeed
Much-Forgiving, Dispenser of Grace
(The Women:150-152)

Since the Prophets were special men chosen by God Himself to guide their nations, their stories serve as an inspiration to true believers, They were, after all, impeccable guides of humanity in whose life there is a lesson for us all. Take the devotion of Abraham, the selflessness of Ishmael, the patience of Job, the penitence of Jonah, the perseverence of Moses, the bravery of David, the wisdom of Solomon and the other worldliness of Jesus. In every little story of theirs, in every trial, tribulation and triumphs of theirs is a lesson to be learnt. This is why you find the Qur'an narrating the stories of the prophets in such great detail.

Take for instance Adam, the first human being, and also the first prophet of Islam whose mission was confined to his immediate descendants. His story along with that of his wife Eve is one of repentance after they had eaten from the forbidden tree and cast down to the earth where they propagated the human species. Then there was Noah whom God commanded to build an ark for his family and a pair each of the rest of creation so that the deluge would not overtake them. He is known for his

perseverance in preaching the message of God to his people who in their arrogance rejected him, only to be overcome by God's punishment.

And then there was Abraham, the father of the patriarchs, who in his youth railed against idolatry and left his hometown in the service of the One True God. Many were the sacrifices he made and so dearly did God love him that he was called the *Friend of God*. Indeed God even entered into a covenant with Him to make of his offspring a great nation, through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed, though His Grace was not to extend to the wrongdoers among them. Through his Egyptian spouse Hagar Abraham had Ishmael and both of them together built the Ka'aba, the cube-shaped temple in Mecca dedicated to the worship of the One True Lord. And through his wife Sarah he had Isaac, himself a great prophet who in turn had Jacob, another great prophet who was nicknamed Israel 'Soldier of God and from Israel sprung his twelve sons.

Among them Joseph whom God saved from the jealousy of his brothers went on to an adviser to the Pharaoh of Egypt after he had interpreted a dream. Eventually his brothers joined Joseph in Egypt, but the fortunes of their children, the children of Israel was not to last long for there came a Pharaoh who enslaved them and ordered that every male babe born to them be drowned in the Nile. And then came Moses who was saved from this fate and led the Israelites away from captivity in Egypt, wandering in the desserts for forty years with the twelve tribes who were provided succour by God in the form of Manna and quails. On Mount Sinai he received the Ten Commandments. His people came to settle in the land of Canaan, in Palestine, a land flowing with milk and honey. But they constantly rebelled against God's commandments which is why God sent them numerous prophets to remind them of His covenant with them, to worship Him and none other. To their brave king David who slew Goliath and defeated the Philistines God revealed the Psalms, and to his wise son Solomon he bestowed a kingdom the like of never seen before, for it encompassed within it not only the animal kingdom which whom Solomon could communicate with, but also a community of genies who served him well.

But the children of Israel were a rebellious lot. They could not accept God's commands and developed a strong taste for money and all that is worldly, even taking usury which God had strictly prohibited them. And so finally God sent them Jesus, the immaculately conceived one born from the womb of his mother Mary through a spirit God had sent. He worked many miracles including healing the sick, giving sight to the blind and life to the dead. To Him God revealed the Gospel, but still the Jews would have none of it. They attempted to do away with him, and worse still to give him a most painful death by crucifying him on the cross, but God saved him taking him upto Himself, and gave another his likeness so that he was crucified instead. With him the mission to the children of Israel came to a close.

However Jesus teachings were not lost. His disciples, ordinary folk whom no one else seemed to care about, transmitted them in whatever way they could though his untimely departure made it difficult to preserve his message. They were after all, like lost sheep after the departure of their shepherd, at the crossroads of orthodox Judaism and Roman Paganism. But remember Jesus' mission was meant originally for the Jews, for did he not say: "*I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel*" (Matthew 15:24). When Jesus sent His disciples to preach the good news of the kingdom, He expressly told them, "*Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter a city of the Samaritans. But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel*" (Matthew 10:5-6).

Further due to the hostility of the Jews, much of his mission was left unfinished and despite all his preachings of love and compassion, he did not or could do nothing to humanize the harsh mosaic laws of war, or their stern punishments or raise the status of women. That unfulfilled mission would be completed by his successor Muhammad. However, his followers, irked with the hostile reception the Jews had given him, extended the message to the gentiles, and so we now have Christianity, the world's largest faith in terms of numbers.

But this Christianity unfortunately could not preserve Jesus' original teachings, for it became corrupted with time, regarding Jesus as the Son of God and as One of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, a most ridiculous idea of God, One in Three and Three in One. It also incorporated many Pagan rituals to make it more appealing to the heathen and so you have Sunday, a day devoted to the Sun God as the Holy day of the Christians while Jesus followed the Sabbath which was on Saturday. It was only a very small group of Christians, the Unitarians who managed to hold on to the true teachings of Jesus, which found some expression in the teachings of the Alexandrian Theologian Arius who lived about a century or two before the coming of Islam. Like Islam Unitarianism denounced the concept of the Trinity by holding that God was One and Jesus a prophet who did not share with Him the Divine Attributes. It was condemned as a heresy by the Council of Nicaea in 325 AC and gradually fell on bad times though it survived until about the fifth century, among its adherents being some German tribes who held on to it as late as 496 AC. By the time of the birth of the Prophet in 571 AC it had been almost wiped out from the face of the earth.

It was now time for a more universal mission and so God sent Muhammad, not only to the Arabs among whom he was born, but also for all mankind, thus fulfilling the promise he made to Abraham, for Muhammad was of his seed through his son Ishmael. Although these two great prophets, Abraham and his son Ishmael had established monotheism in Arabia, even going to the extent of building a temple dedicated to the worship of the One True God in Mecca, their descendants, the Arabs had fallen into the same pagan ways that plagued the Jews, taking idols as their gods. God however did not disdain His covenant with Abraham and forsake his pagan progeny. Just as He sent the Jews their prophets, he sent the Arabs theirs. So it was that Hood was sent to the tribe of Ad, the Saleh to the tribe of Thamud; and Shuayb to the people of Madyan. Strangely, the Arabs never forgot their origins from Abraham and Ishmael and continued to respect the great temple at Mecca, though desecrating it with idols of stick and stone. The Quraysh tribe that guarded the sanctuary which had by them become polluted with Pagan rituals of all kinds themselves claimed descent from Kedar, the second born son of Ishmael, the first born of Abraham. It was into this tribe that Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) was born.

But nay, he was not destined to be any ordinary national prophet sent to his people only. His mission was meant for all mankind, for Islam consummated in itself the totality of the religious experiences of humanity throughout the ages, drawing it all into a single, unifying all-embracing faith. Thus came Muhammad in the full blaze of history, when men had learned to read and write and his message could be communicated effectively to the furthest corners of the globe. The Qur'an unlike other scriptures remains preserved in its pure form to this day while the sayings of the Prophet have also been assiduously preserved by his companions and followers. Every little detail of his life, his words and deeds have been faithfully preserved to

this day, their authenticity vouched for not only by the faithful but even by the most prejudiced of critics.

And so we read of this man of little means, unlettered and orphaned in early childhood; a trustworthy man, so trustworthy indeed that his tribe the Quraysh were prepared to believe anything he said, that is anything except in his Prophethood, his call to do away with the idols and paganism of his day giving truth to Jesus Words: *No Prophet is welcome in his hometown*. But still he persevered declaring that he would not let go of the mission God had destined for him, even if they were "*to place the sun in my right hand and the moon in my left*". His love for God, his endless prayers, undying zeal against idolatry, his simplicity, patience in the face of adversity, magnanimity in victory and compassion even for the tiniest of beings demonstrates that he was no ordinary mortal but one inspired by God.

Muhammad's mission was to extend to all humanity, not the least the lost sheep of children of Israel as well as those who had embraced the teachings of Jesus (Peace Be Upon Him). Jesus made it clear that he was not sent but *unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel*. Thus Jesus never expected Americans, Europeans or Australians to become his followers. That would have to wait till his successor Muhammad brought with him the universal message of Islam which all humans would be equally obliged to follow. Muhammad, unlike Jesus, made it clear from the very first day of his mission that he was meant for all humanity, a perennial guide, so to speak.

The universal character of the Prophet's Mission was confirmed by God Himself when He declared: "*We sent you (O Muhammad) not but as a mercy for the worlds (of jinn and men and all that exists)*" (The Prophets:107). He further described His Final Prophet not only as a *Warner* as the other prophets were, but also as a *Bearer of Glad Tidings* and as a *Lamp spreading Light* (The Confederates:45-46). This shows that unlike the other prophets, Muhammad's was a universal mission.

The universal nature of Muhammad's mission has been recognized not just by Muslims, but by a good many Western savants as well, among them Thomas Carlyle who wrote in his Heroes:

"They called him a prophet, you say? Why, he stood there face to face with them, here, not enshrined in any mystery, visibly clouting his own cloak, cobbling his own shoes, fighting, counseling, ordering in the midst of them. They must have seen what kind of a man he was, let him be called what ye like. No emperor in his tiaras was obeyed as this man in a cloak of his own clouting. During three and twenty years of rough, actual trial, I find something of a veritable hero necessary for that of itself. A false man found a religion? Why, a false man cannot build a brick house! If he does not know and follow truly the properties of mortar, burnt clay and what he works in, it is no house that he makes, but a rubbish heap. It will not stand for twelve centuries. A man must conform to Nature's laws, be in communion with Nature and the truth of things, or Nature will answer him. Of a great man especially, of him I would venture to assert that it is incredible that he should have been other than true".

13th Night

Johnny: Salams Sheikh. Taking my question further on the mission of the prophets, what is the evidence that Muhammad is a true Prophet, in other words:

How can you be so sure that Muhammad is the Messenger of God and not an impostor?

The Janissary: To answer your question, young man, tell me, what is the means by which you know a Prophet ? Is n't it said that you shall know him by his marks?

So let me tell you what the marks are by which we know a Prophet. Firstly, a Prophet speaks inspired not by his own heart and soul, but by a Higher Being. This holds true of Muhammad who is told by God to say:

"I tell you not that with me are the treasures of God, nor do I know what is hidden, nor do I tell you I am an angel. I but follow what is revealed to me"
(The Cattle: 50)

Here you see the mark of a Prophet. He does not claim to be any other than a human or to reveal God's hidden knowledge. He is only serving as an instrument of God to reveal all that told him.

So here we have a man, Muhammad, forty years old, who starts hearing voices, not the whisperings of his soul, or the stirrings of some unconscious restlessness, but some power clearly beyond human comprehension. He is seized with fear and thinks he is demented. But nay, he is not. He is, over the years, revealed a scripture through the medium of an angel, a revelation so profound that even the most learned men of all Arabia could not produce its like. And here we have an unlettered man Muhammad who had not as much as composed a single verse suddenly having intensely powerful and yet beautifully enlivening words flowing from his lips, words that over the years would go on on to form a compendious scripture that combined verse and prose, words of wisdom with a moral code governing food, dress, marriage, punishment and a host of other mundane matters; inspiring stories and parables with a fascinating cosmology that captivates its readers, revealing as it were the secrets of creation and of nature.

The first such revelation was Soorah Al-Alaq or the 'Chapter of the Clinging clot'. This is how it runs:

Read! In the Name of Your Lord, Who created
Created man from a clot. Read! And your Lord is the Most Generous,
Who taught by the pen - Taught man that which he knew not

So here we have the angel of revelation, the Archangel Gabriel revealing the first verse to the unlettered Prophet, and what does it say *Iqraa* Read! The entire revelation comes to be known as the *Qur'an* and what does it mean- The Reading! All of it revealed to an unlettered man, a revelation from God Himself and one that no hand of man or genie could produce.

If mankind and the jinn joined together to produce the like of the Qur'an,
they could not produce its like, even if they helped one another
(The Night Journey:88)

And what does this unlettered man do when this revelation comes? He is terrified, so terrified that he runs all the way home to his wife to find comfort in her like a child clinging to the bosom of its mother. Imagine an Arab running to the arms of a woman one thousand four hundred years ago. This is unthinkable even today and one can only imagine how such an act would have been looked upon in those days when men were simply expected to be men. It was only later, well after the shock of the angel's embrace had subsided, that he came to believe in his mission and fought for it for the rest of his life, come what may.

Another mark by which you shall know a Prophet is his being unwelcome among the people to whom he has been sent. Remember the words of Jesus when he was rejected at Nazareth: "*A Prophet is not without honour except in his native place*" (Matthew 13:57). In like manner when the Prophet Zarathustra came to the Iranians, he first had only one follower, his cousin Maidhyoimanha. The local devil-worshpping priests opposed him so maliciously that he had to migrate to the realm of King Vishtaspa.

This is because the powers that be do not like change, preferring instead the status quo and all the ills that go with it. The strong moral message of the true prophets and their exemplary lives hit hard at these arrogant men, and so they reject these prophets. This is why the Jews rejected Jesus and instead looked to a messiah who would pander to their desires and tolerate their corrupt practices like usury. False prophets in contrast are often welcomed with open arms. Going by this count, although the Prophet was sent to all humanity his mission was initially confined to the people of Mecca, but did they receive him with open arms? No, rather they abused him ridiculed him and even plotted to kill him.

When he felt the Meccans could no longer be preached to, he went to Taif in the hope that the townsfolk there would lend him an ear. But no, they turned out to be even worse than the Meccans. He was so badly treated that he had to flee from some urchins who pelted stones at him mercilessly and have to dive for cover in a garden. Pitying his plight, its owner instructed his Christian slave Addas to take a tray of dates to him.

When he saw the Prophet saying *Bismillah* (In the name of Allah) before he ate of it, he was surprised. "*The people of these lands don't say these words?*" he said. "*And where are you from?"* the Prophet asked him, to have the boy reply: "*I am a Christian from Nineveh (Iraq)*". "*From the town of the righteous man, Jonah*" asked the Prophet. Addas burst out in excitement: "*And what makes you know about Jonah?*". "*He is my brother. He was a Prophet, and so am I*" was the reply. Addas kisses his forehead, hands and feet while his two masters stared in disbelief. When reprimanded by his masters, Addas replied: "*O my masters, there is nothing on earth that is better than he is; he has indeed informed me about a matter that none knows about except for a Prophet*".So there you are. While his own people reject him, a foreigner, a Christian non-Arab acknowledged him as such.

Yet another mark by which you shall know a Prophet is his unswerving zeal, his commitment to passing on the message entrusted to him come what may. In the early years of his mission Muhammad struggled very hard to preach the message to his arrogant townsfolk of Mecca to begin with, but to no avail. His only followers were his immediate family, including his wife Khadijah, daughter Fatima, Cousin Ali and a few very close friends like Abu Bakr and a couple of slaves like Bilal the Abyssinian and Sumayyah, a slave woman who was killed by her master for holding steadfast to the new faith. The Quraysh, his own tribe, persecuted him and his followers to such an extent that many of his close companions had to seek refuge in

Abyssinia where they were warmly welcomed by the Christian King Negus. Muhammad himself, to escape the hostility of the Meccans had to migrate to Medina where he was able to unite the two tribes of Aws and Khazraj and lay the foundations for the first Islamic state.

It was in the face of great odds before his migration that his uncle tried to persuade him to cease his preaching, offering all sorts of worldly inducements, but the response he received from his nephew will go down in history as one of the greatest statements of undying zeal to a cause the world has ever seen: " *O uncle, if they were to put the sun in my right hand and the moon in my left hand to stop me from preaching Islam, I would never stop. I will keep on preaching until God makes Islam prevail or I die doing so*" (Seerah Ibn Hisham).

In Medina he was pledged allegiance by its people and could have easily lived a comfortable life as an uncrowned king, but kept himself away from the pleasures of this life. Although once a well-to-do merchant, he did not like to indulge in worldly delights, giving whatever he earned or received in charity, so that he was not better off, but only worse off materially after becoming a Prophet.

His close friend Umar once visited him and saw him lying on a mat which had left its marks on his sides. Beholding this, he started weeping. "*What is making you cry?*" asked Muhammad. Umar replied: "*O God's Messenger! Caesar and Chosroes are leading the life, while you, God's Messenger though you are, is living destitute*". The Prophet replied. *'Won't you be satisfied that this world is theirs to enjoy and for us the Hereafter*?' " (Saheeh Al-Bukhari).

Yet another mark by which you know a true prophet is his truthfulness. So let us see how truthful he was. Do you know that even in his youth, Muhammad was called *Al-Ameen* 'The Trustworthy One' and even in later times was known as such by his pagan compatriots, that is until he began to preach the truth. This could be seen in an interesting incident that took place shortly after he had received his call. That was when he climbed up the Mount Safa and called out to his Meccan townsfolk: "*If I tell you that an enemy is approaching behind those hills to attack you, so be on your guard, would you believe me?*". They answered: "*We believe you, even though we do not see behind the mountain. Since you are Muhammad the Trustworthy, we never doubt your words*". Upon this Muhammad said: "*As you would trust me in this news, you should also believe me that there is only one God who created this world. The idols you worship are but pieces of stone, earth or wood. Leave these idols and believe in One God. Know that God has sent me as a Prophet to you*". Although they accepted his truthfulness, the unbelievers found the truth he preached hard to stomach and departed forthwith. They simply could not wean themselves away from their ancestors' crooked idolatrous ways.

However his truthfulness could be gleaned from the remorseful words Nadr bin Harith spoke to his tribe: "*O Quraysh, a situation has arisen you cannot deal with. Muhammad was a young man most liked amongst you, most truthful in speech and most trustworthy, until, when you saw grey hair on his temple, and he brought you a message, you said he was a sorcerer, a diviner, a poet and was possessed. But by God, there is nothing of this sort in Muhammad, for I have heard him speaking and preaching"* (Seerah Ibn Hisham).

His truthfulness was acknowledged even by his greatest enemies. The Byzantine Emperor Heraclius once questioned Abu Sufyan, who was then an avowed enemy of the Prophet. "*Has he*" asked he "ever *dishonoured his word?*". "*No*" Abu Sufyan replied "*He always abides by his word*". Then there was Ubay Bin Khalaf who hated the Prophet so, that he used to boast to his face: "*I am breeding a strong horse, and I*

will one day kill you while riding that horse". The Prophet answered: "*I will one day – God Willing - kill you!*". In the heat of the Battle of Uhud, Ubay looked for the Prophet saying: "*If I cannot find him today, I will be doomed!*". When he approached the Prophet his companions wanted to slay him, but the Prophet called out to them: "*Let him come to me!*". When he came near, the Prophet took a spear from the hand of a companion and hurled it at him. The weapon whizzed past him, though it was enough to throw him off his horse. He was so shocked that he ran back to his army screaming: "*I swear that Muhammad has killed* me". His companions said: "*It is only a scratch!*" but Ubay was inconsolable, saying: "*Muhammad told me 'I will kill you!' I swear that I will die even if he spits at me!*". As he kept howling away, Abu Sufyan told him off saying: "*You are not supposed to howl about this tiny scratch*", only to have Ubay answer: "*Do you know who has done this to me? It is Muhammad, I swear by Laat and Uzza that if this scratch is distributed to the people of Hijaz they would all perish*". The wretch died soon afterwards.

And who can forget that brave Arabian Knight Suraqah's trust in the Prophet when he thought he had him cornered. That was when the Prophet and his close friend Abu Bakr took flight from Mecca to Medina. The knight on horseback prodded on by the reward of a hundred camels for their heads, tracked them down, only to be told by Muhammad: "*Return to your people and I promise you that one day you would wear the bracelets of Chosroes*". Suraqah asked in amazement whether he meant Chosroes, the Emperor of Persia. "*Yes*" replied the Prophet and no sooner he heard it, the took his word for it and returned to his hometown, embracing Islam when the Prophet took over the city eight years later. The Prophet passed away a couple of years afterwards and ten years later the mighty Persian Empire fell before the armies of Islam in the reign of Caliph Umar. Suraqah was now an old man, and the Caliph who remembered the Prophet's promise to Suraqah had the erstwhile knight brought before him and in front of the entire congregation presented him the bracelets of the Persian Emperor, saying: "*Here are the bracelets of Chosroes, the Emperor of Persia. This is what Muhammad had promised you. Put them on and let all Muslims see them so that they are all assured that Muhammad's promise is fulfilled!*". Suraqah burst out in tears and the entire assembly wept. Such was the trust people had in Muhammad.

When you study the life of Muhammad you will certainly not find the psychological profile of a conman, for his life was throughout one of sincerity; nor of a madman, for every word he uttered made immense sense, not only to his compatriots but also to us of the present day. Had his followers perceived the slightest sign of deception in him, his entire mission would have crumbled in the blink of an eye. This is why the great historian W. Montgomery tells us after studying the history of our Prophet: "*His readiness to undergo persecutions for his beliefs, the high moral character of the men who believed in him and looked up to him as leader, and the greatness of his ultimate achievement – all argue his fundamental integrity. To suppose Muhammad an impostor raises more problems than it solves*".

Another mark of a Prophet is his ability to foretell the future with accuracy. His prophecies always come true whether in his lifetime or after. This is because only an All-Knowing God could know the future. As the Bible itself says: "*You may say to yourselves, "How can we know when a message has not been spoken by the Lord?*" If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken" (Deuteronomy 18:21-22). Going by this token, the Prophet made several predictions that have come true since, including

among others the Islamic conquest of Persia and Byzantium, the greatest empires of the day, the Mongol invasion and even of things we see in our day and age.

It once happened that some companions of the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) were working on a trench, a defence against the Meccan Pagans. They dug on until they came across a huge, white rock. The Prophet took a pickaxe from the hands of one of the diggers, Salman and struck the rock so hard it split. From it came a flash of light so strong as to illuminate all the way between the two ends of Medina. It seemed like a great lantern on a very dark night. The Messenger of God invoked God's greatness, saying "*God is most Great*" as at a victory, and the Muslims did so as well. He then struck it again and the same thing happened, and a third time with the same result. The companions asked the Prophet what it meant and he replied, "*From the first, the castles of al-Hira and cities of Chosroe were lit up to be seen like the fangs of dogs. Gabriel announced to me that my nation would be victorious over them. From the second, the red castles of Byzantium were illuminated, as though they were the fangs of dogs; Gabriel announced to me that my nation would be victorious over them. From the third, the castles of Sana were lit up like the fangs of dogs; Gabriel announced to me that my nation would be victorious over them. So be joyful at this news!"* The Muslims were delighted, and said "*Praise be to God!*" (Seerah, Ibn Ishaq).

When the enemy clans appeared for battle, the believers assured one another that what God and his messenger had promised them would come true. The hypocrites among them however said: "*He tells you he can see from Yathrib (Medina) to the castles of al-Hira and the cities of Chosroe, and that they will be rendered up to you, yet here you are digging the trench and can't even come out into the open!*". It was that about them that God revealed, *"(Remember) when the hypocrites and those with sickness in their hearts say, "What God and his messenger promise us is mere fancy!""*(The Confederates:12).

And so it came to pass that the Muslims conquered Yemen in 630, a good part of the Byzantine Empire in 638 and all of Persia in 651. The capital of Byzantium, Constantinople did not fall until 1453 when the Ottoman Turks under the leadership of the young Mehmed took it, but even this too was prophesied by our Prophet when he declared: "*Surely, Constantinople will be conquered (by my community); how blessed the commander who will conquer it, and how blessed his army*" (Saheeh Muslim).

The Prophet also foretold that there would come a time when the Arabian desert would become fertile again. He said:

"*The Hour will not come until the land of the Arabs once again becomes meadows and rivers*"
(Saheeh Muslim)

This saying of the Prophet suggests that there was a time when the Arabian desert was full of meadows and rivers and this is attested by geological evidence including natural oil and gas which are the remains of ancient life forms that once thrived here. Indeed even the so-called Rub Al Khali or Empty Quarter, one of the driest deserts known to man still shows the traces of old dried out lakes and watercourses.

The saying also suggests that the desert would revert back to its earlier state in becoming alive with meadows and rivers. Recent climatic changes are increasingly proving the truth of this statement uttered over a thousand years ago. Nowadays we even hear of snowfall in the Arabian peninsula which a few years ago would have

been difficult to imagine. What's more, Geologists are agreed based on a study of glacial cycles that have occurred in the past that the middle east will become one of the most hospitable places to live in the not too distant future with a cool climate and ample rainfall. In fact, if not for global warming which has a greenhouse effect on the global climate, the ice age that would turn the northern lands of Europe and America into perpetually cold lands and the middle east and the southern lands to countries having a lovely temperate climate, would have come sooner. But eventually it will, for none can stop the Hand of God. And so another prophecy fulfilled!

The Prophet, Upon Him Be Peace, also predicted the Mongol invasion, saying: "*The Hour will not come before you fight against a people with red faces, small, slant eyes and flat noses. They wear hairy leather boots*" (Saheeh Al-Bukhari). And so it came to pass that the Mongols from Far Asia led by Hulagu Khan invaded the Arab lands taking Baghdad in 1258. It was of course not long before the conquerors themselves became the conquered when they embraced Islam, perhaps the only instance in history when the conquerors accepted the faith of the conquered. The Moghuls who conquered India for Islam were in fact descendants of these Mongols.

Coming to more recent times, our beloved Prophet, Peace Be Upon Him, told his followers that the Last Day would not come until "*The shepherds of black camels start boasting and competing with others in the construction of high rise buildings*" (Saheeh Muslim). We see that this has already become a reality in the Arab countries today. One such country in the Gulf, an Emirate, has constructed the tallest standing skyscraper on the face of the earth, the Burj Arab Tower. Many more are in line in the other rich gulf countries to compete even with this. He also said that the Last Hour will not come before "T*he land of the Arabs becomes meadows with rivers*" (Saheeh Muslim). This too we see gradually becoming a reality with modern technology, with drip irrigation, man-made rivers and other novel techniques that could over time transform the deserts of Arabia to fertile fields and gardens.

Besides these marks, there is one very important mark by which we can know of a final universal messenger, and that is his advent being prophesied in earlier scripture. We know very well from the Bible that the nations of the world will gain salvation from the seed of Abraham in keeping with God's Promise.

> *Now the Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will show thee: and I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: and I will curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.* (Genesis 12:1-3)

From this pledge made by God to Abraham even before he had any offspring we gather that the promise could apply equally to Ishmael, his firstborn son through his handmaiden Hagar as much as his second born son Isaac through his wife Sarah. Thus it would apply equally well to Ishmael's descendants the Arabs among whom Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) was born as to Isaac's descendants, the Jews to whom were sent numerous prophets including its final messenger Jesus (Peace Be Upon Him).

However, there is a stronger case for supposing that the promise applies more to Ishmael and his Arabian descendants than Isaac or the Children of Israel. For one thing we know that the promise in question was made to Abraham before any child was born to him. God also promised to Abraham at the time: "*Unto thy seed have I*

given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the Euphrates" (Genesis 15:18). True to God's promise, Abraham's descendants through Ishmael, the Arabs, came to settle in the land between the Nile and the Euphrates within a few years following the revelation of Islam to the Prophet who was himself a descendant of Ishmael. They are to this day very much its inhabitants. Abraham's children through Isaac, the Jews, never at any given time of their history held this portion of land.

Thus the promise seems to apply more to the children of Abraham through Ishmael rather than through Isaac. Further according to the Bible the traditional rights and privileges of the first born son are not to be affected by the social status, whether free or slave, of his mother (Deuteronomy 21:15-17). Going by this token we may suppose that the promise should really apply to Ishmael, the son of the bondswoman Hagar than to his younger half-brother Isaac born to the freewoman Sarah.

Thus it came to pass that after Jesus, the last Israelite prophet whom the Jews rejected, God in fulfilling his pledge to Abraham bestowed the final mission to their cousins, the Arabs, through whom all the nations were to be blessed. The chosen one was none other than Muhammad who was from the progeny of Abraham through Ishmael. It is very likely with reference to this that Jesus said: "*Therefore, say I unto you, The Kingdom of God shall be taken away from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruit thereof*" (Matthew 21:43). Thus Jesus himself told his Israelite followers that the Divine Mission would be taken away from them and given to another nation. Now who would this other nation be but the Arabs through whom God had promised Abraham that the nations of the earth shall be blessed.

This is also supported by another passage from the Bible, this time from the Old Testament where it is written: *"And Jacob called unto his sons and said: "Gather unto yourselves together that I may tell you that which shall befall you in the last days" and he said: "The sceptre shall not depart from Judah nor a lawgiver from between his feet until Shiloh come; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples*."*"* (Genesis 49:1-11). Now *Shiloh* we know is a Hebrew word meaning 'peace' or 'peace through submission to God", in other words Islam, which was established by the Arabian Prophet Muhammad. What becomes clear from Jacob's words is that the prophethood passed through the lineage of Isaac will cease as soon as the Arabian Prophet emerges. And this is exactly what happened.

But that's not all. The coming of the Prophet was clearly prophesied in the Bible, for we read in the Old Testament Moses predicting the rise of another prophet:

And the Lord said unto me, They have well spoken that which they have spoken. I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him. And it shall come to pass, that whosoever will not hearken unto my words which he shall speak in my name, I will require it of him
(Deuteronomy 18:19)

If we consider this prophecy we would find that it describes none other than Prophet Muhammad, and not Jesus whom Christians believe it refers to.

Firstly, let us take the phrase *I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee*. That the Hebrew word thus used for brethren *ahgh* could also mean kinsfolk is borne out by other Biblical passages such as the one where the Jews are told by Moses not to hate the Edomites: "*You shall not abhor an Edomite, for he is your brother (ahgh)*" (Deuteronomy 23:7). So just as the term could apply to the

Edomites who were the descendants of Esau, the twin brother of Jacob, it could as easily apply to the descendants of Ishmael, the half brother of Jacob's father Isaac.

Now, it is well known that the elder son of Abraham Ishmael is the father of the Arabs just as his younger son Isaac is the father of the Jews. The Arabs are thus the brethren of the Jews. Both are the descendants of Abraham through different mothers, the former through Hagar and the latter through Sarah. Thus they are in fact the brethren of the Jews. The prophecy in question distinctly mentions that the coming prophet who would be like Moses, must arise not from the Children of Israel, but from among "*their brethren*" who are none other than the Children of Ishmael, in other words, the Arabs.

The second part of the prophesy runs *like unto thee* (that is Moses) which cannot refer to any but our Prophet. Muhammad like Moses was born naturally of both father and mother and was married with children. Like Moses he also had political authority being a lawgiver and military leader at the same time and like him was victorious over his opponents. In contrast Jesus was immaculately conceived through a virgin mother, he never married or had children. He did not enjoy political power, nor was he victorious over his opponents who almost crucified him had it not been for God's timely intervention in taking him up to Himself.

Both Moses and Muhammad were accepted as prophets by the vast majority of their people during their own lifetime and died only after they had fulfilled their mission. In contrast Jesus was rejected by the greater part of his people before he was taken to God. His mission on earth is yet to come, when he shall descent to earth and establish a kingdom of God on earth. Further, the Christian view that the Prophet referred to is Jesus is far-fetched when we consider that the established Christian view holds that Jesus was not a prophet, but the Son of God.

In the rest of the prophecy God tells us: "*And it shall come to pass, that whosoever will not hearken unto my words which he shall speak in my name, I will require it of him*" (Deuteronomy 18:19). So here we are warned by God that whoever does not hearken to the words of His Prophet shall earn His Wrath. Thus all, be they Jew or gentile, ought to accept the Prophethood of the final messenger.

Up to the time of Jesus (peace be upon him), the Jews were awaiting the prophet like unto Moses prophesied in Deuteronomy. When John the Baptist came, they asked him if he was Christ and he said "*no*". They asked him if he was Elias and he said "*no*". Then, in apparent reference to Deuteronomy 18:18, they asked him "*Art thou that Prophet*" and he answered, "*no*". (John 1: 1 9-2 1). Nor did Jesus ever claim to be the Prophet referred to. He merely warned us to beware of false prophets, giving us the criteria to identify false prophets and implying that another Prophet would come after him when he said: "*Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so, every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Therefore, by their fruits ye shall know them"* (Matthew 7:15-20).

Thus Jesus clearly indicated that a true Prophet would come after him, while warning against false prophets: Therefore, by their fruits ye shall know them (Matthew 7:15-20).

It is also well known that the Jews and Christians of pre-Islamic Arabia living in the midst of Arabs were awaiting a prophet. They would say: "*The time has come for the unlettered prophet to appear who will revive the religion of Abraham. We*

will join his ranks and wage fierce war against you." When Muhammad actually appeared, some of them believed in him, and some refused. This is why God revealed:

> *And when there comes to them a Book (Quran) from God confirming that which was with them – although before they used to pray for victory against those who disbelieved – but [then] when there came to them that which they recognized, they disbelieve in it; But the curse of God be upon the disbelievers*
> *(The Heifer:89)*

But that's not all. Moses predicted the coming of the Prophet in another little understood prophecy. He said to his people: "*The Lord came from Sinai, and rose up from Seir unto them; he shined forth from mount Paran, and he came with ten thousands of saints: from his right hand (went) a fiery law for them. Yea, he loved the people; all his saints (are) in Thy hand: and they sat down at Thy feet; (every one) shall receive of Thy words"* (Deuteronomy 33:2).

This prophecy tells of God's speaking to Moses in Mount Sinai, His Words becoming established in the land of Seir near Jerusalem with the advent of Jesus and his Message attaining its peak in Mount Paran, when the chosen one came with 10,000 men and gave unto them a strong and lasting code of law, a criterion between good and evil. Paran is an obvious reference to the Hijaz country of Arabia which in the Bible (Genesis 21:21) is called the wilderness of Paran where Ishmael and his mother Hagar dwelt after being driven out by Sarah and the mount it refers to is Mount Hira where the Prophet received the first call to his universal mission. The *ten thousand saints* it refers to are the ten thousand strong army that followed the Prophet in taking Mecca for Islam and the fiery law is no doubt the law of Islam which brooks no idolatry and tolerates no injustice.

The Prophet Isaiah likewise made a very clear reference to Muhammad's mission when he proclaimed:

Behold my servant, whom I uphold, mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth. I have put my spirit upon him, and he shall bring forth judgement to the gentiles. He shall not cry, nor lift up, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street. He shall bring forth judgement unto truth. He shall not fail nor be discouraged, till he has set judgement in the earth, and the isles shall wait for his law. I the Lord have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thine hand, and will keep thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the gentiles. To open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the prison, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house. I am the Lord, that is my name, and my glory I will not give to another, neither my praise to graven images. Sing unto the Lord a new song and His praise from the end of the earth. Let the wilderness and the cities thereof lift up their voice, the villages that Kedar doth inhabit, let the inhabitants of the rock sing, let them shout from the top of the mountains. Let them give glory unto the Lord and declare His praise in the islands (Isaiah 42:1-10).

These words seem to speak of the universal mission of Muhammad who was sent not just to the Arabs and their Jewish cousins, but also to the rest of mankind insultingly called gentiles by the Jews. When God says Behold my servant, whom I uphold, mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth it seems specifically to refer to Muhammad who often used to call himself a servant or slave of God, like when he once told a companion who had called him Our master: "*God alone is the Master! I am no one's master. Let not the devil deceive you; I do not wish you to raise me to a*

status higher than that God has placed me. I am only God's Slave and His Messenger" (Ahmed).

When God says: *He shall not fail nor be discouraged, till he has set judgement in the earth, and the isles shall wait for his law*, what He means is he would persist in his mission till it spreads all over and justice is established far and wide. This is a fitting description of the Prophet's mission which was meant for all humanity.

When He says: I *the Lord have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thine hand, and will keep thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the gentiles,* it means that the chosen one would be the seal of the messengers and that his message would be embraced by the gentiles, which is exactly what Islam was all about, the final revelation of God to all humanity.

When He says: *To open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the prison, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house*, it means nothing but bringing the Pagans out of the darkness and blindness of idolatry to the light of the One True God. Bringing out the prisoners from the prison may either mean saving or enfranchising people from the prison of this world and guiding them on to the path to true freedom in the hereafter, or in a more literal sense freeing slaves, both of which the Prophet achieved.

When He says: *I am the Lord, that is my name, and my glory I will not give to another, neither my praise to graven images. Sing unto the Lord a new song and His praise from the end of the earth,* what He is saying is that the Chosen One would establish the Oneness of God for all time through a new dispensation and a new language which would reach all the corners of the world. This too is a fitting description of the Prophet's mission, which to this day remains the most monotheistic and most iconoclastic of all faiths. This faith came through the vehicle of a new language Arabic, the *new song* referred to, so that God's praises could be heard from all over the world, like in the minarets of the mosques scattered over every continent. What this also says is the faith would be a universal one as God's praises would emanate from the ends of the earth, which can be nothing but Islam.

And when He says: *Let the wilderness and the cities thereof lift up their voice, the villages that Kedar doth inhabit, let the inhabitants of the rock sing, let them shout from the top of the mountains. Let them give glory unto the Lord and declare His praise in the islands*, He is referring to the message commencing among the children of Kedar, son of Ishmael in their Arabian homeland and spreading to the most distant islands like the numerous islands of the Indonesian archipelago. The Prophet was in fact a descendant of Kedar as were his Arabian followers and his message did in fact spread to the furthest islands of the world. The reference to the *inhabitants of the rock* shouting God's praises *from the top of the mountains* is a fair description of Muslims gathering every year at Mount Arafat during the Islamic pilgrimage to cry out at the top of their voices: "*Here I come O God. Here I come. Here I come. There is no partner with you. Verily yours is the Praise*"

That this description cannot refer to Jesus as Matthew (15:18-21) wrongly believed is seen from the fact that as Jesus himself said, he had been sent to the *lost sheep of the house of Israel*. In contrast, Islam which Muhammad brought was meant for all, Jew and gentile. Further Jesus was unable to bring victory to justice or justice to the gentiles due to the schemes of the Jews, but Muhammad was, after vanquishing the Jews on numerous occasions. And if as most Christians today hold that he was the *Son of God*, then he certainly cannot be My servant whom I uphold, though it can very well refer to Muhammad who claimed to be no more than a Messenger and Slave of God.

Besides, the awaited one is here said to be a descendant of Ke'dar. Let's see what the Bible has to say about Kedar:

"Now these are the generations of Ishmael, Abraham's son, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah's handmaid, bare unto Abraham: and these are the names of the sons of Ishmael, by their names, according to their generations: the firstborn of Ishmael, Nebaioth; and Kedar, and Adbeel, and Mibsam, and Mishma, and Dumah, and Massa, Hadad, and Tema, Jetur, Naphish, and Kedemah: these are the sons of Ishmael, and these are their names, by their towns, and by their castles; twelve princes according to their nations" (Genesis 25:12-16).

So Ke'dar is here described as the son of Ishmael who was the son of Abraham. He was the progenitor of the Quraysh tribe and hence the forefather of Muhammad. So when the awaited one is described as being of Abraham's seed it must obviously refer to Muhammad. Jesus was not a descendant of Ishmael, but of Isaac.

The Prophet Haggai said: "*This is what the Lord Almighty says: In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations, and the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory, says the Lord Almighty.*"; (Haggai 2: 6-7): "*The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house, says the Lord Almighty. and in this place I will grant peace, declares the Lord Almighty*." (Haggai (2:9). The Prophet Malachi added: "*Behold, I send my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the lord of hosts*." (Malachi 3:1).

This set of prophecies no doubt speak of the Prophet foretold by Moses. In the first God tells us that "the desired of all nations will come" and who else can this be than the universal prophet Muhammad. In the second we are told "*The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house and in this place I will grant peace*" which implies that the new house chosen by God will surpass the old house in glory, which is to say the temple of Mecca will surpass the temple of Jerusalem, and the house of Islam will supersede the House of Israel and that it will enjoy peace. The third "*I send my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple*" speaks of the sudden appearance of the Prophet in the temple of Mecca, the Ka'aba, where he destroys the idols and dedicates it to the worship of the One true God. But that's not all. Take the words of the Prophet Daniel who proclaimed:

I saw one like the son of man coming on the clouds of heaven; when he came to the Ancient of days (God), and was presented before him, he received dominion, and glory, and a kingdom that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him his dominion is an everlasting dominion,which shall not be taken away (Daniel 7:13-14)

The phrase '*Son of Man'* means in Biblical terminology a prophet; his coming to the presence of the 'Most Ancient of Days' seems but a reference to Muhammad's coming before the presence of God Almighty who is also known in Islamic tradition by the same term '*The most Ancient of Days*'. This is little doubt a reference to our Prophet's ascension to the heavens from Jerusalem accompanied by the angel Gabriel and his meeting with God who enjoined on his followers the daily prayers which Muslims offer to this day; His being given dominion and a kingdom of all nations and languages no doubt refers to Muhammad's imperial power and his

universal mission for all the nations of the earth. It could not refer to Jesus as he did not enjoy temporal dominion as Muhammad did. It could also not refer to Jesus as he was not sent to all of humanity, but rather to the *lost sheep of Israel*. Muhammad, on the other hand proclaimed he was a universal messenger to mankind and openly invited other nations to enter the fold of Islam, even going to the extent of writing missives to the rulers of the neighbouring nations like the Byzantines and Persians.

They would eventually be overtaken by Islam, so that the little Islamic city state of Medina founded by Muhammad a few decades earlier would expand to encompass within it diverse nations who spoke different tongues.

We further read in the Psalms revealed to David (Upon Whom Be Peace) of a long awaited Prophet whose description best matches that of Muhammad:

He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and buckler. Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day; A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee. Only with thine eyes shalt thou behold and see the reward of the wicked. Because thou (the Prophet to come) hast made the Lord, which is my refuge, even the most High, thy habitation; There shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling. For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways. They shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone (stumble). Thou shalt tread upon the lion (Persia) and adder (Egypt); the young lion (Byzantium) and the dragon (the Orient) shalt thou trample under feet. Because he (the Prophet) has set his love upon me (God), therefore, will I deliver him. I will set him on high, because he has known my name. He shall call upon me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honor him. With long life will I satisfy him, and show him my salvation. (Psalm 91)

This long verse from the Psalms reveals to us many things concerning the coming Prophet which we can compare with the life and times of Prophet Muhammad. Thus his dwelling in the Secret Place of the Most High seems to refer to Muhammad's frequent meditations in a secret cave on the *Jabal al Noor* or 'Mountain of Light'; *the terror by night* referred to seems to have occurred when the pagan tribes hatched a plot to kill him while he slept; the arrows referred to were likely those the Prophet encountered when he entered into hostilities against the pagan tribes; *the angels having him under their protection* refers to the angels sent to help him and his followers at the battle of Badr and to strengthen his resolve in the face of great adversity. *The conquest of the Lion, Adder and Dragon* is nothing but a symbolic reference to the victory of the Muslim armies against Persia, Egypt and the Orient, namely parts of China, for the Lion was the symbol of Persia, the Serpent that of Egypt and the Dragon that of the Orient.

David's son Solomon also prophesied the coming of a promised one not of the Children of Israel whose prayers he beseeched God to answer:

Moreover concerning a stranger that is not of thy people Israel, but cometh out of a far country for thy name's sake; (For they shall hear of thy great name, and of thy strong hand, and of thy stretched out arm); when he shall come and pray toward this house. Hear thou in heaven thy dwelling place, and do according to all that the stranger calleth to thee for: that all people of the earth may know thy name to fear thee, as do thy people Israel; and that they may know that this house, which I have built is called by thy name (Kings 8:41-43)

Here we are told of one coming out of a distant land in the name of God, that is a prophet; the far country referred to could well be Arabia which was in those days a journey of several months by camel or caravan from Palestine where Solomon had his kingdom; He would not be of the chosen people of Israel, but of another nation which when we take God's promise to Abraham would have to refer to a descendant of Ishmael, Abraham's elder son from whom the Ishmaelites or Arabs are descended; his coming towards this house (that is the Temple of Jerusalem) refers to his miraculous nightly journey to heaven from a rock in the temple which is today a mosque surmounted by a golden dome and his praying towards it refers to the fact that he and his followers initially had Jerusalem as their original direction of prayer before it was directed towards Mecca; Finally Solomon prays for the success of the awaited one's mission so that God would be known throughout the earth which again agrees with the universal mission of Muhammad.

We also read in the Song of Songs which is some sort of wedding allegory told by Good King Solomon:

My beloved is white and ruddy, the chief among ten thousand; His head is as the most fine gold, his locks are bushy, and black as a raven; His eyes are as the eyes of doves by the rivers of waters, washed with milk and fitly set. His cheeks are as a bed of spices as sweet flowers: his lips like lilies dropping with sweet smelling myrrh. His hands are as gold rings set with the beryl: his belly is as bright ivory overlaid with sapphire; His legs are as pillars of marble, set upon sockets of fine gold; his countenance is as Lebanon, excellent as the cedars; His mouth is most sweet: yea, he is Muhammedim. This is my beloved, and this is my friend. O daughters of Jerusalem (Song of Songs 5:10-16).

In Hebrew the last verse in which Muhammad occurs reads as: "*Hikko Mamittakim we kullo Muhammadim Zehdoodeh wa Zehraee Bayna Yerusalem*."

So here we have the bride, the Shulamite, describing her beloved as Muhammed in the plural form Muhammedim which is a form of respect in the same style that the Hebrew term for God Elohim is used, a device used in a language that has no capital letters like English or a definite article like Arabic to give distinction to a revered proper noun. She refers to her intended as her brother, which makes sense if we consider it to refer to the Prophet Muhammad who was of the Ishmaelites or Arabs, the half-brothers of the Israelites or Jews. The bride though of dark hue, a colour which she compares with the tents of Kedar asks her companions not to shun her because of her dark complexion and proudly sings that her beloved is fair.

She describes him as being white and ruddy which is exactly how the companions of Muhammad described him, a handsome fair complexioned man of a kindly disposition. Even though her spouse is fair she reminds her companions that her complexion is prized by the people with whom she is being united, that is the people of Kedar, who as we saw earlier was the second son of Ishmael and the founding father of the Quraysh, the tribe to which Muhammad himself belonged. The mention of her beloved being the chief of ten thousand seems to refer to the 10,000 holy warriors who marched to Mecca under the command of Muhammad.

This seems to be some sort of wedding allegory symbolizing the outcastes among the Jews, the black sheep among them, so to say, who had not the arrogance of that proud race, uniting with the Arabs under Muhammad to form a single community. We learn from Islamic history that it were only a very few Jews who chose to follow Muhammad and this may well be a reference to their number. It could also refer to the Christians who began as an outcaste offshoot of Judaism and who gave the Prophet and his followers a most warm reception such as the Negus of Abyssinia did

when the persecuted Muslims of Mecca migrated to his kingdom. Interestingly these Ethiopian Christians though of Semitic stock like the Jews and Arabs were not as fair-skinned as them on account of mixing with other peoples and were ruled by a monarch, the Negus of the tribe of Judah who claimed descent from Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.

The Assyrian Bible also preserves a memory of a prophet to come who closely resembles Muhammad.: "*And I will shake all nations and the praised one of all the nations will come. And in this place I will give Peace, says the Lord of Hosts*" (Haggai 11:79). The word used here for '*Praised One'* is *himada* which in turn is derived from an ancient Hebrew or Aramaic root *hemed* or *hemida* and which being a Semitic word has the same origin as Arabic *Ahmad*, another name for Muhammad mentioned in the Qur'an itself. Also interesting is the fact that the passage mentions '*Peace'* as the final testament. This takes the form *Shalom*, and *Shalom* we know is the Hebrew form of the Arabic *Salaam* also meaning '*peace'*. However, it could also mean *Islam* meaning *submission (to God)*. So here we are told of a prophet whose name literally means '*Praised One*' who will bring a religion called '*Peace'* or '*Peace through Submission'*.

But that's not all. Jesus (Upon Whom Be Peace) also foretold the coming of Muhammad. For one thing he warned the Jews: "*Say I unto you, The Kingdom of God shall be taken away from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruit thereof*" (Matthew 21:43). For another he predicted the rise of another spirit (In his language a Prophet) who was described in the Greek translation of his original Aramaic speech as a '*Comforter'*

"If ye love me, keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you. I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you"
(John 14:15-18)

"These things have I spoken unto you, being yet present with you. But the Comforter, which is the holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you"
(John 14:25-26)

That the Holy Spirit referred to here is not the Holy Ghost or Angel Gabriel is clear from the words of Jesus himself: He *shall give you another Comforter*. Besides, the Holy Ghost was, according to Christians, as well as Muslims, already present to help and guide Jesus, in other words to strengthen him in his mission. That the Holy Spirit is none but a prophet is clear from John himself when he uses spirit in the sense of Prophet: "*Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God; because many false prophets are gone out into the world*" (John 4:1). But that's not all. He goes on to say: "*Hereby know ye the spirit of God. Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God*" (John 4:2).

Here John uses spirit for prophet, and not just that. He says that the prophet who says Jesus came in the flesh is certainly a true prophet, which shows that Muhammad who spoke so well of Jesus, acknowledging his immaculate birth, his miracles and

many other things, must be, according to this criteria, considered a true prophet, and indeed the comforter Jesus refers to when he says: "*I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another comforter, that he may abide with you forever*". If Jesus is the first comforter, which is obvious from this passage, then the other he refers to, it must follow must be like him, that is in the flesh and not spirit as the Holy Ghost is thought as.

Now, the Greek word used to describe the coming one *Parakletos*, has been translated here as '*Comforter'* though it more precisely means 'one who pleads another's cause, an intercessor'. That John understood the Parac1ete to be a flesh and blood person, and not a incorporeal spirit or angel is clear from another book of his where he uses the term with reference to Jesus: "*We have an advocate (parakletos) with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous*"(1 John 2: 1). Thus the *Parakletos*, the Comforter or Intercessor spoken of cannot be an angel or Holy Ghost that descended to Jesus in the form of Gabriel. Rather, it means a prophet of flesh and blood.

However it is possible, nay very likely that the actual word spoken by Jesus was *Mawhamana* meaning 'Praised One' and that it was originally translated to Greek *Periklytos* 'The Much-Praised', which is an exact Greek translation of the Aramaic term which was the speech of Jesus, this being the language used in Palestine at the time. Thus it is likely that the Greek term Parakletos is actually a translator or copyist's error of *Periklytos*. Interestingly both these terms, the Aramaic and the Greek have the same meaning as the Arabic *Muhammad* which means 'The Praised One' from the Semitic root *hmd* 'praise'. It is the same root that gives rise to the Arabic Ahmad which the Qur'an tells us was the term Jesus used in describing the Prophet to come after him:

> *And remember, Jesus, The son of Mary, said: "O Children of Israel! I am the messenger of God (Sent) to you, confirming Torah (which came) Before me, and giving Glad Tidings of a Messenger To come after me, Whose name shall be Ahmad (i.e. Muhammad)"*
> *(The Battle Array:6)*

The character of this personality also matches that of Muhammad. For one thing, he is called '*The spirit of Truth'*, in other words a Prophet known for the Words of Truth he speaks. This is confirmed in the Qur'an where God Almighty says of Muhammad: "*O mankind! The Messenger has now come unto you with the truth from your Lord: believe, then, for your own good!*" (The Women:170). The Greek term used in the Bible is *pneuma tees aleetheais* 'the inspired truthful one' and interestingly enough this Greek word *aleetheais* has exactly the same meaning as the Arabic *Al-Ameen* "the Trustworthy", which was a title by which Muhammad was known, even in his Pre-Prophetic days.

The promised one is also described by Jesus as one who will "*abide with you for ever*" (John 14:16). What Jesus is telling us here is that his mission like that of the earlier prophets, has to give way to a more lasting one taught by another, until the end of days. Here he draws a very fundamental distinction between his mission and the one to come which will be a lasting one. Now who would that be but Muhammad whose teachings will last and have universal appeal. After all, Muhammad is God's last messenger to humanity. His teachings are preserved in all its pristine purity and he dwells in the hearts of his followers who worship God in the manner he laid down. At the same time it affirms for a fact that the Gospel brought by Jesus himself is not the final word of God, nor complete, as it clearly announces the coming of

another to perfect the message left incomplete by Jesus. This of course came to pass with Muhammad;s ministry when God Himself revealed: "*This Day have I perfected your religion for you and completed My Favour upon You"*

Jesus also says of him: "*He shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, (that) shall he speak*" (John 16:13), and this too is corroborated in the Qur'an which says of Muhammad: "*Neither does he speak out of his own desire: that (which he conveys to you) is but (a divine) inspiration sent down to him*" (The Star:3-4). He also says of him: "*He shall glorify me*." (John 16:14) and in the Qur'an revealed to Muhammad we find Jesus being spoken of in very high terms: "*Behold! The angels said: O Mary! God gives you Glad tidings of a Word from Him. His name shall be Christ Jesus, son of Mary, held in honour in this world and in the Hereafter and of those Nearest to God*" (Family Imraan:45). Muhammad not only glorified Jesus, but also cleared him of the blasphemies the Jews accused him of and the calumnies they cast upon his mother Mary.

Jesus further says of him: "*And bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you*" (John 14:26) which again agrees with the words of the Quran which quotes Christ as saying*, 'O Children of Israel, worship God, my Lord and your Lord"*" (The Repast:72). Thus it reminds Christians of the first and greatest command of Jesus which they have since forgotten: "*The first of all the commandments is 'Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God is one Lord*"" (Mark 12:29). Jesus also says of the Paraclete: "*He will teach you all things*" (John 14:26) which again agrees with the teachings of the Prophet, which is an entire way of life, covering the spiritual, moral, social and political spheres of human life in a manner no other religion does.

You will be surprised to learn that all this is corroborated by our Holy Book, the Qur'an which expressly tells us that both the Old and New Testaments contain references to Muhammad as the coming Prophet:

Those who follow the Messenger, The unlettered Prophet, Whom they find mentioned
In their own (Scriptures) -In the Law and the Gospel –
It is they who will prosper
(The Heights:157)

And remember, Jesus, The son of Mary, said: "O Children of Israel! I am the messenger of God (Sent) to you, confirming Torah (which came) Before me, and giving Glad Tidings of a Messenger To come after me, Whose name shall be Ahmad (i.e. Muhammad)"
(The Battle Array: 6)

Surely, all of these prophecies foretold by these two great prophets when considered together with the words of the Qur'an tell us but one thing: That Muhammad was the promised one, the universal messenger from God Almighty sent to all mankind. How is it that the Bible prophesies the coming of a Prophet whose description fits exactly that of Muhammad while at the same time keeping in mind the biblical promise that the saviour shall be from the seed of Abraham through whom all the families of the world would be blessed.

One of the earliest to recognize him as such was a Christian monk Bahira, also known as Sergius who spotted the signs of Prophethood on the young Muhammad, then only a child. The boy had traveled to Syria with a Meccan caravan accompanied by his uncle Abu Talib , and when it passed by his cell, the monk invited the

merchants to a feast. After the feast, the monk told Abu Talib that Muhammad would be a great prophet one day. He observed that when he had seen the caravan in the distance there had been a cloud hanging over them, shading them from the heat of the desert.

When the caravan halted under a tree the cloud also stopped above them. He looked at the cloud when it overshadowed the tree and saw its branches bending and drooping over Muhammad until he was in the shadow beneath it. The monk advised his uncle that Muhammad be taken back to Mecca at once, for if the Jews were to find out who he was they would kill him. Abu Talib took the advice of this wise monk and sent his nephew back with some of the guides.

Then there was Waraqa, another Christian savant. He was a cousin of Muhammad's wife Khadijah and the good lady had consulted him about her husband's first encounter with Gabriel which had so scared him. He too prophesied that Muhammad would be a prophet, though he did not become a Muslim. "*Holy Holy! By Him in whose hand is Waraqa's soul, if you are telling me the truth, O Khadija, (it means that) there has indeed come to him the great Namus*" and by Namus he meant Gabriel, upon whom be peace, who used to come to Moses, "*He will assuredly be the prophet to his own people. Tell him so and bid him be brave of heart*". When the two men met subsequently in the street, the blind old man told him: "*I swear by Him in Whose hand Waraqa's life is, God has chosen you to be the prophet of this people. They will call you a liar, they will persecute you, they will banish you, they will fight against you. Oh, that I could live to those days. I would fight for thee*." (Seerah Ibn Hisham).

He kissed him on his forehead and died shortly after this solitary meeting with the coming prophet. The Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) would later dream of him in white robes - signifying that Waraqa was in heaven. Thus Waraqa was very likely a Unitarian Christian, perhaps one of the last of his breed which was dying out after being persecuted by the Byzantines who had adopted the heretical Trinitarian doctrine.

Finally I can only cite the words of Thomas Carlyle who very wisely observed of Muhammad's mission:

"*Our current hypothesis about Mohammed, that he was a scheming impostor, a Falsehood incarnate, that his religion is a mere mass of quackery and fatuity, begins really to be now untenable to any one. The lies, which well-meaning zeal have heaped around this man, are disgraceful to ourselves only". He goes on to add of the reason behind the success of Muhammad's faith: "What an umpire Nature is; what a greatness, composure of depth and tolerance there is in her. you take wheat to cast into the earth's bosom; your wheat may be mixed with chaff, chopped straw, barn sweepings, dust and all imaginable rubbish; no matter: you cast it into the kind, just Earth; she grows the wheat- the whole rubbish she silently absorbs, shrouds it in, says nothing of the rubbish. The yellow wheat is growing there; the good earth is silent about all the rest, has silently turned all the rest to some benefit too, and makes no complaint about it! So everywhere in nature she is true and not a lie*".

What better way to dismiss the impostor claim than the words of this wise man from the west. In so few words he says it best, that Muhammad could not have been a charlatan due to the way nature - and by this he meant all nature including human nature - accepted his claims, which could have only been so if he were in contact with the great heart of the universe, in other words, the Supreme Being Himself.

14th Night

Johnny: Salams Sheikh. I learnt a lot last night and I guess there is much in favour of Muhammad's coming being foretold in earlier scriptures. What struck me as particularly intriguing is that Judeo-Christian scripture should prophesy about the coming of a prophet that so well fits the description of Muhammad down to the fact that he will be of the seed of Abraham. There can also be no doubt about Muhammad's integrity and sincerity. In English when we say prophet, we usually mean a person who prophesies, one who tells us of what is to come. So my next question is:

Muhammad is a Prophet you say. What are the prophecies he predicted?

The Janissary: A prophet is not just somebody who prophesies or performs miracles. He is more of a guide who conveys God's Message to men so as to lead them on the straight path.

In Arabic *Nabi*, which is loosely translated in English as 'prophet' actually means '*He who informs or brings good tidings'*. The word comes from *naba* 'good tidings' as seen for instance in a passage of the Qur'an where God says of the days of Mary: "*This is part of the tidings of the things unseen"* (Family Imraan:44) where *anba* 'tidings' used here occurs as the plural of *naba*, or where Jesus says: "*I shall declare (nabbi*) *what you eat and what you store in your houses*" (Family Imraan:49) where the verbal form *nabbi* conveys the sense of 'passing on the tidings'. The Arabic word is related to Hebrew *navi* which more or less means the same thing, one who speaks on behalf of the Almighty as we see for instance in Deuteronomy 18:18, where God declares: "*And I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him*." Thus in the Semitic tongues prophets are basically the intermediaries through which God makes known His Will to men.

However it is true that the prophets also prophesied or foretold future events, not as a necessary, but rather as an incidental part of the prophetic mission. They warned us of the times to come and of the Signs of the Last Day. So did our Prophet, perhaps more than any other before him, because He was also the Final Messenger sent to all humanity. Even in your English language Muhammad is called *The Prophet*, meaning *The Prophet Par Excellence*. There is much our beloved Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) said which has come to pass and much that remains to come. There are also indications that some of what he said is taking place in this very age of ours.

Generally speaking the prophecies of our Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) could be classed into two broad categories – Those that have come to pass, shortly after his demise until this day and those telling of the Signs before the End of Days. To the first category belong the prophecies that have already taken place. And these mind you, are crystal clear predictions, unlike the vague prophecies found in the Bible that could be interpreted in different ways.

Among the first of the remarkable prophecies he made was that the Muslims would be victorious against the great superpowers of the day, and all this in the face of overwhelming adversity when the Muslims were on the verge of being defeated by the Pagan Meccans and their allies in the Battle of the Confederates in 626 AC. The Prophet made the prophecy, revealed to him by the Angel Gabriel, in the course of the digging of a trench which the Muslims had just undertaken to protect themselves from their enemies. In fact some thought that the prophecy was outrageous given the circumstances of the time and here we have the prophet declaring that they will conquer the Persians and the Byzantines, the two greatest empires on earth at the time!

A companion of the Prophet named Amr tells of this prophecy: "I Salman, Hudhayfa, Numan and six of the Ansar were working on the trench. We dug on until we reached al-Nada, where we came across a huge, white rock. It broke our metal tools and gave us great difficulty. So Salman went to the Messenger of God (Peace Be Upon Him) who was then in a Turkish pavilion, and told him of it. He came and took the pickaxe from Salman and struck the rock so hard it split. From it there came a flash of light so strong as to illuminate all the way between the two lava fields- (at both ends) of Medina, that is. It was like a great lantern on a very dark night.

The Messenger of God (Peace Be Upon Him) invoked God's greatness, saying *Allahu Akbar* (God is Great), as at a victory, and the Muslims did so as well. He then struck it again and the same thing happened, a third time with same result. Salman and the Muslims asked the Messenger of God (Peace Be Upon Him) what the light meant. He replied: "*From the first, the castles of al-Hira and cities of Chosroe were lit up to be seen like the fangs of dogs. Gabriel announced to me that my nation would be victorious over them. From the second, the red castles of Byzantium were illuminated, as though they were the fangs of dogs; Gabriel announced to me that my nation would be victorious over them. From the third, the castles of Sana were lit up like the fangs of dogs; Gabriel announced to me that my nation would be victorious over them. So be joyful at this news!'* the Muslims were delighted, and said *"Praise be to God!*".

When the enemy clans appeared for battle, the believers assured one another that what God and his messenger had promised them was true,. And yet all this came at a time when the Muslims of Medina were struggling against the Quraysh and their allies with great odds against them. And so it came to pass that a few years after the demise of our Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him), Persia, which was then ruled by the Sassanids, fell before the Islamic army in the reign of Caliph Umar. The Battle of Qadisiyyah fought in 636/637 AC dealt a major blow to the Persians and this was followed by the sack of the Sassanian winter capital at Ctesiphon on the Tigris. The Battle of Nahavand in fought in 642 sealed the fate of the Persian Empire. Chosroes, the Persian Emperor had in a fit of arrogance many years ago torn the letter the Prophet sent him, inviting him to Islam.

Now God tore his empire to piece, replacing it with the Peace of Islamdom. This was an empire, mind you, that was one of the two major superpowers of the day, the other being the Byzantine Empire which would also eventually fall to Islam. Indeed even in the many centuries before Christ, in the first millennium BC, this great Aryan nation had consistently been a thorn on the side of Western civilization which was then dominated by the Greeks.

Persia was no easy foe. It had risen to prominence under the Achaemenid dynasty founded by Cyrus the Great in the 6th century BC, eventually taking over the old Babylonian Empire and expanding within a short period to stretch from the Indus Valley in the East to as far West as Thrace and Macedon near Greece and to Egypt and beyond so that it covered three continents - Europe, Asia and Africa. Its historic enmity with Greece was demonstrated in the many Greco-Persian such as in the Battle of Marathon when they sought to subdue all of Greece but were soundly defeated. Alexander the Great's invasion a couple of centuries later put its dreams of expansion into Europe to an end but it was soon to rise again like a Phoenix under the Sassanids who took on the might of the Byzantine Empire which had taken on the mantle of European leadership from the Greeks. Such was the power of Persia. And to think it would be overwhelmed by the Arabs of some oasis towns in the desert to its west.

These Persians who had been following a degenerate version of Zoroastrianism that had lost much of its original monotheism flocked to embrace Islam on a mass scale as soon as the conquest was over. They added much to Islamic civilization. The very name of *Baghdad*, the capital of the Abbasid Caliphs, an Arabian dynasty that ruled Islamdom from 750 until 1258, is of Persian origin and means 'Given by God'. The compilers of all the six great canonical works that recorded our Prophet's sayings and doings, the *Sihah As-Sittah* or the Six Correct Books including Bukhari, Muslim, Aboo Dawood, Ibn Majah, Tirmidhi and Nasai were all Persians. Even mundane literature like the *Alf Layla Wa Layla* or The Thousand and One Nights also known as the Arabian Nights was originally based on a lost Persian archetype of unknown antiquity known as *Hazar Afsanah* (Thousand Stories) to which an Islamic touch was given with the likes of the illustrious Caliph Harun Al Rashid being brought into the narrative.

And then came the turn of the Byzantine Empire, the other major superpower of the day, to fall to the armies of Islam, as foretold by the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him). The Byzantines were then a powerful empire that had as its seat the city of Constantinople. Sitting on the Bosporus it straddled the continents of both Europe and Asia, in what is now Istanbul in Turkey. It was founded by Constantine the Great in 327 AC on the site of the ancient Greek city of Byzantium as the new capital of the Eastern Part of the Roman Empire and was called *Nova Roma* – New Rome. However it soon became a separate empire when the two sons of Theodosius, the last ruler of a United Rome divided the empire among themselves, Honorarius taking the Western Part based in Rome and Arcadius the Eastern part based in Constantinople.

It did not take it long to emerge as a superpower, especially after the fall of the Western Empire based in Rome in 476 to a coalition of Germanic tribes professing the Arian creed, a form of Unitarian Christianity that the older empire still tinted with its pagan ways had spurned. That event was so momentous that it ushered in the Middle Ages of Europe, known to some as 'The Dark Ages'. It was in the east that the older Roman Empire still lived, protected it is said by "*the impregnable walls*" of Constantinople. It carried on the traditions of Roman civilization and its rulers came to be regarded as the true heirs of the ancient Caesars, especially after its Emperor Justinian invaded Italy and took over Rome by defeating the Arian Goths in 554. This was why the Arabs of the time called them *Al-Room* 'The Romans', an appellation that even went on to form the name of a chapter of a Qur'an revealed a few decades later.

And so we now had the Prophet declaring "*The red castles of Byzantium were illuminated, as though they were the fangs of dogs; Gabriel announced to me that my nation would be victorious over them*". He would later also prophesy: "*You will conquer Constantinople. Its commander is the best and its army (that will conquer it) is the best*". The Prophet was referring to none other than Sultan Mehmed, also known as Muhammad Al Fatih (Muhammad the Conqueror) and his Army of Ottoman Turks who took Constantinople in 1453, an event so momentous that it would close the Middle Ages and usher in the Modern Era.

On that fateful day of the First of April 1453, Mehmed and his army of over 100,000 soldiers arrived at the walls of Constantinople. The sight that greeted them must have been awesome for it seemed so impregnable. These walls had never been conquered in history, but they would soon fall, its defenders taken by surprise seeing the soldiers flooding into the city and the flags waving on their walls. Before long the conquest had been complete and soon the victorious Sultan marched into the Church of Hagia Sophia where the people of the city had gathered. Dismounting from his

horse he prayed to God, thanking him for the conquest and turning to the people of the city who were bowing and prostrating in tears, said: "*Stand up! I am Sultan Muhammad and I would like to tell you, your brothers, and all the people present that your lives and freedoms are protected*". A strict follower of Islam, he did not touch a single inhabitant despite the fact that they had only a few days earlier spurned his offer to surrender the city and live in peace. In fact he encouraged them to stay in the city by absolving them of taxes and also insisted that the Greek Orthodox Church rule its Christians on his behalf. And so Constantinople, now renamed Islambul 'City of Islam' became the capital of his vast empire. The Sultan was only twenty three years old at the time and went on to conquer Serbia, Greece, Romania, Albania and Bosnia Herzegovina for the faith.

And mind you, it was this singular event in history, the fall of Constantinople, that signaled the end of the Mediaeval Period and ushered in the Modern Era. Such was the significance of 1453. And to think that all of this was prophesied by our Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him).

Our Prophet also prophesied other conquests for the faith, among them Egypt which was then under the rule of the Byzantines. He told his close friend and father in law Umar: "*God will open Egypt to you after my death. So take good care of the Copts in that country for they are your kinsmen and under your protection*"(Khutba of Amr Ibn Al Aas). On another occasion he advised his followers: "*Fear God regarding the Copts of Egypt, you shall take them over, but they shall be your instrument and supporter in the Way of God*" (Tabarani).

Here we find the Prophet directing that the Muslims who would take Egypt after his death take good care of the Copts, a Christian people descended from the ancient Egyptians. The community enjoyed a special relationship with the Arabs, being the race to which Hagar, the mother of their ancestor Ishmael belonged to. And so it came to pass, not very long afterwards that the Muslim General Amr Ibn Al Aas took Egypt in 642, routing the Byzantine forces that had for long oppressed the Copts due to sectarian differences.

The Prophet also foretold the first maritime battle to be undertaken by Muslims against Cyprus which he said would be witnessed by Umm Haram, the first woman to participate in a naval expedition. It so happened that one day when the Prophet woke up in the house of Umm Haram and he smilingly said: *I dreamt that my community would be waging war in the sea sitting on thrones like kings.* Umm Haram pleaded: "*Pray that I too may be with them*". And he replied: "*You shall be*" (Tirmidhi). This came true forty years later when Umm Haram accompanied her husband 'Ubada ibn Samit, on the conquest of Cyprus.

The Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) even went on to declare: "*God, the Exalted, unfolded for me the Earth, to the extent that I saw its Eastern and Western sides (i.e. the extremities). The Kingdom of my Ummah (nation) will reach as far as what has been unfolded to me"* (Saheeh Muslim).

Thus the Prophet foresaw that his followers would one day grow to such numbers that they would reach the furthest corners of the earth and this was pronounced when the young Muslim community had barely if at all spread outside of the Arabian Peninsula, perhaps not even beyond the city of Medina. Today however we see a totally different picture. Muslims who are Arab form only about 15 percent, a mere one seventh of the total Muslim population. The rest are all Non-Arabs belonging to different races. Muslims are found in all corners of the world with their greatest concentrations being from Morocco in the West to India in the East; Bosnia Herzegovina in the North to Indonesia in the South. The followers of Islam come a

close second after Christianity. In Europe they form the second largest religious group after the Christians and their numbers are only increasing. There are already three Muslim states in Europe, Albania, Kosovo and Bosnia Herzegovina and if we add Turkey, a part of which also extends to Europe it'll be four. As fascinating is the fast growing Muslim population of Western Europe, especially countries like Germany and France.

"*The rise of Islam*" as A.L.M. Stoddard noted "*is perhaps the most amazing event in human history. Springing from a land and a people previously negligible, Islam spread within a century over half the earth, shattering great empires, overthrowing long establisged religions, remoulding the souls of races, and building up a whole new world – the world of Islam. The closer we examine this development, the more extraordinary does it appear. The other great religions won their way slowly, by painful struggle, and finally triumphed with the aid of powerful monarchs converted to the new faith. Christianity had its Constantine, Buddhism its Asoka and Zoroastrianism its Cyrus, each lending to his chosen cult the mighty force of secular authority. Not so Islam. Arising in a desert land sparsely inhabited by a nomad race previously undistinguished in human annals, Islam sallied forth on its great adventure with the slenderest human backing and against the heaviest material odds. Yet Islam triumphed with seemingly miraculous ease, and a couple of generations saw the fiery crescent borne victorious from the Pyrenees to the Himalayas*".

However, the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) also predicted the many great dangers that awaited the Islamic nation. One such was the Mongol invasion in the 13th century when he declared:

The Hour will not come before you fight against a people with red faces, small, slant eyes and flat noses. They wear hairy leather boots
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

This is a fitting description of how the Mongols who wreaked such havoc on the Islamic world eight hundred years ago looked like. They were a wild and ferocious people from Mongolia that overran much of the Middle East and Eastern Europe in the 13th century and there is ample evidence from historical accounts and miniature paintings to show exactly how they looked like - a Mongoloid people with flat noses and slanted eyes, just as the Prophet had predicted centuries earlier.

The Muslims of the day had unfortunately got used to a life of indulgence and decadence and could not stave off the invasion of these barbaric hordes sweeping from the east. These barbarians who brought nothing but terror in their wake overran much of Persia, Arabia and Eastern Europe, killing millions of innocents in the process. One might as well describe the areas they subdued as being nothing but mounds of skulls and rivers of blood. Genghis Khan who spearheaded the Mongol onslaught was followed by Hulagu who sacked Baghdad in 1258 putting an end to the Abbasid Caliphate. In fact it was their constant oppression that spelled the end of the Arabian hold on the Muslim world. The Arab Muslims had fought them – true to the Prophet's prophesy – and lost. The loss was however only temporary, for the Mongols would eventually be won over to Islam and arise as the new champions of the faith. For instance they would go on to conquer India and rule it for nearly four centuries under such great emperors like Babur, Humayun, Jahangir and Aurangzeb. These were the Moghuls who brought India much of its culture and civilization.

If you're wondering what they have go to do with the Mongols, all I can say is everything except their Pagan faith. These Moghuls were nothing but the Islamized descendants of the Mongols of old. In fact, the very name of Moghul is a corruption of the word Mongol. This was perhaps the first time in history that a conquering people had accepted the faith of their conquered subjects.

Yet another danger the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) warned us about was the appearance of venereal diseases whenever promiscuity becomes rife. That was when he addressed his followers warning them that they may be afflicted by certain things, that God forbid they should live to see. He said: "*Sexual immorality never appears among people to such an extent that they commit it openly except that they will be afflicted by plagues and diseases unknown to their forefathers*" (Ibn Majah). So here we have it, a very interesting pronouncement by an unlettered Arab well over a thousand years ago, that sexually transmitted diseases never before seen would emerge when people become promiscuous. How true indeed. We do not know what kind of diseases existed in those days, but we certainly know that during Victorian times there was Syphilis and Gonorrhoea and no sooner they were treated, a new disease emerged as if from nowhere, a disease we call AIDS for which there is still no cure. Even the best scientists cannot tell us how these diseases come into being in the first place, but we know from what our Prophet has taught us, that they emerge when we lose our moral values, when we scorn marriage and the stability it brings the family and opt for free sex with all its attendant evils that threaten the very fabric of society.

The other class of prophecies are those that speak of the Apocalypse, of the Signs that portend the End of Days. They tell us of many things – of an increase in wealth and of earthquakes and of shepherds competing with one another in putting up high rise building; of great wars and the appearance of false prophets; of Jesus' coming and of his fighting the Antichrist and of Muslims joining him and waging war against the Jews. Although much of it is yet to come, there are some that already seem to be taking place already - in this very day and age.

It happened one day that the angel Gabriel came to the prophet in the guise of a man while he was in the company of his companions. He asked the prophet when Judgment day will come. "*Tell me about the Hour*" he asked. The Prophet responded: "*The one questioned about it knows no better than the questioner*" Here the Prophet told the angel that he himself did not know the time of the Last Day. This is very similar to what Jesus taught when he said in the Gospel of Mark: "*But of that day and hour no man knoweth, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only*". He (Angel Gabriel) asked: "*Then tell me about its signs*." The Prophet said: "*That the slave-girl will give birth to her mistress and when the shepherds* of *black camels start boasting and competing with others in the construction of high rise buildings*" .The Archangel then left and the Prophet inquired from his close friend: "*O Umar, do you know who the questioner was?*" He replied: "*God and His messenger know best*". The Prophet said: "*That was Gabriel who came to you to teach you your religion*"(Saheeh Muslim).

So here we are told that one of the signs will be when "*The slave-girl will give birth to her mistress".* This is a rather strange portent and it is difficult to comprehend what it means. Perhaps it may refer to surrogate motherhood where rich couples hire poor women to bear their children because the wife is sterile or thinks it is not worth the trouble to carry a child in her womb for nine months. This is however mere conjecture and we still in no position to say what it actually means. Among the other Sign is: "*When the shepherds of black camels start boasting and*

competing with others in the construction of higher buildings". So here the Prophet is telling us is that one of the Signs of the Last Day is that the shepherds of black camels will not just take part in constructing tall buildings, but will also compete against one another in this matter. What did he mean by *shepherds of black camels* you may ask? The Arabs of the Gulf of course, for who else are shepherds of camels but the Arabs. One may look at it another way and argue that it refers to cars which are run on black gold, in other words petrol. In this case black camels would mean cars and its shepherds the Arabs who drive in it. This is exactly what is taking place in the Gulf countries today with kingdoms and emirates competing with one another in putting up some of the tallest standing skyscrapers on the face of the earth. Take for instance the Burj Arab Tower in the United Arab Emirates which enjoys the enviable reputation of being the tallest structure on earth at 2,087 feet and rising higher year after year.

Many were the other portents of the Hour which the Prophet (peace be upon him) told us about: "The Hour will not be established (1) till two big groups fight each other whereupon there will be a great number of casualties on both sides and they will be following one and the same religious doctrine, (2) till about thirty false prophets appear, and each one of them will claim that he is God's Prophet (3) till the religious knowledge is taken away (by the death of Religious scholars) (4) earthquakes will increase in number (5) time will pass quickly, (6) afflictions will appear, (7) killing will increase, (8) wealth will be in abundance, so abundant that a wealthy person will worry lest nobody should accept his Alms Tax, and whenever he will present it to someone, that person will say, 'I am not in need of it, *(9) till the people compete with one another in constructing high buildings,* (10) till a man when passing by a grave of someone will say, 'Would that I were in his place *(11) and till the sun rises from the West. So when the sun will rise and the people will see it (rising from the West) they will all believe (embrace Islam) but that will be the time when: (As God said) 'No good will it do to a soul to believe then, if it believed not before"* (Saheeh Al-Bukhari).

So here we are told that the Hour will not come unless, firstly, two large groups of people fight each other so that there will be a great number of casualties on both sides. We are told that they will be following the same religion. This may well refer to the First World War or the Second World War which the Christian nations of Europe waged against each other which took with it millions of lives or who knows it may refer to another war to come, a still greater war, a Third World War; Secondly that about thirty false prophets will appear. We have already had many such impostors and charlatans claiming to be prophets in spite of Muhammad's being the Seal of the Prophets. There was the American Joseph Smith, the founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, better known as the Mormons and the Frenchmen Michel Potay who claimed to receive a revelation, The Revelation of Arès, dictated by God in 1977 and who is considered a prophet by his followers, the Pilgrims of Arès; thirdly, that religious knowledge will be taken away, perhaps by the death of pious scholars. We see this to some extent today where even the bastions of traditional Islamic learning have succumbed to the wishes of worldly-minded despots who try to twist the faith to give legitimacy to evil acts such as lending on interest which God has totally prohibited us; fourthly that earthquakes will increase in number.

How true indeed, for today we see earthquakes rattling the planet with increasing ferocity and taking hundreds of thousands of lives, the likes of which we never see in the annals of history. From 1900 to the 1930s there were 50 major quakes, from 1940

to the 1970s 70 such quakes and from the 1980s to 2015 it had risen to a staggering 150 or so. By 2015 the number of earthquakes striking the earth more than doubled from the number in 1980. What all this shows is that the earth is not being too kind to us and is rumbling and grumbling and becoming more unstable, surely another sign of the end times. fifthly that time will pass quickly, which seems to be happening even today due to modern lifestyles where people do not seem to have time even to devote to God or their families; sixthly that afflictions will appear, and there needs no gainsaying that since the days of our Prophet afflictions have emerged that did not exist earlier, in the middle ages, the great bubonic plague known as the 'Black Death' which took millions of lives and in our modern age diseases such as AIDS and SARS which were unknown in earlier times; seventhly that killings will increase, which is what we see today when the one who kills does not know why he killed, and the one killed does not know why he was killed. In the US alone guns kill 30,000 people a year on average with gangsters and street gangs playing a big role in the carnage; eighthly that wealth will increase, which is what we see even today where the world is much better off materially than it ever was; ninthly, that the people will compete with one another in putting up high-rise structures, which is what is happening today with wealthy emirs and tycoons and even the newly rich going all out to put up tall buildings that are beginning to scrape the sky; tenthly when people will start wishing for death as if to escape from the travails of this world. This too is happening to some extent with suicide wishes being openly expressed by many people especially in the west; and finally that the sun should rise in the West, which needless to say has yet to take place. Maybe that's a long way from today but of that Hour only God Knows.

But before that day there will also come a time when there will be a great war between the Muslims and their enemies in the Middle East, especially that area near Jerusalem. The Muslims will wage war against the Antichrist who will be backed by the Jews. Jesus Christ (Peace Be Upon Him) who will descend from the heavens will kill the Antichrist while his followers among the Muslims will wipe out the Jews. Jesus will then usher in a 'Kingdom of God' on earth, a reign of forty years that will bring peace and goodwill to the world. The Jews would have by then be wiped out and the Christians, seeing that Jesus is the promised Messiah would accept the truth of Islam, believing in him only as a Messenger of God and not the Son of God. His death will signal the beginning of the last days.

But Christ will come only after the coming of the Antichrist. We Muslims call him the *Dajjal* or Great Liar. He will claim divinity and lure men into worshipping him before Jesus descends from the heavens. The Prophet said, "*No prophet was sent but that he warned his followers against the one-eyed liar. Beware! He is blind in one eye, and your Lord is not so, and there will be written between his eyes (the word) Kafir (Disbeliever)*. He also described seeing the Anti-Christ in a dream as a "*man with a huge body, of a red complexion and curly-haired and blind in one eye. His eye looked like a floating grape*" (Sahih Al-Bukhari).

He warned us that he will use worldly inducements to mislead us: "*The Anti-Christ would have with him water and fire and his fire would have the effect of cold water and his water would have the effect of fire, so don't put yourself to ruin*". He also warned us of his magical powers: "*He will come to the people and call them to his obedience and they will affirm their faith in him and respond to him. He will then give command to the sky and it will send its rain upon the earth and he will then send his command to the earth and it will grow vegetation. Then in the evening their pasturing animals will come to them with their humps very high and their udders full of milk and their flanks stretched. He will then come to another people and invite*

them, but they will reject him and he will leave them, in barren lands and without any goods and chattels! He would then walk through the waste land and say to it: `Bring forth your treasures', and the treasures will come out and follow him like swarms of bees. He will then call a person brimming with youth and strike him with the sword and cut him into two pieces and make these pieces lie at a distance, which is generally between the archer and his target. He will then call that young man and he will come forward, laughing, with his face gleaming out of joy" (Saheeh Muslim).

The Antichrist will enjoy immense power since he will be supported by the misled peoples of the world and especially the Jews who will be his most ardent supporters. As our Prophet warned "The Anti-Christ would be followed by seventy thousand Jews". That he should be supported by the Jews comes as no surprise as they still continue to reject Jesus as the promised Messiah which both Muslims and Christians believe him to be. Thus the Antichrist will arise as the Messiah of the Jews. This false Messiah will very likely pander to the tribal yearnings of the Jews to be the dominant people on earth, and work towards their cherished goal of subverting man and the rest of nature to Jewish thralldom such as one sees today in the expansionist designs of the Zionist state of Israel.

The descent of Jesus (Peace Be Upon Him) will spell victory for the Muslims and the destruction of their enemies who will be led by the Antichrist. The Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) said of Jesus: "*There is no prophet between me and him, that is, Jesus (Peace Be Upon Him). He will descend (to the earth). When you see him, recognise him: a man of medium height, reddish hair, wearing two light yellow garments, looking as if drops were falling down from his head though it will not be wet. He will fight the people for the cause of Islam. He will break the cross, kill swine, and abolish the Poll Tax on Non-Muslims. God will perish all religions except Islam. He will destroy the Antichrist and will live on the earth for forty years and then he will die. The Muslims will pray over him"* (Aboo Dawood).

So here we find the Prophet describing Jesus as a man with reddish hair. It closely matches a contemporary account of Jesus given by Lentulus who wrote to the Roman Emperor Tiberius: "*A man of stature somewhat tall, and comely, with very reverent countenance, such as the beholders may both love and fear, his hair of (the colour of) the chestnut, full ripe, plain to his ears, whence downwards it is more orient and curling and wavering about his shoulders. In the midst of his head is a seam or partition in his hair, after the manner of the Nazarenes. His forehead plain and very delicate; His face without spot or wrinkle, beautified with a lovely red; His nose and mouth so formed as nothing can be reprehended; His beard thick, in colour like his hair, not very long, but forked; His look innocent and mature; His eyes grey, clear, and quick. In reproving hypocrisy he is terrible; in admonishing, courteous and fair spoken; pleasant in conversation, mixed with gravity. It cannot be remembered that any have seen him laugh, but many have seen him weep. In proportion of body, most excellent; His hands and arms delicate to behold. In speaking, very temperate, modest, and wise. A man, for his singular beauty, surpassing the children of men".*

The Prophet also went on to state that while the Antichrist would be occupied with his nefarious designs "*God will send down the Messiah son of Mary, and he will descend in the eastern part of Damascus, near the white minaret dressed in the two yellow garments, with his hands resting on the arms of two angels. When he will bend down his head, water drops will appear trickling down, and when he will raise it, it will appear as though pearl-like drops are rolling down. Any disbeliever whom the air of his breath reaches-and it will reach up to the last limit of his sight will fall*

dead. Then, the son of Mary will go in pursuit of the Anti-Christ, and will overtake him at the gate of Lud, and will kill him." (Saheeh Muslim).

So here we are told by the Prophet that Jesus will descend in the Eastern part of Damascus near the white minaret of its mosque. As another saying of the Prophet tells us this shall take place at the time of the Subah or the morning prayer: "*Exactly at the time when the Leader of the Muslims will have stepped forward to lead them in the Morning Prayer, Jesus son of Mary (Peace Be Upon Him) shall descend upon them. The Imam will step back so that Jesus may step forward (to lead the Prayer), but Jesus (Peace Be Upon Him) placing his hand between his two shoulders, will say "No, you should lead, for the congregation has assembled to follow you. So, the Imam will lead the Prayer. After the salutation, Jesus will say, "Open the gate;" so the gate will be opened. Outside, there will be the Antichrist, along with 70,000 armed Jews. As soon as the Anti-Christ sees Jesus (Peace Be Upon Him), he will start dissolving like salt in water, and will flee. Jesus will say, "I shall strike you a blow which will not allow you to survive." And he will overtake him at the eastern gate of Lud, and Allah will cause the Jews to be defeated. And the Earth will be so filled with the Muslims as a vessel is filled with water. The entire world shall recite and follow one and the same Word and none shall be worshipped except God*" (Ibn Majah).

The extermination of the unrepentant Jewry will be accomplished both by Jesus and his Muslim followers. God will send Jesus as an instrument of His Vengeance against the Jews who had constantly laid thorns in the way of His Messengers. They had even tried to kill Jesus and indeed had gotten away with the idea that they had. So God will send him before the end of time to prove that they did not kill him and that He had saved him from the fate they had planned for him. But not just that, God will also smite the Jews through Jesus. As a tradition of the Prophet has it: *"Jesus son of Mary shall appear among the Muslims. Then, the people will stand up for the Prayer, and he will be asked, 'Step forward, Oh Spirit of God (and lead us in the Prayer); but he will say, 'No, your own leader should step forward and lead the Prayer.' Then, after offering the Morning Prayer, the Muslims shall go forth to fight the Anti-Christ. 'When the Liar (Anti-Christ) sees Jesus, Peace Be Upon Him, he will start dissolving like salt in water. Then, Jesus will advance towards him and will slay him; and it will so happen that the trees and the stones will cry out: 'Oh Spirit of God, here is a Jew hiding behind me.' None will be left from among the followers of the Dajjal, whom he (Jesus) will not kill."* (Musnad Ahmad). So we find that Jesus, whom the Jews sought to nail on to the cross will himself kill the Jews. Another tradition of the Prophet has it that the Muslims will join him: "*The last hour will not come until the Muslims will fight against the Jews and the Muslims would kill them until the Jews would hide themselves behind a rock or a tree and the rock or tree will say: O Muslim, the servant of God, there is a Jew behind me; come and kill him; but the tree Gharqad (a thorny tree known as Boxthorn) would not say so, because it is the tree of the Jews*" (Saheeh Muslim).

The events so related of the Antichrist and of his Jewish followers seem to take place in the Middle East, in the desert land where the Gharqad tree grows. This terrain we may presume to mean the land of Palestine, present-day Israel or Syria to which the Jews would have advanced in their quest for Eretz Israel or Greater Israel. Although one tradition speaks of Jesus descending to Damascus at the time of the morning prayer, another tradition tells us that the Arabs will be in the *Baytul Maqdis* or 'Holy House', which is generally taken to mean the mosque of Jerusalem, when Jesus descends and is asked to lead the prayer. Thus it may be that Jesus will descend

in Damascus and make a second descent to Jerusalem. So when the prophet said that the Antichrist and the Jews will be found outside the gates, we cannot say exactly whether he was referring to the gates of Damascus or Jerusalem. What we can be sure of is that Jesus would chase them back to a spot called Lud where he will kill the enemy. This Lud we can only surmise is Lod or Lydda, 13 miles away from the capital of present-day Israel Tel Aviv where the most important airport of the Zionist state now stands.

Isn't it remarkable that the Jews' return to 'the promised land' was foretold by our Prophet at a time when they were not dominant, nor even resident there anymore. That was in the seventh century when Christians were ruling Jerusalem and all that land we today call Palestine. Not a single Jew was to be found here, for the simple reason that they had been driven out when the Romans sacked Jerusalem in 70 AC. The event marked the great Jewish Exodus to the rest of the world, finding their way to Europe, Africa and even India where they lived in a city called Cochin. But none were to be found in Palestine. It was only with the Zionist movement begun by Theodor Herzl in the late 1800s that the Jews settled elsewhere began to trickle down to Palestine, a land their ancestors had not seen for nearly 2000 years. So just as the Prophet prophesied that the Jews would return to Palestine, his prophesy that they will be wiped out at the hands of the Muslims should also be fulfilled at some time in future.

Once the Jews who are the enemies of the rest of mankind and of nature - remember even the trees would betray them to the Muslims – would have been done away with, the greatest impediment to people embracing the true faith of Islam would have been removed and they would flock to embrace Islam in great numbers. The Christians having witnessed Jesus breaking the cross will no longer come to look at it as a sacred symbol worthy of worship and will merge into the community of Islam like the rest of humanity.

However before the peace could settle, the hordes of Gog and Magog will be let loose. These are some barbaric tribes known in Arabic as Ya'jooj and Ma'jooj and are described in the Qur'an in the story of Zul Qarnayn 'the two-horned one', a great ruler or prophet known for his conquests, though who he exactly was has been lost in the mists of time. Some say he was Alexander the Great and others have different views.

The story goes that the great conqueror came across a people who beseeched him to protect them from these oppressive people:

They said: "O Zul-qarnain. The Gog and Magog do great mischief on earth: Shall we then render thee tribute in order that thou mightest erect a barrier between us and them? He said: "(The power) in which my Lord has established me is better (than tribute): Help me therefore with strength: I will. erect a strong barrier between you and them: "Bring me blocks of iron." At length, when he had filled up the space between the two steep mountain-sides, he said, "Blow (with your bellows)" Then, when he had made it (red) as fire, he said: "Bring me, that I may pour over it, molten lead." Thus were they made powerless to scale it or to dig through it. He said: "This is a mercy from my Lord: But when the promise of my Lord comes to pass He will make it into dust; and the promise of my Lord is true." On that day We shall leave them to surge like waves on one another: The trumpet will be blown and We shall collect them all together. And We shall present Hell that day for Unbelievers to see, all spread out,-(Unbelievers) whose eyes had been under a veil from remembrance of Me, and who had been unable even to hear? (The Cave:94- 101).

The Holy Book also says of this people: "*Until the Gog and Magog are let through (their barrier), And they swiftly swarm From every hill. Then will the True Promise Draw nigh: Then behold! the eyes Of the Unbelievers will Fixedly stare in horror: 'Ah! Woe to us! we were indeed Heedless of this; nay; we truly did wrong!*" *(The Prophets:96-97).*

This is the same Gog whom God addresses in the Bible: "*After many days you will be mustered against a nation which has survived the sword, which has been assembled from many peoples, which has been brought forth from among the peoples and all of whom now dwell in security. You shall come up like a sudden storm, advancing like a cloud to cover the earth, you and your troops*" (Ezekiel 38:8-9). Although the Jews might conclude that Gog rises up against Israel, it is evident from the Bible itself that they would rise against a nation "which has been assembled from many peoples" which cannot refer to the Jews, who are a racial group, but rather the Muslims who are in fact "*assembled from many peoples*".

Thus both Islamic and Judeo-Christian scripture is very explicit about the coming cataclysm, of Gog and Magog surging like waves and attacking the Believers from every hill, meaning from everywhere on earth. When they will be let loose as a beast of prey would when set free from its cage, they would swoop down bringing death and destruction wherever they go like the Mongols did in the times of yore.

The Prophet has told us that once the war with the Jews has been won, the Muslims will have to contend with the Gog and Magog, but here too Jesus will come to their assistance and beseech the Almighty to deliver them from the scourge. God will reveal to Jesus: "*'I have brought forth from among My servants such people against whom none will be able to fight; Take these people safely to the Tur mountain*".

Then, God will send Gog and Magog and they will swarm down from every slope. The first of them will pass the lake of Tiberias (Sea of Galilee) and drink out of it. And when the last of them passes, he will say: *'There was once water here'*. When they reach the Mount of Khamr in Jerusalem, they will arrogantly proclaim: "*We have conquered the people of the earth, now we will annihilate those in the sky*" So saying they will fire their arrows towards the sky. When the arrows return to the ground they will be blood stained. Jesus and his companions will then be besieged here to the extent that an ox will be more valuable to them than one hundred Dinars.

Jesus, and his companions will pray to God, who will send to them (Gog and Magog) insects (which will attack their necks) and in the morning, they would perish as one single person. Jesus, and his companions will then come down (from the Tur mountain) and they will not find as much space as a single span that is not filled with decomposed remains of Gog and Magog's corpses. Jesus, and his companions will then supplicate to God who will send birds whose necks would be like those (the necks) of Bactrian camels and they will carry them (Gog and Magog) away and throw them where God wills. Then God will send a rain which no house of mud-bricks or (tent of) camel-hair will keep out and it will wash the Earth until it resembles a mirror. Then, the Earth will be ordered to bring forth its fruit and restore its blessing and, as a result thereof, pomegranate will grow that will be enough for a group of people to eat and seek shelter under its skin. A dairy cow will give so much milk that (will be enough for) a group of people to drink. The milking camel will give so such milk that a whole tribe will be able to drink from it.

Jesus' reign will be one of peace, for our Prophet said of those blessed days to come: *"Peace will prevail and people will use their swords as sickles. Every harmful beast will be made harmless, the sky will send down rain in abundance, and the earth will bring forth its blessings. A child will play with a fox and not come to*

any harm; a wolf will graze with sheep and a lion with cattle, without harming them. The Earth will be filled with peace as a container is filled with water. People will be in complete agreement, and only God will be worshipped" (Ahmad, Aboo Dawood & Ibn Majah).

It is little doubt of this same era of peace and justice under Jesus that God spoke of through his prophet Isaiah: "*As the years of a tree, so the years of my people, any my chosen one shall long enjoy the produce of their hand. They shall not toil in vain nor beget children for sudden destruction, for a race blessed by God are they and their offspring. Before they call I will answer; while they are yet speaking, I will hearken to them. The wolf and the lamb shall graze alike and the lion shall eat hay like the ox*" (Isaiah 65:24-25).

Jesus, having accomplished his task, the task he could not complete in his first mission on earth due to the evil schemes of the Jews to whom he was sent, would live in this world for 40 years before he passes away into the Mercy of the Almighty. Remember we Muslims hold that Jesus did not die on the cross, but was taken up to God. So there will have to come a time when he will have to depart from this worldly life in keeping with the Words of God: "*Every soul shall taste of death*".
And so shall Jesus die a natural death on earth. The Prophet told us: "*He will stay in the World for forty years. Then, he will die and the Muslims will perform the funeral prayer for him*"(Aboo Dawood & Musnad).

Before long, God will take the lives of all good Muslims, so that only the wicked among them shall remain to face the approach of the Last Hour. As the Prophet said: "*Then, God will send a cool wind from the direction of Greater Syria, which will take the soul of everyone who has the slightest speck of good or faith in his heart. Even if one of you were to enter the heart of a mountain, the wind would reach him there and take his soul. Only the most wicked people will be left; they will be as careless as birds, with the characteristics of beasts, and will have no concern for right and wrong. Then, Satan will come to them in human form and say: 'Don't you respond?' And they will say: 'What do you order us to do?' And he (Satan) will order them to worship the idols but, in spite of this, they will have abundance of sustenance and lead comfortable lives. Then, the trumpet will be blown and no one will hear that but he will bend his neck and raise it.* The Prophet continued: "*The first one to hear that trumpet will be the person who will be busy repairing the water reservoir for his camels (to drink). He will be struck and the other people will also struck, then God will send down rain which will be like men's semen, out of which the bodies of the (dead) people will grow. Then the trumpet will be blown another time and they (dead people) will be resurrected and be looking around*" (Saheeh Muslim).

The Resurrection will not come before three signs which will leave no doubt as to the Resurrection and the end of Creation as we know it. When these signs come, there will be no question of repentance to God. Why, because the nature of these signs are such that none could doubt the Ultimate Reality behind it all when it happens. When one sees a sign of this nature unfolding before one's eyes, the reality becomes manifest to him or her, so that there is no longer a test of faith. That is when the veil of belief is cast aside and our faith in the Unseen, our faith in God and his angels and the afterlife becomes obvious, when we realize that the the things we have seen in this worldly life are ephemeral and those we had'nt seen are eternal.

The Signs are Three. The Rising of the Sun from the West, The Beast of the earth and the Great Fire that will gather the people. The Prophet said: "*The hour will not be established till the sun rises from the West; and when it rises (from the West) and the people see it, they all will believe. And that is (the time) when no good will it do*

to a soul to believe then." Then he recited from the Qur'an: : "*Do they then wait for anything other than that the angels should come to them, or that your Lord should come, or that some Signs of your Lord should come! The day that some of the Signs of your Lord do come, no good will it do to a person to believe then, if he believed not before, nor earned good through his Faith. Say (to the disbelievers), 'Wait you! We (too) are waiting*'.

The Second Sign would be the appearance of the Beast:

And when the Word is fulfilled against them, We shall bring out from the earth a beast to them, which will speak to them because mankind believed not with certainty in Our Signs (The Ant:82)

And the Third would be the Fire that Will Gather the People. This fire, the Prophet said:

Would burn forth from the Yemen, and would drive people
to the place of their assembly
(Saheeh Muslim)

The great fire will be terrible, striking fear into the hearts of the last humans on earth and driving hordes of humanity to their gathering place. They will soon be joined by the rest of a now resurrected humanity to face Divine Justice. When these Signs appear it will follow one another in rapid succession, for the Prophet said:

The signs are like beads strung on a string. If the string breaks,
they (quickly) follow one after the other
(Musnad, Ahmad)

Then will come the day God describes:

When the earth will be changed to a different earth and so will be the heavens also and (men) will be marshaled forth before God, the One, the irresistible
(Abraham::48)

15th Night

Johnny: Salams Sheikh. Thanks for last night's talk about your Prophet's predictions. It seems there is much more to come. Now to my next question

Why didn't your Prophet perform miracles to prove his mission the way Jesus did?

The Janissary: We Muslims accept just as much as you do that Jesus, the Peace of God be upon him, performed miracles such as healing the sick, giving sight to the blind and life to the dead. All this he was able to accomplish by the leave of God as our Holy Book says. Jesus was a very special messenger of God in this sense, which may be one reason why men came to hold him in such high awe, the ignorant among them believing that he had something divine about him. To work miracles, after all, is not something that an ordinary mortal can do.

But remember Jesus was not the only miracle worker. According to the Bible there were other prophets who also performed miracles. True, Jesus healed the lepers and cured the blind and raised the dead, but so did Elisha when he healed Naaman the Leper (Kings 5:7-14), restored vision to the blind through prayer (Kings 6:17-20) and raised two children from the dead (Kings 17:22 & Kings 4:34).

In contrast, Prophet Muhammad was not a great miracle worker like Jesus. He could have worked miracles if God had willed him to and there were occasions he indeed did, but this was not the way to convince men that God had chosen him. This is why he strived as much as possible to live an ordinary human life. He was to be an exemplar for humanity and had to live his life accordingly, in a manner people could learn from his example given the limited powers they enjoy.

The truth is that the miracles performed by Jesus are little compared to the Signs of God that exist everywhere in the universe, which is why the Qur'an draws man's attention to these Signs which are all around us. They are there for all to see in every age from the dawn of time to this day, unlike the miracles of that great prophet, which were witnessed by only the men of that time. Ask yourself – isn't the creation of man a miracle, or of the universe for that matter? Yes, everything around us is a miracle – the song of a bird, the light of a star, the birth of a child, the Signs of God through which He speaks to us. The fact is that the whole living world is a miracle and we see it not, the workings of the Divine Hand in all those things around us. As God says in the Qur'an:

> *The creation of the heavens and the earth is definitely a greater thing than the creation of mankind, however, most of mankind knows not*
> *(Forgiver:57)*

However Muhammad's mission as a Prophet was not to be confined to a particular age. It was to be universal, embracing all peoples till the end of times. This is why we find Muhammad in a variety of roles; as a loving husband and a gentle father; as a simple soul who would not hesitate to help even a demented woman who dare order him about and as a humble human who could not be made out from his companions when a visitor from afar wished to see him, and that too at the height of his power; at the same time, he could be firm, meting out punishment as a Judge would, leading his men to battle as a General would and ruling his nation of believers as a King would. Such was Muhammad, the last of the Messengers, an example to both prince and pauper!

This is not to say that our Prophet did not perform miracles, he did, but these are not well known nor widely publicized. Why, because the Prophet's purpose is not to work miracles. It is to convey God's Message. Even miracles are of no use to the hard-hearted. You only have to look at how the Jews treated Jesus despite his many miracles. Remember it was Jesus who said:

This generation is an evil generation; it seeks a sign, but no sign will be given it, except the sign of Jonah. Just as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so will the Son of Man be to this generation. At the judgement, the queen of the south will rise with the men of this generation and she will condemn them, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and there is something greater than Solomon here. At the Judgement, the men of Nineveh will arise with this generation and condemn it, because at the preaching of Jonah they repented, and there is something greater than Jonah here
(Luke 11:29-32)

This is why in the Qur'an, we read of God addressing His prophet, inquiring what good would a miracle do to sway the hearts of those who spurned him even if "*you were able to seek a tunnel in the ground or a ladder to the skies and bring them a Sign*" (The Cattle: 35). The misguided would still persist in their unbelief:

If you could but see when they are made to stand before the Fire and will say, "Oh, would that we could be returned (to life on earth) and not deny the signs of our Lord and be among the believers.".

But nay, God assures us:

Even if they were returned, they would return to that which they were forbidden; and indeed, they are liars
(The Cattle:27-28)

This is why we do not dwell so much on the miracles of our Prophet. Rather, we believe the Qur'an to be the greatest miracle he brought us. As our Prophet observed:

The miracles of the prophets (before me) were confined to their times. The miracle I have been given is the Qur'an, which is everlasting
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

Yes, the Qur'an is a living miracle unlike the ephemeral miracles Jesus performed, a miracle that can be witnessed by all people till the end of time. It holds its own in every age and every place, capturing the minds of men and revealing things science is only now beginning to unravel. It appeals to one like no other scripture. Whether you be a scientist or salesman, it has that unique ability to appeal to every level of intellect. It has to, because as we Muslims hold, it is the Word of God. It has a unique, inimitable style of its own, so profound and yet so sublime, bearing as it were '*the Signature of God'*. God Himself challenges men to compose its like:

If mankind and the jinn joined together to produce the like of the Qur'an, they could not produce its like, even if they helped one another
(The Night Journey:88)

Why, because He knows they cannot. The Qur'an can never be replicated; never has and never will be. God further promises us that not a jot of it shall be changed.

It is indeed a Glorious Book. No falsehood can come from before or behind it. It is sent down by One full of wisdom, worthy of all praise
(Expounded:42)

Yes, because it is the final testament, the last episode of the religious knowledge divulged by God to man and so it will remain till the end of days. It is 'The Mother of the Book', the very essence of revelation; the fountainhead of God's eternal and universal law whence all streams of knowledge flow through time and space to nourish our minds, purify our hearts and cleanse our souls.

It all happened when a forty year old Muhammad, retreated for his meditations in the cave of Hira. The archangel Gabriel descended and asked him to *Read!*. Bewildered he replied, "*I do not know how to read*." The angel again asked him to read and he replied, *"I do not know how to read*" When the Angel repeated it for the third time, Muhammad realized that all he had to do was to repeat the words taught to him by Gabriel, a revelation from the Lord of the Worlds.

Read! In the Name of Your Lord, Who created
Created man from a clot. Read! And your Lord is the Most Generous,
Who taught by the pen - Taught man that which he knew not

Unlike other scriptures the Qur'an is addressed to the whole of mankind and as such has universal appeal. It is the means by which God speaks to us, a letter addressed to man by God Himself as it were, for all time the earth and heavens last. God declares of it:

Verily this is a revelation from the Lord of the Worlds which the trustworthy spirit (Gabriel) has brought down upon your heart (O Muhammad)
(The Poets:192-196)

The Quran's universality is in fact testament to its Divine origin. Even a cursory glance of the Qur'an shows that it is in no way a *Book of the Desert* had it been the work of an Arabian who lived in a desert setting. Nay, not at all. The Qur'an speaks of so many things that transcend the bounds of the desert and its denizens. It speaks of seas and rains and hail and all manner of things that can appeal to people of every age and place. Had it been the work of our Arabian Prophet, it would give us some insights into the workings of his mind, like the trials and tribulations he underwent, his feelings for his loved ones, his fears and such things subjective to his life's experience, but we find none of it.

The power and beauty of its language is haunting and addictive, especially when read in its original Arabic which no translation can really capture, and lingers on in one's mind well after it has been heard. Its charming rhyme-rhythm captivates one like no other scripture so that even read in a serious tone. It is ordered sound, flowing smoothly like water and sweet as a song, easy on the tongue and pleasing to the ear, revealing a God who is Beautiful and loves beauty, who even beautified His Word, the Qur'an, with rhyme and rhythm so captivating to His Devotees.

The Qur'an is both verse and prose in one, impressing on man the need to be godly and keep away from evil, to prophesy and reveal amazing scientific facts that are only now being properly understood. And to think of it, all of it should come from a man who could neither read nor write, for Muhammad to whom it was revealed was an unlettered man without any scientific knowledge or poetic gifts. No literary masterpiece such as it had been produced before or since. To this day, it is the Arabic of the Qur'an that serves as the standard of the Arabic language throughout the Arab world uniting both Muslim and Christian Arab in speech.

True, the widely scattered people in the Arab world, do speak dialects of Arabic, but the standard used in formal speech and mass media and academia is the same, originating from the Arabic of the Qur'an spoken 1400 years ago, making it still very much a living language. Language evolves with time. For instance, the English spoken when Beowulf was written is vastly different from the English of Shakespeare or of today. Take the Lord's Prayer from a Bible in English written a thousand years ago where we find the expression '*Faeder ure on heofonum'*. In today's Bible it is '*Our father in heaven*'. Arabic, on the other hand, is the same today as it was over a thousand years ago, thanks to the Qur'an.

If you take the words of the Qur'an and compare it with the sayings of the Prophet, you will find that they are different in both language and style, so much so that they could easily be told apart. In fact the companions of the Prophet would immediately know the difference between a revelation and his own speech from its manner and style, not to mention the unusual spiritual state he went through in those moments such as perspiring very heavily even on a very cold day, so that his companions would not fail to notice the sweat that dropped from his forehead no sooner the inspiration was over. Gabriel, it is said, would come in the form of a man to the Prophet so that he could grasp what he said, though his companions could not see the angel in their midst.

The Prophet's wife Ayisha tells us that when he was asked "*O God's Messenger, How is the Divine Inspiration revealed to you?*" he replied, "*Sometimes it is (revealed) like the ringing of a bell, this form of Inspiration is the hardest of all and then this state passes ' off after I have grasped what is inspired. Sometimes the Angel comes in the form of a man and talks to me and I grasp whatever he says*." Ayisha adds: "*Verily I saw the Prophet being inspired Divinely on a very cold day and noticed the Sweat dropping from his forehead (as the Inspiration was over)*"(Saheeh Al Bukhari).

The verses of the Qur'an are profoundly moving, especially when recited in its original Arabic. So much so that listeners feel enveloped and overwhelmed by the Divine Word in their very midst, like manna falling from heaven to enrich their souls. When the renowned Arab poet Labeed accepted Islam, he gave up writing poetry. When asked why he did so, he replied; "*What? After the Quran?*" . Other poets could no longer stomach posting their poems on the wall of the Kaaba as they did in Pre-Islamic days, especially after the daughter of the most illustrious Arab poet of the time, Imrul Qays, cried out after listening to a verse from the Qur'an: "*This cannot be the word of a human being! If there is such a word in the world, my father's poems must be taken down from the walls of the Ka'aba. Go and pull them down, and in their place post these verses!*".So profound were its verses that many embraced Islam just hearing it, as they felt it was only divine inspiration that could account for it. Others were left confused, as they did not know what to make of it.

After all, was it not a single verse from the Qur'an that changed the heart of Umar, who would later become one of the prophet's closest companions and the second

Caliph of Islam. It happened one day that Umar, thinking it was high time to do away with Muhammad once and for all, rushed through the streets of Mecca sword in hand to a little house at the foot of Mount Safa. On his way there a secret Muslim of his clan accosted him and told him why not go look at his own house. He rushed home and faintly heard the words of the scripture coming out of his window. "*What was that balderdash?*" he cried as he burst into the house and beat up his sister who had secretly embraced Islam and who in his absence had invited Khabbab the blacksmith to recite to her and her husband the most recent chapter of the holy scripture. He beat her up so ferociously that she bled, but now his glance fell on the manuscript poor Khabbab had dropped in his haste to flee his wrath. He picked it up and began to read the opening verses of Surah TaHa. "*How fine and noble a speech is this?*" he said in amazement and running through Mecca burst into the house where Muhammad was. The Prophet seized him by his cloak: "*What has brought you, son of Khattab?*" he asked, and Umar replied: "*O Messenger of God, I have come to you to believe in God and His Messenger*". Such was the power of the Qur'an.

In fact the Qur'an is so structured that its verses leave an impression in one's mind like no other book, stirring the soul with its hypnotic effect, and lingering and embedding itself into one's innermost conscience, allowing it to be memorized so very easily. There are millions of people today who have memorized the entire Qur'an who can recite its over 6000 verses by heart word for word from beginning to end. This includes little children as young as seven.

Suppose a dictator were to assume control of the world, God Forbid, and order that all Qurans be destroyed, it could still be reconstructed from the minds of men who serve as the earthly protectors of the Holy Book , which is why they are called *Haafiz* 'Protector'. Could the same be said of a single Christian?. Nay, there is none who has by-hearted the entire Gospel, the words taught by Jesus, which is far smaller than the Qur'an, nay, not even the Pope himself! Take the following verses in its original Arabic, where God speaks to man intimately in the singular first person or more profoundly in the Royal plural or more distantly as the God on High, each usage fitting its context:

Fala Uqsimu Bil Khunnasi
L' Jawaaril Kunnasi
Wal Layla Iza As'asa
Was Subhi Iza Tanaffasa

(Verily I call to witness the heavenly bodies that recede
Go straight or hide, and the Night as it dissipates
And the Dawn as it breathes away the Darkness)
(The Folding Up:15-18)

Another beautiful nature passage runs:

Alam Naj'alil Arla Mihaadan
Wal Jibaala Awtaadan
Wa Khalaqnaakum Azwaajan
Wa Ja Alna Nawmakum Subaatan
Wa Ja Alna Layla Libaasan
Wa Ja Alna Nahara Ma'aashan

(Have We not made the earth as a wide expanse
And the mountains as pegs
And created you in pairs
And made your sleep for rest
And made the night as a covering
And the day as a means of subsistence?
(The Great News: 6-11)

Then take the description of the creation of man and of the jinn race before that:

Khalaqnaal insaana min salsaalin
min hamaain masnoonin
Wal ja'anna khalaqnaahu
min qablu min naarissamoom

(We Created man from sounding clay, from mud moulded into shape;
And the Jinn race We Created before from the fire of a scorching wind)
(The Rocky Tract:26-27)

Or of the angels:

Jaa ilil mallaikati rusulan
Ooli ajnihatin
Mathna wa thulatha wa ruba
Yazidu fil khalqi maa yashaa

(Who made the angels
Messengers with wings
Two or three or four
He adds to creation as He pleases)
(The Originator of Creation: 1)

Or of the manifold blessings we enjoy:

Alam naj'allahu aynayn
Wa lisanan wa shafatayn
Wahadaynahun najdayn

(Have we not made for him a pair of eyes?
And a tongue and a pair of lips?
And shown him the two highways)
(The City:8-10)

This is why translators of the Qur'an have confessed they can never do any real justice in translating the scripture, like John Naish who had this to say:

The Qur'an in its original Arabic dress has a seductive beauty and charm of its own, couched in concise and exalted style, its brief pregnant sentences, often rhymed, possess an expressive force and explosive energy which it is extremely difficult to convey by literal word for word translation

But one does not really need the Arabic to get an idea of the beauty or profundity of the Qur'an. Any language will do. Even the shortest of verses are full of wisdom and convey so much with so few words. Take for instance the passage where God tells Moses how he saved him by inspiring his mother to place him in a chest and send him down the river Nile, assuring him of His protection from the very cradle:

"*I cast (the garment of) love over you from Me,*
in order that you may be reared under Mine Eye"
(TaHa:39)

Or what it has to say after relating the story of David's slaying of Goliath, a political reality we see to this day with one superpower being kept at bay by another, reflecting the balance of the world as it were, just as amoeba control bacteria, disease has its medicine and poison its antidote:

Had not God checked one set of people by means of another,
the earth would indeed be full of mischief . But God is full of bounty to all the worlds
(The Heifer:251)

Or when it describes the fragile form of falsehood which is ever so fickle and faulty, ready to fragment and flee at the slightest touch of truth:

And say: "Truth has (now) arrived, and Falsehood perished: for Falsehood
is (by its nature) bound to perish."
(The Night Journey:81)

Or when it compares Time with Space so that we imagine Night and Day to be places in the Domain of God, bringing to mind something like a chessboard of Black and White:

To Him belongs all that dwell in the Night and the Day,
for He is the One who Hears and Knows all things
(The Cattle:13)

Or when it speaks of fiery hell in so terse a manner that we are jolted into deep reflection:

One Day We will ask Hell: "Are you filled to the full?"
and it will say: "Are there any more?"
(Qaf:30)

Or when it challenges those who question the resurrection, so that we do not doubt the prospect at all, given that the resurrected part we are told about differs from person to person:

Does man think that we cannot assemble his bones?
Nay, We are able to put together in perfect order the very tips of his fingers
(The Resurrection: 3-4)

Indeed it even shows the influence of a mathematical genius that had a scientific knowledge available only in our modern age many many centuries ago. Although the

Qur'an is not so much a book of science as a book of signs, there is nevertheless much science it contains all tallying with the latest findings and some of it is embedded in coded language, in the same manner it mentions both Adam and Jesus by name 25 times because both were created in a similar manner from the breath of God.

For example take the word for sea *bahr* and the word for land *bar* occurring in the Qur'an. The word for sea is used 32 times and the word for land 13 times. Summing up these two numbers we get the number 45 and hence the percentage ratio of these two words which corresponds exactly to the ratio of the land and the sea on this earthly abode of ours. The word for sea in the total number of words (sea and land) gives a ratio of 71 %, which represents the surface area of seawater compared to the land on the Earth. Likewise the word land in the total number of words (sea and land) gives a ratio of 28 %, which represents the percentage surface of the land in the surface of our planet. We find such coded language in other passages of the Qur'an as well, such as for instance the word for day *yawm* which occurs 365 times, which is exactly the number of days in a year, the time the earth takes to complete a cycle around the sun. Now you may wonder how such scientific knowledge came to be coded in the Holy Book. The answer my friend is simple - Divine inspiration!

The Qur'an is accurate to the minutest detail. This goes well with its statement:

Do they not then consider the Qur'an with care ? Had it been from other than God, they would surely have found therein much discrepancy
(The Women:82)

In the Chapter of the Cave, the Qur'an talks of the Seven Sleepers (believed to be pious Christian youth fleeing Roman persecution) and states that they spent 300 years in the cave plus an additional nine years: "*So they stayed in their Cave Three hundred years and add nine*" (The Cave:25). One might wonder why this verse did not simply state the total number of years as 309. Today we know what the Qur'an was referring to was the difference between the Solar year of the Romans and the Lunar year of the Arabs. The lunar calendar of the Arabs is 11 days shorter than the solar calendar, and in 300 years, the difference between the solar and lunar years would be exactly nine years, so that 300 years in the solar calendar would amount to 309 years in the lunar calendar.

We also read in the Bible, in Genesis, that creation took place in six days, implying that a day here is the manner in which we commonly understand it, a 24-hour period as it refers to the evenings and mornings of these days. In the Qur'an too we find: *Your Guardian-Lord is God, Who created the heavens and the earth in six days* (The Heights:54). However, the word used to denote this period of creation is *ayyam*, the singular form of which *yawm* may denote a much longer period of time than a day as we know it as in the Qur'anic verse: *He regulates all affairs from the heavens to the earth. In the end will (all affairs) ascend to Him in a day, the measure of which is a thousand years according to your reckoning* (The Prostration:5). Another verse has it: *To Him ascend the angels and the Spirit in a day the measure of which is fifty thousand years*". (The Ways of Ascent:4). These verses clearly suggest that these 'days' are not to be understood in the literal earthly sense we commonly understand them but rather as aeons.

All this makes perfect sense. Before the creation of the universe and the world there was no notion of "day" as a period of 24 hours. Therefore, the six *yawms* must

be understood as six "periods" which is in perfect agreement with modern scientific data which indicate that the universe and our earth passed through several stages, from a nebulous gaseous state to colossal galaxies, with the earth too undergoing various stages of formation before reaching its present state with plant and animal life. It's ridiculous to say the least that God created day and night before He created the sun as we read in Genesis.

Another indication of the accuracy of the Qur'an is seen in the story of the creation of man.

It is He Who has created man from water (The Criterion:54) *Man did We Create from a quintessence (of clay)* (The Believers:12) *We created man from sounding clay, from mud moulded into shape* (The Rocky Tract:26). The Qur'an offers greater clues as to the origin of man than for example the Bible where it is stated: "*Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being*" (Genesis 2:7).

While we are told in the Qur'an that man was created from water, we are also told that clay went into his making. Strangely enough do you know the first two things that scientists look for when searching for evidence of life or past life on another planet. It is the presence of water and the presence of clay-like minerals called phyllosilicates. Recent research has shown that wet clay could have well served as the basis for the complex biochemicals that make life possible. A substance called clay hydrogel formed of clay and ocean water has been shown to absorb liquids like a sponge and act as the perfect place for chemicals to react with one another to form proteins, DNA and eventually living cells. The clay was found to provide the protective encasing needed for the biochemical concoctions that could have led to early life.

Another interesting fact related to the creation story given in the Qur'an is that the first humans lived in a higher state of bliss, in a paradise called *Jannatul Adn* - the Garden of Eden, and that their banishment to the earth as punishment involved a descent from this higher state to a lower earthly life to live and die and propagate their kind. It differs from the Biblical story that places Eden somewhere in Mesopotamia, near the head of the Persian Gulf where the Tigris and Euphrates join with two other streams, the Pishon and Gihon to form a single river (Genesis 2:8-14).

Such bliss, the Qur'an tells us ended when our first parents tasted of the forbidden tree and God banished them saying: "*Get you down, with enmity between yourselves. On earth will be your dwelling place and your means of livelihood – for a time. Therein shall you live, and therein shall you die; but from it shall you be taken out (at last)*" (The Heights:22-25).

This would suggest that although man was created from clay, he was not a terrestrial creature as such like the rest of creation and that earth was his later adopted home. This may explain why we find modern man, *Homo Sapiens*, suddenly emerging on earth without any antecedents. He soon subjugates the rest of nature and spreads his kind over the globe. His arrival on earth could not be very old, for even the parent forms of the languages he speaks today go back to about 5000 BC, no more. For instance, the Indo-European languages including tongues as diverse as English, Greek, Latin Persian, Hindi and Sinhala, all go back to a parent form known as Proto-Indo-European spoken in Southern Russia about 6000 years ago. The same holds true of the Semitic speeches like Arabic and Hebrew, whose parent, Proto-Semitic goes back to about the same time.

This suggests that humanity on earth could not have been here for more than 10,000 -15,000 years ago. Interestingly in both these speech families, the Semitic and

Indo-European, the word for man or the first man derives from a root meaning ‘clay’ or ‘earth’. Thus in Semitic Adam originally meant ‘earthly being’ while in Proto-Indo-European *ghumon*, which gave rise to the Latin *homo*, also meant the same thing, from the root *ghom* meaning ‘earth’ or ‘soil’ or ‘clay’. That’s not all even primitive tribes believed so. The Dogon of Mali say the Supreme Being Amma created people out of clay. The Ewe of Togo say God fashioned people out of clay and mud and the Efe of Zaire say God formed the first man out of loam which he kneaded into shape, covered it in skin and filled it with blood. In India the Birhor tribe had an old legend that the Creator God Singbonga created humans out of mud. All this accords with the story that man was created of clay or mud or loam.

More interesting is the fact that the very physiology of man suggests that he emerged from another realm, perhaps one with a lower gravity which may explain why he suffers from ailments like back pains in this earthly existence of his. Although humans are supposed to be the most highly developed species on the planet, they have been found to be remarkably unsuited and ill-equipped for the earth's environment when compared to other terrestrial creatures. Gravity takes its toll on man more than any other creature, weighing him down as it were, and as he gets older burdening him with back pain and sagging face. If indeed as scientists say man evolved on this planet, how is it that they have such ridiculously high rates of disease or women have such trouble giving birth. The birth pains they experience no other creature on earth goes through. Science certainly cannot explain this phenomenon and one might as well look to the Bible where we read God telling Eve:

In pain shalt thou bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband,
and he shall rule over thee
(Genesis 3:16)

All this suggests that humans did not evolve on earth, but were abruptly placed here by a higher force, confirming the Qur’anic account of their descent to earth.

The Qur’an also affirms the idea of a common origin for mankind:

O Mankind! Reverence your Lord, Who created you from a single person (Adam),
created of like nature his mate (Eve), and from them twain scattered
countless men and women
(The Women:1)

Although in this day and age we know that all humans are descended from a common stock as they all can mate and interbreed successfully, this was not acknowledged as such in ancient times. Indeed even as late as the nineteenth century there were racist European scholars who contended that Negroes would have evolved from a different stock than the white European. Today, however scientists tell us that all humans, be they from Africa, Asia or Europe, indeed derive from a common ancestor or rather ancestress. This is because all the genetic evidence points to the fact that Mitochondrial DNA passed down the centuries from mother to daughter (men are carriers, but don’t pass it on) ultimately has its origins in a single woman whom they called the “mitochondrial Eve. All humans carry the same mtDNA as they are all copies of the same original that belonged to that single woman.

Likewise, all men in the world today carry the same Y-Chromosome inherited from the same single source, from an individual male ancestor. Every Y- Chromosome

existing today is a copy of that same original. How is it that one man bequeathed his Y chromosome to all mankind and one woman her mitochondria to all womankind unless we suppose that they were indeed Adam and Eve?

Also take the story of the great flood of Noah's time. In Genesis we read that in the Great Flood "*All creatures that stirred on earth perished. Birds, cattle, wild animals, and all that swarmed on the earth, as well as all mankind. Everything on dry land with the faintest breath of life in its nostrils died out and Noah only remained, and those that were with him in the ark*" (Genesis 7: 22-23). Likewise in the Qur'an we read that once Noah had constructed the ark *Behold! There came Our Command, and the fountains of the earth gushed forth! We said: Embark therein, of each kind two, male and female, and your family* (Hood:40). Then the word went forth "*O Earth! Swallow up your water, and O Sky! Withhold (your rain)!* The water abated and ark rested on Mount Joodi (Hood:44).

Archaeological evidence suggests that throughout the millennia down to the present day there have always existed flourishing civilizations in several parts of the globe from Egypt to India and that they never suffered a break in the period described in the Bible as to wipe out all humanity save those with Noah in the ark. A global flood would have left ruins all over the world at that particular period in time, but there are none.

However the archaeological evidence tallies well with the statement of the Qur'an that suggests that it were only the people of Noah who were destroyed in the Great Flood. *And the nation of Noah, when they denied the Messengers We drowned them, and We made them as a sign for mankind* (The Criterion:37) showing again that the Qur'an is more a credible source than the Bible. In contrast to the Bible, the narration contained in the Qur'an deals with a cataclysm that is limited to Noah's people. Noah's flood was no global event, but likely emerged from the region of Mesopotamia, the land between the Tigris and Euphrates. It would have arisen when a rain storm spoken of in the scripture raised the water level of the rivers to such an extent that two rivers combined to form a massive flood, breaking its banks and devastating everything in its path. The legend of a global cataclysm would have arisen from the survivors who had made it to a boat or similar vessel who would have seen nothing but water up to the horizon due to the curvature of the Earth, making it look like the entire world had been submerged by the waters.

There are other apparent shortcomings in the Bible where the Qur'anic narrations reveal a greater understanding of the events described in it. For instance in the Biblical narrative of Joseph related in Genesis, we find Jacob's sons traversing the vast expanse of the Sinai desert on the backs of donkeys, despite the fact that donkeys are unsuitable for the nomadic life the early ancestors of the Hebrews lived before settling down in the land of the Pharaohs and for desert travel over long periods. In contrast, the Qur'an tells us that they make this journey in camel caravans.

And when he provided them with their provision, he put the drinking-cup in his brother's saddlebag, and then a crier cried: O camel-riders!
Lo! ye are surely thieves!
(Joseph:70)

Whereas in the Bible, the rulers of Egypt of both Joseph's and Moses' period are called Pharaoh, in the Qur'an, we find Joseph referring to the Egyptian ruler as King and not as Pharaoh whereas we read of Moses certainly dealing with one. History tells us that the ruling dynasty of Egypt in the days of Joseph, around the eighteenth

or seventeenth century BC, were the Hyksos, a Semitic people quite distinct from the native Egyptians who were called by the Egyptians *Hekau Chasut* meaning 'Foreign Overlords' and who adopted this title themselves. Interestingly the later native Egyptian rulers, like the one of Moses' time, around the 13th century BC certainly called themselves Pharaoh, which accords well with the Qur'an's treatment of the royal titles.

We also read in the Qur'an Pharaoh commanding one of his people to build him an edifice, much like the tower of Babel, from which he could ascend to see the unseen god above the heavens spoken of by Moses:

"O Haman! Build me a lofty palace, that I may attain the ways and means – the ways and means of (reaching) the heavens, and that I may mount up to the God of Moses"
(Forgiver:36-37)

Now, the Bible nowhere speaks of a Haman, except in the Book of Esher which places him much later in time, not in Egypt but in Persia as a Minister in the Court of Ahasuerus, though nowhere in Persian history is such a person mentioned. This led some western scholars to mock the Qur'an, claiming that the Prophet had lifted the Biblical passage and inserted it in the Qur'an in a different context. That is, until recently, when it was discovered that there indeed was a man going by the name of Haman in the New Kingdom of Egypt. And guess his profession – *The chief of the workers of the stone quarries*. What's more the determinate joined to his name indicates the intimate relationship he enjoyed with the Pharaoh. This accords well with both the function of Haman as a builder and as a confidante of Pharaoh as suggested in the Qur'an. How, we may ask could the Prophet have been privy to such information since by that time the knowledge of reading hieroglyphs had been long lost, only to be known again with the decipherment of the Rosetta Stone by Jean Francois Champollion in 1822.

We also find the Qur'an expanding on the Biblical stories as for instance in the story of Moses where it states:

And we brought the Children of Israel across the sea. Then Pharaoh with his hosts pursued them in rebellion and hostility until, when the fact of his drowning overtook him, he said: "I believe there is no god except the one in whom the Children of Israel believe, and I am of those who surrender to him". God said: "What- now, after you have rebelled and caused corruption ? This day we shall save you in your body so that you may be a sign for those who come after you. But truly, many among mankind are heedless of Our Signs
(Jonah:90-92)

The Qur'an's reference to the saving of the Pharaoh's body is remarkable as it refers to the ancient Egyptian practice of mummifying their deceased monarchs which had probably been forgotten by the time of the Prophet. The Pharaoh of Moses' time was very likely Merneptah, successor to Ramses II whose mummified body was discovered only in 1898 in the Valley of the Kings at Thebes. A medical examination of the mummy has, shown that the body could not have stayed in the water for long as it does not show signs of deterioration due to prolonged submersion. Here again we see agreement between the Qur'anic narrative and modern scientific knowledge.

So in verity it is the greatest miracle Muhammad brought us; all the others which he performed pale in comparison with it. For fourteen centuries the Qur'an has stood

the test of time. Not a single word or letter has been added, removed or altered in any was since it was first revealed so unlike other scriptures such as the Torah and Gospel which have been corrupted over time. And it will continue this way for God Himself has promised:

Indeed, it is We who sent down the Message, and indeed We will be its Guardian
((The Rocky Tract:9)

But that's not all. The choice of words in the Qur'an shows that no human could have composed such a work. That such a work was the creation of an unlettered man fourteen hundred years ago defies explanation, for even a modern day scholar or a team of scholars from all disciplines could not create such a work.

Little wonder then that Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749-1832), the greatest European intellectual who ever lived, had so much esteem for the Qur'an. Evidence gleaned from his writings suggest that he was in fact a Muslim. At the age of 70 he wrote that he intended *"to celebrate respectfully that night when the Prophet was given the Koran completely from above" "* He also declared in his renowned work *Divan*:

"*Whether the Koran is of eternity?*
I don't question that!
That it is the book of books
I believe out of the Muslim's duty."

That it was indeed a miracle was even acknowledged by western scholars who have delved deeply into its meaning, like the Italian Orientalist Laura Vaglieri who wrote in Apologia dell Islamismo: "*It was neither by means of violence of arms nor through the pressures of obtrusive missionaries that caused the great and rapid diffusion of Islam, but above all, through the fact that this book presented by the Muslims to the vanquished, with the liberty to accept or reject it, was the Book of God, the Word of Truth, the greatest miracle Muhammad could show to those in doubt. The strength of this message was its crystal clear simplicity and marvelous easiness, for Islam reached out to the soul of the people without having recourse to long explanations*".

And now to your question about the Prophet's performing miracles. He certainly did and there were a number of witnesses to it among his companions, sometimes numbering hundreds or even thousands. Going by these miracles alone, one might reasonably conclude that he, like Jesus, was a true messenger of God. Miracles, after all, strengthen the claims of a Prophet in the eyes of men. But God in His Wisdom did not produce miracles for Muhammad upon the whims and fancy of his detractors who used to say:

"We shall not believe in you until you cause a spring to gush forth for us from the earth, or you have a garden of date-palms and grapes and cause rivers to gush forth in their midst, carrying abundant water or you cause the sky to fall in fragments as you say will happen against us or you bring God and the angels before us face to face"
(The Night Journey: 90-92)

God Himself tells us why He would not meet their expectations at their beck and call. He understood their fickle nature:

Now they swear by God with their most solemn oaths that if a miracle were shown to them, they would indeed believe in this. Say: 'Miracles are in the power of God alone.' 'And for all you know, even if one should be shown to them, they would not believe so long as We keep their hearts and their eyes turned (away from the truth), even as they did not believe in it in the first instance: and (so) We shall leave them in their overweening arrogance, blindly stumbling to and fro
(The Cattle:109-110)

If God were to perform miracles, it would be in His own good time. That time came when in order to strengthen the believers and to meet the demands of the unbelievers among the Meccans He chose to perform a miracle before their eyes. That day came when a host of the unbelievers of Mecca including the diehard Abu Jahl went to the Prophet and said, "*O Muhammad! If you are truthful in what you say, then split the moon for us into two pieces*." The Prophet invoked the Almighty to split the moon and He answered his prayer. (Saheeh Al-Bukhari). God split the moon in two separate halves and then re-joined them. The miracle finds mention in the Qur'an:

The Last Hour draws near, and the moon is split asunder! And if they see a sign (miracle), they turn away and say, 'Passing magic!'- for they are bent on giving it the lie, being always wont to follow their own desires
(The Moon:1-3)

Had the event never occurred, the Muslims would have doubted their new found faith and even left it while the unbelievers would have pounced on it to prove the Prophet a liar. Instead, the believers grew stronger in their faith and the only words the Pagan Meccans could come up with was '*passing magic!*' The Jews of Jesus' time reacted likewise. Remember what the Pharisees said when they heard that Jesus could drive out demons: "This man drives out demons only by the power of Beelzebul, the prince of demons" (Matthew 12:24). Even miracles cannot change a hardened heart and God knew this well.

Another miracle the Prophet performed was in Medina when the people were struck with famine. A man stood up when he was delivering the weekly sermon on Friday, and said "*O Messenger of God, our wealth has been destroyed and our children are starving. Pray to God for us*" Muhammad raised his hands in prayer. The moment he lowered his hands after praying, clouds began to build like mountains and by the time he stepped down from the pulpit, rain was dripping from his beard. It rained the whole week till the following Friday and the same man stood up again, complaining this time "*O Messenger of God, our buildings are destroyed, and our property is drowned, pray to God for us!*"'. The Prophet raised his hands and prayed: "*O God, (let it rain) around us, not on us*"'. The congregation noticed the clouds withdrawing towards the direction he pointed, so that Medina was surrounded by clouds, but there were no clouds over it. (Saheeh Muslim).

His companions also tell us that on more than one occasion, the Prophet would bless food by either praying or touching it so all present could get their fill. This took place in times of food scarcities. One such incident took place during the Battle of the Trench. While digging the trench the Muslims ran out of food and were hungry. A companion of some means, Jaabir wanted to provide them with food, but

he had only a small amount of barley and a small sheep. So he invited the Prophet along with few Companions, but the Prophet called out loudly: "*O people! Jaabir has made food for you, so let us go!*" He ordered Jaabir to wait for him before he prepared the food, and when he arrived there, he blessed the food. The Companions entered in groups until they all ate their fill. Jaabir would later recall: "*By God! The fighters were one thousand on that day*." (Saheeh Al Bukhari).

On another occasion his companions were in dire need of water when he went to Mecca for pilgrimage. In the long journey through the desert, the companions had run out of all water, and only the Prophet was left with a vessel with which he performed ablution for prayers. He put his hand in the vessel and lo and behold, water began flowing from between his fingers. Over a thousand men drank of it and even made ablution (Saheeh Al- Bukhari). Reminds you of Jesus' converting a few loaves and fishes into food for 5000 people, doesn't it?

What all this proves is that the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) did perform miracles, though these are not publicized the manner in which the followers of Moses or Jesus did. Muhammad's mission, after all, had more to do than the mere performing of miracles for the eyes to feast on. True faith calls for more than that!

16th Night

Johnny: Salams Sheikh. Thanks for last night's enlightening talk. I guess you have a point about miracles not being the only test of faith. There's more to it than meets the eye. So my next question is:

Why do you love your Prophet so?

The Janissary: The truth is we love our Prophet more than we love our own selves. He occupies a place only second to that of God in our lives, being fondly remembered as if he were here with us only yesterday. He is the beloved of God, His Chosen One whom He sent as a mercy to all mankind. He is God's Mercy to each and every one of us. He is our Saviour and our Salvation, for if not for him, where would we be? He is our guide, our teacher, our friend even in this day and age, for he lives in our hearts. Whatever he did, whatever trials he underwent, whatever tribulations he faced, he did for us.

No man in history has ever commanded so much love and respect than Muhammad from his followers. No man's biography has been recorded so assiduously as Muhammad's, and no man's example has been imitated as much as Muhammad's. He is without doubt the most influential person in history, holding a place in the hearts of over a billion people all over the world. If you think its only people today who have never seen him and who have never known him, who love him, you're sadly mistaken. Many of his earliest followers probably loved him more than any of us do today.

They stood by him through thick and thin when Islam was still weak and its followers faced severe persecution at the hands of the Pagans of Mecca. They were willing to give up everything they held dear to their hearts, their wealth and their families, indeed their very lives, for their love of him and for the message he brought. Take Nusaybah, a female follower of his who jumped into the thick of battle with sword in hand to defend her Prophet from his foes without a care for her own life; Take Bilal, the Abyssinian slave who rose to be the first Muezzin (caller to prayer) of Islam, who so loved his Prophet that the last words that left his lips on his deathbed were: "*Rejoice, rejoice. I am flying to the Prophet*".

No man and no prophet ever commanded so much love from his people. Jesus said: "*Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me*" (Matthew 10:37) but even his closest disciples, if we are to believe the Bible, did not love him the way he should have been loved. He gave them food and drink and performed many miracles at their bidding and offered them a place in paradise with him, but when the Jews came to take him away, not one stood by him, nay not even Peter, who after the Jews had taken him away, denied knowing him, not once, but thrice. The same holds true of Moses. He led them from captivity from Egypt but all he could hear from his followers, except for a few, were complaints and grumblings.

Not so Muhammad. Within the 23 years of his mission from the age of 40 to 63 he transformed his society so thoroughly that there was no going back. He was able to weld quarrelsome tribes given to blood feuds into a single nation bound by faith; to guide his people away from idolatry to the worship of the One True God; to move them away from lawlessness to one of law and order; from wanton killing to respect for life; from drunkenness to sobriety; from debauchery to morality; from decadence to the greatest civilization the world had seen at the time. Never had Human history known such a complete transformation of a people before or since. And not just that, the movement he had started went on to transform other nations as well, for as he lay

on his deathbed Islam was becoming an empire that would within ten years of his death overcome the then superpowers of Persia and Byzantium and within a hundred stretch from Gibraltar to the Himalayas.

Such was Muhammad, a man like no other – a faithful friend, a great counselor, a loving husband, a wonderful father, religious teacher, social reformer, moral preacher, judicious statesman, military genius, refuge of orphans, emancipator of women, protector of slaves and much much more - all in one. To be able to combine all these qualities in a single personality to such an amazing level of perfection and that against such great odds is well nigh impossible for any man, save one who has been blessed by God. Unlike other men, he was not a man who belonged exclusively to his age or place, but transcended time and place with his towering personality so that he could appeal to everyone at every place and every age. All that is good and beautiful in man reached its peak in him. Other men are but like shadows under the effulgence of his angelic light. Whatever we do, we can never measure up to him. No one has and no one will. One so full of mercy and compassionate to the needy; so patient in adversity and so generous in victory, so noble and yet so humble. One like him, the world has not seen before and will never see since. If there ever were a superman, an Übermensch, it is he, it is he, it is he!

That's why the good Muslim looks upon him as an examplar to emulate at all times. When one is strong, one remembers his humility; when one is wealthy, one remembers his generosity; when one is victorious, one remembers his magnaminity and when one is down, one remembers his patience and his humiliation at the hands of the unbelievers; when all seems lost, one remembers his perseverance against great odds; when one is lonely, one thinks of the orphan boy who tended sheep and when one has company, one thinks of his companions who stood with him through thick and thin.

We have a pen picture of what Muhammad looked like from his contemporaries. They described him as a man of a whitish complexion with a reddish tinge whose face shone like the moon. He was exceedingly handsome, as if the brightness of the sun shone from his blessed face. He had a large head with a wide forehead and extremely black eyes with long thick eyelashes and a somewhat high and prominent nose. He had a full beard and a head of hair parted in the middle that sometimes reached upto his shoulders. His chest was broad and he was of middling stature but inclined to be tall. Despite lack of proper food his body was stronger and more virile than those of better nourished persons. His palms were softer than wool. He walked at a quick pace and took rather a long step. When he walked it seemed as if he was descending to a lower plane. When he looked at someone he turned his whole body towards him. He often looked down. His sight was focused more to the ground than towards the sky though sometimes he would look towards the sky as when he waited for revelation. He was the best of the people in generosity, the most truthful of the people in speech, the gentlest of them in temperament, and the noblest of them in social intercourse. If someone saw him unexpectedly, he was awestruck by him, and if someone associated with him knowingly, he loved him.

Umm Ma'bad, has left us a fitting description of Muhammad when he passed by her tent during his journey from Mecca to Medina. She witnessed some of his miracles and swore fealty to him before he departed. When her husband came back, he was surprised to find her with a quantity of milk. He asked her: "*Where you have got this from, O Umm Ma`bad, while our sheep is alone and untouched and we have no milch cow in our home?"* She said: "*Nay, but by God, a blessed man passed by*

our way and did so and so." He said: "*Describe him to me, O Umm Ma`bad*". And she said:

I saw a man, pure and clean, with a handsome face and a fine figure. He was not marred by a skinny body, nor was he overly small in the head and neck. He was graceful and elegant, with intensely black eyes and thick eyelashes. There was a huskiness in his voice, and his neck was long. His beard was thick, and his eyebrows were finely arched and joined together. When silent, he was grave and dignified, and when he spoke, glory rose up and overcame him. He was from afar the most beautiful of men and the most glorious, and close up he was the sweetest and the loveliest. He was sweet of speech and articulate, but not petty or trifling. His speech was a string of cascading pearls, measured so that none despaired of its length, and no eye challenged him because of brevity.

Another lady named Hind bint Abu Halah described him:

The Messenger of God was a wonderful man who was honoured by all who saw him. His face glowed like the full moon. He was of moderate height, not too tall and not too short. He had a large head and his hair was wavy. He would part his hair if it got long. He was a healthy pink. His forehead was wide. There was a vein between his eyebrows that swelled when he was angry. His nose was straight and had a special glow. He had a thick beard with soft cheeks. He had a moustache. His teeth had gaps in between. His chest and shoulders were wide. His skin was white. He walked in strides and in a graceful manner. Whenever he turned he would turn with his entire body. He lowered his gaze at all times. He looked down to earth more than he looked up to the heaven. He offered greetings to others before they offered it to him. The Prophet appeared sad most of the time, and would be in deep thought. Whenever he spoke he would start with the name of God. His statements were very decisive; no one could distort his words. He was extremely kind and caring. He never insulted others. He was grateful for every blessing God bestowed on him, no matter how small it seemed, he never belittled anything. If a person was wronged, he would become very angry. His anger would not subside until the person's right was given to him. He would not become angry if he was wronged, , nor would he avenge himself. Most of his laughter was by smiling. Whenever he smiled his teeth appeared like pearls of hail.

Muhammad was born in Mecca 570 years after Christ. The only child of Abdullah and Aminah, he could not even set his eyes on his father as he died before he was born. His mother passed away when he was just six years old and he was left an orphan brought up by his uncle Abu Talib. In spite of his young days being a sad one, he grew up to be a very reflective and modest person with the help of God. It is to him that the Qur'an refers: "*Did He not find you (O Muhammad) an orphan and give you a refuge?*" (The Glorious Morning Light:6). Abu Talib was not a man of means and in his adolescent years Muhammad found work as a shepherd, which incidently was one occupation all the prophets of God had in common. He once observed: "*God never sent a Prophet who was not a shepherd over a flock of sheep*". His companions asked: "*Even you, O Messenger of God?*", and he replied, "*Yes, I would take care of a flock of sheep for the people of Mecca*" (Saheeh Al-Bukhari).

There were also occasions he traveled with his uncle, accompanying his caravans as far north as Syria and it there that a Christian named Bahira noticed how even the

clouds seemed to shade the young man from the sun and foretold that he would be a prophet, advising his uncle to take him back forthwith since if the Jews were to find out they would kill him. In later times the young Muhammad, now a handsome young man served as an agent of a businesswoman named Khadijah, a rich widow who owned a fleet of caravans. So impressed was the lady with his character that she proposed marriage. She was forty years old at the time and Muhammad twenty five.

The lady bore him four daughters, Zainab, Ruqayya, Umm Kulthum and Fatima and he remained faithful to her until her death many many years later. He was now a well respected trader and family man who could have lived a life of ease and comfort like other rich folk of Mecca. However wealth or status did not interest him. He was mostly interested in serving his fellow creatures which showed even before he commenced his ministry, like when he joined a league of chivalry, *the Hilf Al Fudool* to establish justice and protect the weak and oppressed. Of this brotherhood of good, he would later say: "*If now in Islam, I were summoned to a similar pact, I would gladly respond!*'

He was also a reflective type of person. The idolatrous ways of his people and their barbarous practices such as burying alive their infant daughters must have saddened him greatly. Thus he would sometimes retreat to the cave of Hira to meditate and contemplate on the universe. He would spend days and nights in the cave, subsisting on the food his dutiful wife Khadijah prepared him to continue with his meditations.

And then came the call from God which would change his life forever. He was forty years old at the time and had found his way to the cave of Hira to meditate when the archangel Gabriel came to him and asked him to *Read!*. Bewildered he replied, "*I cannot read*." The angel embraced Muhammad until he could hardly breath and then let go, saying "*O Muhammad, Read!*". Again Muhammad replied: "*I cannot read*" The Angel embraced him again and ordered him to read for the third time, and when he did not embraced him so tightly, so that he could not breathe, and then let go saying:

Read! In the Name of Your Lord, Who created
Created man from a clot. Read! And your Lord is the Most Generous,
Who taught by the pen - Taught man that which he knew not

The towering presence of the awe-inspiring angel did little to calm him. He was so shaken by the mystical experience that day in the embrace of the angel that he rushed home to his beloved wife, but not as an Arab of his day might do. Rather he was crawling on his hands and knees and shaking convulsively before he got some strength to fling himself onto his beloved Khadija's lap, crying out *Cover me! Cover me!* beseeching her to shield him from the terrifying presence. Khadija held him tight in her arms and soothed him till the fear abated, she assured him that all was well: "*You are kind and considerate toward your kin. You help the poor and forlorn and bear their burdens. You strive to revive the noble qualities your people have lost. You honour the guest and go to the assistance of those in distress. This cannot be, my dear!*".

Khadijah took her husband to her cousin Waraqah who had become a Christian and said to him: "*O cousin, listen to what your nephew (Muhammad) is about to tell you*" Waraqa asked: "*What is it you have seen, dear nephew?*". When Muhammad told him about it, Waraqa said "*By God, this is the angel Gabriel*". Adding: "*I wish I would be alive when your people drive you from Mecca*". Muhammad wondered: "*Will they drive me out of Mecca?*" and Waraqah replied: "*Never has a man*

conveyed a message like that entrusted to you, but that his people waged war against him. If I witness this, I will support you".

Sometime later came another revelation affirming that he had been commissioned by God as a Prophet:

O you (Muhammad) enveloped (in garments); arise and warn!
And your Lord magnify! And your garments purify!
(The One Wrapped Up: 1-4)

One fine day, convinced of his mission, he climbed up the mountain of Safa and called out to his townsfolk: "If *I tell you that an enemy is approaching behind those hills to attack you, so be on your guard, would you believe me?*". They answered: "*We believe you, even though we do not see behind the mountain. Since you are Muhammad the Trustworthy, we never doubt your words*". Upon this Muhammad said: "*As you would trust me in this news, you should also believe me that there is only one God who created this world. The idols you worship are but pieces of stone, earth or wood. Leave these idols and believe in One God. Know that God has sent me as a Prophet to you*". Visibly annoyed they departed henceforth. They were so given to idol worship that they found the truth he preached unpalatable.

Nevertheless they feared that Muhammad would one day challenge the established order of things and made a very strange proposal to him. Thinking that Muhammad must be making claims to Prophethood for personal gain, its leaders sent an envoy who told him: "*If you want money, we will collect enough money for you so that you will be the richest one of us. If you want leadership, we will take you as our leader and never decide on any matter without your approval. If you want a kingdom, we will crown you king over us*".

This would have been a very hard offer to turn down for any rational being, but the generous offer came with another condition that went against everything that Muhammad stood for. It was to give up his call to Islam and to cease worshipping God alone, without any partner. Needless to say Muhammad flatly refused the offer. On another occasion Muhammad's uncle Abu Talib fearing for his nephew's life begged him to stop his mission. Muhammad answered:

"I swear by the name of God, O Uncle!, that if they place the sun in my right hand and the moon in my left hand in return for giving up this matter (calling people to Islam), I will never desist until either God makes it triumph or I perish defending it."
(Seerah Ibn Hisham)

His mission was no easy one. The Arabs of his time were after all a rigidly patriarchal, stiff-necked, hard-hearted people who engaged in idolatry, looked down on women and oppressed their slaves, so barbaric that they even buried their infant daughters alive. In fact within the first three years of his mission he had gained only a handful of followers, about thirteen men and women, free and slave.

Once he invited his kin kin for a meeting and informed them of his mission, requesting them for their support. Silence fell, and who would proclaim his support to him but his young cousin Ali only sixteen years who enthusiastically pledged his support. An unlettered man past forty and a headstrong lad in his mid-teens so passionate on taking on such an enterprise as if against all mankind. It seemed so ridiculous that the assembly broke out in laughter.

Muhammad, once overwhelmed with sorrow at the rejection by his tribe, the Quraysh, found himself at a place called Qarn al-Thaalib. He lifted his head towards the sky to see a cloud shading him unexpectedly. He would later recall: "*I looked up and saw within it Gabriel. He called me saying: "God has heard what your people have been saying to you, and how they have disputed you. God has sent the Angel of the Mountains to you so that you may order him to do whatever you wish to these people*.". The Angel of the Mountains called and greeted me, and then said: "*O Muhammad! Order what you wish. If you like, I will cause the two mountains to fall upon them." I said: "No, for I hope that God will bring forth from their progeny people who will worship God Alone, and none besides Him.*" (Saheeh Muslim).

Before long Muhammad became a social outcast, supported only by his wife Khadijah, cousin Ali and a handful of downtrodden people who believed in his mission like his freedman Zaid and the slaves Bilal and Sumayya.

The humiliation this man went through to proclaim the truth is so little known, that it is worth telling. Once when he was praying in the Ka'aba, a man from the Quraysh tribe told a group he was with: "*Do you see this man? Would someone bring the dirt and filth and the bloodied intestines from the camels of so and so, wait till he prostrates, and place it between his shoulders?*. When Muhammad prostrated, the wretch placed the filth on his shoulders and the mob laughed so hard that they were about to fall on each other (Saheeh Al-Bukhari). There was another man who twisted the garment around his neck while he was praying, as if to strangle him, and there were others who spat in his face, threw sand in his face and swore at him until midday. A little girl would come with a container of water, and he would wash his face and hands and say: "*O daughter, do not fear that your father will be humiliated or struck by poverty"* (Mu'jam Al Kabeer). There were even occasions, Muhammad had to wipe away the blood from his face himself, and still he would say: "*O God! Forgive my people for they know not!*" (Saheeh Al-Bukhari).

His family, friends and the few followers he had, stuck with him through thick and thin. The haughty leaders of the Quraysh who ruled Mecca, in their bid to stamp out the new faith, first imposed a boycott on his family, the rigours of which his faithful wife Khadija had to endure in her final years in isolation in the Vale of Shaib Abi Talib to which they were confined like a ghetto.

The more helpless sections of his followers were even beaten. The leading men of Quraysh, the tribe that ruled Mecca, did all they could to stamp out the new faith and inflicted terrible tortures on the more helpless sections among them such as the slaves in order to compel them to forsake their faith. One such was Sumayya the slave girl who was brutally killed when she refused to recant her faith, thus becoming the first martyr in Islam. Another girl Zaneera was so harshly beaten that she lost her sight. Bilal the black slave also suffered heavily when his master forced him to lie in the hot sands of the Arabian desert and dragged him along with a rope to force him to give up the faith, but to no avail.

Seeing no hope in Mecca, Muhammad left for Taif only to be treated worse than in his hometown, so much so that he had to flee from the urchins whom the townsfolk got to throw stones at him. They pelted him so pitilessly that his shoes were filled with blood, and even when he tried to sit down, exhausted by the ordeal, they would not let him be, compelling him to get going by hurling their missiles at him.

And if that were not bad enough, when he got back to Mecca, he barely escaped with his life when his enemies, having sworn to take his life, banded together in a plot to kill him. That was when his sworn enemy Abu Jahl proposed that a strong man chosen from each clan assassinate Muhammad by striking at him with their

swords together so that the blood would be distributed among all the clans and the Prophet's clan, the Banu Hashim, a small yet important clan, would not be able to take revenge on them all. The Prophet was warned of it by divine inspiration and along with his ever faithful friend Abu Bakr took flight to a little town that was willing to welcome them. To deceive the mob his cousin Ali, at great risk to himself, slept on the bed of Muhammad when the assasins arrived.

In that fateful year of 622 after Christ, in the thirteenth year of his mission, Muhammad took flight to Yathrib, a little oasis town not very far from Mecca whose inhabitants had heard about his mission and had invited him over. The event would prove momentous, for the town would henceforth be known as Medina 'The City (of the Prophet)'. The flight would mark the beginning of the Islamic Year called *Hijra* 'The Flight' – not a birthday or a victory, but a flight of all things!

The townsfolk took in the migrants from Mecca as their brothers, even going to the extent of sharing their property with them. The folk here belonged to two Arab tribes, the Aws and Khazraj and the migrants to the Quraysh tribe and it's hard to imagine that in those days of tribalism and blood feuds they could become one, bonded by the strength of faith alone. But such was Muhammad's persona and the strength of his teachings, they lay aside their tribal loyalties for the common good. Men and women embraced the new faith with a zeal never seen before or after in the history of mankind.

Soon the first Islamic city state was formed in Medina and before long Muhammad resolved to take his hometown of Mecca, to destroy its idols and dedicate it again to the worship of the One True God as his forefather Abraham had done. He marched at the head of a 10,000-strong army. On the way he noticed that a bitch had given birth to some pups and moved by compassion for the helpless creatures he had a sentry placed there to ensure his army did not walk over them or harm them in any way. This was Muhammad, Mercy to the Worlds.

The outnumbered Meccans were helpless and feared the worst. These sworn enemies of the Prophet who had conspired to kill him and gone to war against him, After all they not done all in their power to oppress the Prophet and his followers even going to the extent of going to war against them thrice, in the battles of Badr, Uhud and the Battle of the Trench. Not only had they mocked the Prophet but they had also martyred many of his followers. And here they stood, surrounded by ten thousand armed warriors ever ready to settle past scores with them. The Prophet asked them: "*O Quraysh, what do you think that I am about to do with you?*". "*Good Muhammad*", they said entreating his forgiveness "*You are a noble brother, son of a noble brother*". "*Go your way*" replied the Prophet "*for you are the freed ones*" (Seerah Ibn Ishaq).

The Quraysh, needless to say, embraced Islam of their own accord, with neither force nor coercion being exerted on them to do so. Muhammad conquered their hearts not with his sword, but with his mercy. Never in human history was such mercy shown to a helpless foe. Even the sedate and peaceful Jesus could utter: "*But as for these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slay them before me*" (Luke 19:27) and advice his disciples: "*But now, let him who has purse take it, and likewise a bag. And let him who has no sword sell his mantle and buy one*" Luke (22:36).

There are some people whom it is very difficult to forgive, but the Messenger of Mercy had the strength to forgive even them, like Abu Sufyan's wife Hind who had in the course of a battle against the Muslims, got an Abyssinian slave to kill the Prophet's uncle Hamza and even went to the extent of mutilating the slain in the

battlefield, cutting off their ears and noses to make anklets and collars. She now came veiled in disguise to accept Islam, but was still insolent in her replies to the questions posed by the Prophet. She was nevertheless forgiven without being asked to explain or atone for her previous conduct. Astonished by the Prophet's magnanimity, she exclaimed: "*Muhammad, no tent I hated aforetime more than yours, but none is now dearer to me than your pavilion*".

When Wahshi, the killer of his uncle Hamza had nowhere else to flee, he sought the Prophet's forgiveness for his crime, only to have the Prophet tell him: "*Hide your face from me and never let me see you again*" (Ibn Ishaq). And who can forget Habbar who had been responsible for the death of the Prophet's daughter Zaynab. The criminal had been condemned in the final conquest of Mecca and was about to flee to Iran when he recanted and confessed to the Prophet about his crime: "*I have come to you O Prophet of God. The reports you have received about me are all correct*". The Prophet, forgetting even the death of his beloved daughter forgave the man.

Even at the height of his power, he was never haughty. Once some people came to meet him with the news that a certain tribe had refused to embrace Islam. They said to him" *Supplicate God against them. The tribe of Daws is doomed and destroyed!*". The Prophet raised his hands and said: "*O God guide the tribe of Daws and bring them (to Islam)*". It once happened that a Jewish Rabbi named Ben Sana from whom Muhammad had taken a loan grabbed hold of the edges of his cloak and yelled: "*O Muhammad, will you not pay me back my loan?*". His friend Umar stared at him, eyes swollen with anger and threatened: "*O enemy of God, do you talk to God's Messenger and behave towards him in this manner? By the One who sent him with the truth, had it not been the fear for missing it (paradise) I would have beheaded you with my sword!*". The Prophet looked at Umar calmly and said: "*O Umar, you should have given us sincere counsel, rather than do what you did! O Umar, go and repay him his loan, and give him extra because you scared him!*" (Ibn Hibban).

Muhammad recognized the rights of all and even allowed his humblest followers to avenge themselves on him if they felt he had harmed them in any way. It once happened that a man from the Ansar was cracking jokes with some people and making them laugh. The Prophet happened to pass by him and lightly poked at his side with a branch of a tree he was having. "*O Prophet of God!*" the man said "*Allow me to avenge myself!*" The Prophet said: "*Go ahead!*" and the man said: "*O Messenger of God, you are wearing a garment and I was not when you poked me!*". He then lifted his upper garment, and the man kissed his body saying: "*I only meant to do this, O Messenger of God!*" (Aboo Dawood). Nay, he acknowledged the rights of even little children. A drink was once brought to him, and he drank from it. On his right side was a young boy and on his left were some elderly men. He asked the boy:"*Do you mind if I give the drink to them?*". The lad replied: "*I would not prefer anyone drinking from the place you drank, this is my fair share (on account of sitting to your right)*". So the Prophet handed the boy the drink (Saheeh Al-Bukhari).

Even in the most trying of times, he did not force anybody to do anything against his will. It once happened that a few followers chose not to accompany him in a critical battle for the faith. He simply questioned them after the battle and imposed a social boycott of them for a certain period. Had it been any other leader in that situation, he would have imposed compulsory conscription with those lagging behind being dealt with severely. Even when he was hard pressed for finances to continue the war effort against the enemies of the faith, he never ordered his followers to place

their wealth at his disposal. Those who had the means voluntarily did so. He showed the way to win loyalty without demanding it even in the most difficult days.

Although no battle-hardened warrior, he was earnest in defending the faith at all costs. During the Battle of Uhud he lifted his hands in prayer, entreating His Creator: " *O God, if they are destroyed today, Thou will be worshipped no more*" and in the the heat of that critical battle when his tooth had been smashed and blood was dripping from his face he prayed: "*O God, guide them on the right path, for they know not*". In the Battle of Hunayn when the Muslims, terrified by a sudden onslaught of the enemy, turned on their heels, the Prophet calmly dismounted from his camel and called out: "*Where are you going, men? Come to me. I am God's Messenger, I am Muhammad*". Here was a commander who held his post even when his army took to flight, calmly beckoning his men to come back to him and defend the faith.

Nor was he abandoned by the faithful. In contrast to the picture the Gospel paints of the followers of Jesus, who forsake him as soon as he was condemned to the cross, Muhammad's followers always rallied round their persecuted prophet, with even women defending him with their swords in the heat of battle, like Nusaybah Al Ansariyyah who rushed to defend her Prophet in the thick of battle, so that he would later remark: "*Wherever I turned, to the left or right, I saw her fighting for me*".

Despite all the power he enjoyed, he lived a very simple life. He used to milk his own goats, mend his clothes and shoes and help his wives with the general household work. He lived in a modest mud house and slept on a rough mattress made of leather stuffed with the fibre of the date palm.

The Prophet's close companion Anas says of him: "*The Prophet remembered God very often. He joked very little. He rode a donkey, wore cloth made of rough wool, accepted the invitations of slaves, visited the ill and attended funeral services. You should have seen him on the day the (Jewish) castle of Khaibar was taken, when he wasriding a donkey with a halter made of date leaves. The more God blessed him with victory, the more humble and grateful he became*" (Tirmidhi).

Once his friend and father-in-law Umar saw him lying on a mat made of palm leaves that had left its marks on his sides. Looking around, he saw the few provisions the Prophet enjoyed, including some water skins hung above his head, and was moved to tears. Muhammad asked him: "*What is making you cry?*". Umar replied: "*O God's Messenger! Caesar and Chosroes are leading the life while you, God's Messenger though you are, is living destitute*". The Prophet replied. "*Won't you be satisfied that this world is theirs to enjoy and for us the Hereafter?"* (Saheeh Al-Bukhari).

His wife would say: "*There were many times when the Prophet and his family went without any food night after night. Most of the bread they contented themselves with was made of barley*" (Tirmidhi). She told her nephew: "*O my nephew, we would sight three new moons in two months without lighting a fire (to cook a meal)*". Her nephew asked:"*O aunt, what sustained you?*" and she replied: "*The two black things, dates and water, but the Prophet had some Ansar neighbours who had milk-giving she-camels and they used to send the Prophet some of its milk*" (Saheeh Muslim). When he died, he did not leave any money or anything else except his white riding mule, his arms, and a piece of land which he left to charity. In fact at the time of his death, his shield had been pawned to a Jew in exchange for some barley to make bread for his family. The Prophet loved the poor and used to pray: "*O my Lord! Let me live as the poor, let me die as the poor and resurrect me (on the day of Judgement) among the poor*" (Tirmidhi).

You might think from all this that the Prophet died a pauper, forlorn and destitute. Nay, he died with the coffers of all Arabia from Yemen to the borders of Syria at his disposal, replenished constantly by the alms tax dutifully paid by his followers and war booty arriving laden in camels from far and wide. Yet, he could not bring himself to enjoy even a little of it or even allot a bit of it for his family. Rather he would distribute the monies to the poor and needy. Indeed he had given everything he had that had been gifted to him by his well-to-do companions as charity that he had to buy some food for his family from a Jew, placing his armour as collateral in his final days. Can you find another who had renounced the world and its pleasures despite all the power he held?

He was humble to the core, and refused to adopt any outward signs of power, so much so that when visitors came to see him, they could not make him out from his companions. Once a Bedouin came and inquired from the companions who were sitting with the Prophet in the mosque "*Who of you is Muhammad?*". They said: "This *white man who is leaning on the ground*". When Adi, the son of Hatim, a chief of the Arabian tribe of Tay visited Muhammad in Medina he was unable to decide whether he was Prophet or King, why because he saw on one hand how his folk loved and regarded him and on the other how fervently they were prepared to defend his kingdom by preparing for battle. He was still in two minds when he saw a slave girl coming to seek his advice, only to hear the Prophet reply: "*Come on, I'll go wherever you want*". Shocked at his humility, he tore away the cross hanging from his neck and forthwith embraced Islam.

Despite his being a Prophet, he joined his men in the most arduous tasks. One of his companions named Baraa Al Aazib would recall: "*I saw the Messenger of God on the Day of the Trench carrying soil (dug out from the trench) until the dirt covered his chest. He was quite hairy*" (Saheeh Al-Bukhari). He also used to consult his followers on important matters without taking decisions himself. He once consulted his companions about an upcoming Battle (of Uhud). They urged him to fight, while he himself did not see the need to. The companions, learning of the Prophet's feelings about it, regretted their action and said: "*O Prophet of God! Do as you please*". He replied: "*It does not befit a Prophet who has donned his armour to remove it until he fights*" (Ahmed).

At the height of his power, when he had taken Mecca for Islam, a man came before him, trembling in his presence as if he were about to meet a great emperor. The Prophet met him with humility and told him: "*Calm down, I am not a King. I am the son of a woman of the Quraysh who used to eat sun-dried meat*" (Ibn Majah). A companion once said to the Prophet: "*You are our master*". The Prophet shot back: "*God alone is the Master! I am no one's master. Let not the devil deceive you; I do not wish you to raise me to a status higher than that God has placed me. I am only God's Slave and His Messenger*" (Ahmed).

He advised his companions: "*Do not praise me as the Christians praise the son of Mary, for I am but the servant of God and His Messenger*" (Saheeh Al-Bukhari). To prevent his followers as much as rising up for him out of respect he pronounced: "*Do not stand up as the Persians do, some people honouring the others*"(Aboo Dawood). Indeed, he was so humble that any ordinary man or woman, free or slave, rich or poor could approach him and seek his advice. There was even an occasion when a madwoman took him by the hand and put him to some work and he attended to it without as much as a grumble. Once a woman came to him. He rose to greet her, spoke to her gently, and attended to her pleas. People asked him who she was and he said: "She used to befriend us in the days of Khadijah; loyalty to one's friends is of

the faith". When his beloved son Ibrahim through his Coptic wife Mariya died, an eclipse took place and soon word went out saying that the sun was eclipsed in condolence over the death of Ibrahim. Upon hearing this Muhammad said: "*The sun and the moon are two signs amongst the signs of God. They do not eclipse because of someone's death or life*." (Saheeh Al-Bukhari).

He was lenient even in matters of worship. No man came to visit him and found him in prayer but he shortened his prayer, attended to his visitor and returned to his prayer after the visitor had left. Once while preaching from the pulpit, he heard an infant crying and shortened his sermon so as not to distress its mother. So gentle was he that that he did not mind his little grandsons playing with him during his prayer. He even prayed while Umamah, his granddaughter through Zaynab, sat on his shoulder, so that she had to be taken off when he prostrated himself. When he bowed, he put her on the ground, and when he stood up, he would carry her again (Saheeh Al-Bukhari). A man once came to him and complained: "*O Messenger of God! By God! I do not pray the Dawn Prayer because so and so lengthens* the prayer". The Prophet said angrily, meant as a rebuke to the leader of the prayer: "*O People, verily there are people who chase people away! When you lead people in prayer, shorten the prayer. There are old and weak people, and those with special needs behind you in prayer"* (Saheeh Al-Bukhari).

He was nevertheless deeply spiritual and cared not for the pleasures of the world. Once when his wife Ayisha questioned him about his excessive prayers, especially at night, saying that God had already promised him salvation. He quickly shot back: "*What. Should I not be a grateful slave?*" (Saheeh Al-Bukhari). He was also extremely frugal. His companions once asked him whether they could get him some bedding when they saw that his rough mat left its marks on his body when he awoke. He replied: "*What do I have to do with this world? I am like a rider who takes rest under the shade of a tree and then continues on his journey*" (Ibn Majah).

Despite the sanctity of his mission, he could be humorous at times. One day an old woman asked him to pray to God to make her enter Paradise. The Prophet said, "*O mother of so and so! No old woman shall enter paradise*." The narrator says that on hearing this the old woman went back weeping. The Prophet said to the people around him to go and tell the old woman that she would not enter into Paradise as an old woman. He then recited the Qur'anic verse: "*Verily, We have created those (maidens) by a creation and have made them virgins, loving, of equal age*." (Tirmidhi).

A while before his death, Muhammad beseeched his Lord with these beautiful words after he had established His faith over all Arabia, deep and profound words that flowed from his heart like tears of joy from one's eyes, showing what a humble servant of God he really was: "*O God, Creator of the heavens and the earth, who raises the degrees and bestows bounty; Different tongues overflowing and resonating are all being raised to you and asking from you. My wish from you is this: When the people of the world have forgotten me, I ask that You remember me*" (Al Bidaya).

When Muhammad passed away to meet his Creator, many of his companions were shocked. His death had been so sudden. He had simply rested his head on his wife's thigh and said: "*O God! (with) the highest companions!*" . These were his last words before he passed into the Mercy of God (Saheeh Al-Bukhari).

His companions could not believe that the man who lived among them and brought them peace and salvation was dead. There was even an attempt to deify him, but Abu Bakr, his close friend and confidante who would succeed him as the first Caliph of Islam killed the hysteria with one of the noblest speeches ever made in the history of

religion: "*If anyone worshipped Muhammad, then (know that) Muhammad is dead, but if anyone worshipped God, then God is living and does not die*". He then recited the words of the Qur'an which God had revealed to His Prophet: "*Muhammad is but a messenger, messengers (the like of whom) have passed away before him. If, then, he dies or is killed, will you turn back on your heels?*" (Family Imraan:144).

Finally let me conclude this night's talk with some sayings from three well known non-Muslims on the character of Muhammad. Lamartine wrote in his Historie de la Turquie (1854):

"If greatness of purpose, smallness of means, and astounding results are the three criteria of human genius, who could dare to compare any great man in modern history with Muhammad? The most famous men created arms, laws and empires only. They founded, if anything at all, no more than material powers which often crumbled away before their eyes. This man moved not only armies, legislations, empires, peoples and dynasties, but millions of men in one-third of the then inhabited world; and more than that, he moved the altars, the gods, the religions, the ideas, the beliefs and souls. His forbearance in victory, his ambition, which was entirely devoted to one idea and in no manner striving for an empire; his endless prayers, his mystic conversations with God, his death and his triumph after death; all these attest not to an imposture but to a firm conviction which gave him the power to restore a dogma. 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 standards by which human greatness may be measured, we may well ask, is there any man greater than he?"

Reverend Bosworth Smith wrote in his work Muhammad (1874):

"Head of the state as well as the Church, he was Caesar and Pope in one, but he was Pope without the Pope's pretensions, and Caesar without the legions of Caesar, without a standing army, without a body guard, without a palace, without a fixed revenue. If ever a man had the right to rule by a right divine, it was Muhammad for he had all the power without the instruments and without its supports. He cared not for the dressings of power. The simplicity of his private life was in keeping with his public life".

And Annie Besant wrote in The Life and Teachings of Muhammad (1932):

"It is impossible for anyone who studies the life and character of the great Prophet of Arabia, who knows how he taught and how he lived, to feel anything but reverence for that mighty Prophet, one of the great messengers of the Supreme. And although in what I put to you I shall say many things which may be familiar to many, yet I myself feel whenever I re-read them, a new way of admiration, a new sense of reverence for that mighty Arabian teacher."

17th Night

Johnny: Salams Sheikh. Your Prophet's life story is a truly inspiring one. Little wonder you all love him so. I too cannot help but feel a great respect for his character. What a man!. So great and yet some humble. My next question is:

How does Islam look at Jesus and Christianity?

The Janissary: We believe in Jesus not only as a great prophet of God, but also in his conception without a human father, by a Word of God which He bestowed on Mary, and a Spirit proceeding from Him. We believe in his many miracles, which he did by the leave of God; in his ascension to heaven and in his Second Coming to usher in a new era of Peace and Justice. All this we believe like you Christians do.

Jesus is referred to by name in the Qur'an as much as 25 times, as *Isa Ibn Maryam (*Jesus son of Mary) while Prophet Muhammad is mentioned as such only five times. To start the story with Jesus does not do justice to the importance of this great prophet. So let's start with the story of his mother Mary. Strangely enough, although Christians today go to the extent of calling Mary *Madre De Dios* or 'Mother of God', in the gospels of she seems not to have an important place. In John's gospel she is not even referred to by name and is simply called '*The Mother of Jesus*' (John 2:3). Worse still she is given little importance. We are told at a wedding at Cana to which Jesus and his disciples were invited, the mother of Jesus said to him when the wine ran short: "*They have no wine*" to which Jesus responded "*Woman, how does your concern affect me?*" (John 2:1-4).

In contrast, Mary occupies a very special place in Islamic scripture. She is the only woman mentioned by name in the Qur'an and appears as such 34 times. There is even an entire chapter of the Qur'an named after her*, Surah Maryam* or *The Chapter of Mary*. She is regarded as the pinnacle of womanhood, for we read of the angels addressing her: "*O Mary, indeed God has chosen you and purified you - chosen you above the women of all nations*" (Family Imraan:42). Prophet Muhammad also clearly declared: "*The best of the world's women is Mary*" (Fathul Bari).

There are many chapters in the Qur'an besides the Chapter of Mary that speak of Christ, his mother and his disciples and followers. Surah Ali Imran or 'Chapter of the Family of Imran' takes its name from Anne, Mary's mother being a 'woman of Imran', in a double sense, as she was both the wife of one Imran as well as a descendant of the priestly house of Imran. Surah Al Maidah or 'Chapter of the Repast' takes its name from an incident connected with the mission of Christ when his disciples inquired of him whether his Lord could send down a table set (with viands) from heaven. Surah Al Kahf 'The Chapter of the Cave' takes its name from the *Ashaabul Kahf* 'The Companions of the Cave', God-fearing Christian youth of Ephesus who went into a cave during the persecutions of a Roman emperor like Nero, only to emerge over three hundred years later when Christianity had become the state religion.

Indeed, Mary's story in the Qur'an begins even before she was born:

The birth of Mary:

Behold! A woman of Imraan (Anne, who was a descendant of the priestly house of Imraan and also the wife of one Imraan) said: "O my Lord! I dedicate unto Thee what is in my womb for Thy special service; so accept this of me, for Thou hearest and knowest all things".

When she was delivered she said: "O my Lord! Behold! I am delivered of a female child!". - And God knew best what she brought forth – "And no wise is the male like the female.I have named her Mary and I commend her and her offspring to Thy Protection from the Evil One, the Rejected"
(Family Imraan: 33-36)

The childhood of Mary:

Right graciously did her Lord accept her. He made her grow in purity and beauty. To the care of Zachariah was she assigned. Every time he entered her chamber to see her, he found her supplied with sustenance. He said: "O Mary! Whence comes this to you?". She said: "From God, for God provides sustenance to whom He pleases without measure"
(Family Imraan: 37)

Mary the Blessed:

Behold! The angels said: "O Mary ! God has chosen you and purified you – chosen you above the women of all nations. O Mary! Worship your Lord devoutedly. Prostrate yourself and bow down with those who bow down". This is a part of the news of the unseen, which We reveal to you (O Muhammad). You were not with them when they cast lots with their pens to (decide) which of them should take care of Mary
(Family Imraan:42-44)

Mary the Devout:

And God gives as an example for those who believe, the wife of pharaoh, when she said: "My Lord, build for me a home near you in paradise, and save me from Pharaoh and his deeds, and save me from the wrongdoing people". And (the example of) Mary, the daughter of Imran, who guarded her chastity, so we blew (the spirit of Jesus) into her through Our angel (Gabriel). And she believed in the words of her Lord, and His scriptures,and she was of the devout ones
(The Prohibition:11-12)

Good News of Jesus's birth:

Behold! The angels said: "O Mary! God gives you glad tidings of a Word from Him. His name will be Christ Jesus. The Son of Mary, held in honour in this world and the hereafter and of those nearest to God. He shall speak to the people in childhood and maturity. And he shall be of the righteous". She said: "O my Lord! How shall I have a son when no man has touched me?". He said: "Even so. God creates what He wills; when He has decreed a plan, He but says to it 'Be' and it is! And God will teach him the Book and Wisdom, the Law and the Gospel, and (appoint him) a Messenger to the Children of Israel (with this Message): "I have come to you with a Sign from your Lord, in that I make for you out of clay, as it were, the figure of a bird, and breathe into it, and it becomes a bird by God's Leave. And I heal those born blind, and the lepers, and I give life to the dead, by God's leave; and I declare to you what you eat, and what you store in your houses. Surely, therein is a Sign for

you if ye did believe' (I have come to you) to attest the Law which was before me. And to make lawful to you part of what was forbidden to you; I have come to you with a Sign from your Lord. So fear God and obey me. It is God who is my Lord and your Lord" (Family Imraan 45-51)

Immaculate conception of Jesus:

Relate in the Book (the story of) Mary, when she withdrew from her family to a place in the East. She placed a screen (to screen herself) from them; then We sent to her Our angel, and he appeared before her as a man in all respects. She said: "I seek refuge from you to the Most Gracious; (come not near) if you fear God. He said: "Nay, I am only a Messenger from thy Lord (to announce) to thee the gift of a holy son". She said: "How shall I have a son, seeing that no man has touched me, and I am not unchaste". He said: "So (it will be). Thy Lord says: 'That is easy for Me, and (We Wish) to appoint him as a Sign unto men and a Mercy from us'. It is a matter decreed". So she conceived him and she retired with him to a remote place. And the pains of childbirth drove her to the trunk of a palm tree. She cried: "Ah, would that I had died before this! Would that I have passed into oblivion!". But a voice cried to her "Grieve not! For your Lord has provided a rivulet beneath you; shake towards yourself the trunk of the palm tree; it will let fall fresh dates upon you. So eat and drink and cool you eye. And if you see any man say: 'I have vowed a fast to the Most Gracious, and this day will I enter into talk with no man' At length, she brought the babe to her people, carrying him (in her arms). They said: "O Mary! Truly an amazing thing have you brought. O sister of Aaron! Your father was not a man of evil, nor your mother an unchaste woman!". But she pointed to the babe, They said: "How can we talk to one who is a child in the cradle?". He (the babe) said: "I am indeed a Servant of God. He has given me revelation and made me a Prophet. And He has made me blessed wheresoever I be, and has enjoined on me prayer and charity as long as I live. He has made me kind to my mother and not overbearing or miserable. So peace is on me the day I was born, the day that I die and the day I shall be raised up to life!"(Mary:16-33)

The Mission of Jesus:

Christ Jesus the Son of Mary was a Messenger of God, and His Word, which He bestowed on Mary, and a Spirit proceeding from Him
(The Women:171)

We sent Jesus the Son of Mary, confirming the Law that had come before him. We sent him the Gospel. Therein was guidance and light
(The Repast:46)

The Messiah said: "O Children of Israel, worship God, my Lord and your Lord. Whoever sets up partners with God, then God has forbidden him Paradise, and the Fire will be his home"
(The Repast:72)

And remember Jesus, the Son of Mary said: "O Children of Israel! I am the messenger of God sent to you confirming the Law (which came) before me and giving

glad tidings of a messenger to come after me, whose name shall be Ahmed"' But when he came to them with clear signs, they said "'This is evident sorcery"
(The Battle array:6)

Miracles of Jesus:

God will say: "O Jesus the Son of Mary! Recount My Favour to you and your mother. Behold! I strengthened you with the Holy spirit, so that you spoke to the people in childhood and in maturity. Behold, I taught you the Book and Wisdom, the Law and the Gospel. And behold! You make out of clay, as it were, the figure of a bird, by My Leave, and you breath into it, and it becomes a bird by My Leave, and you heal those born blind, and the lepers by My Leave, and behold! You bring forth the dead by My Leave. And behold! I restrained the Children of Israel from you when you showed them the clear signs. And the unbelievers among them said: "This is nothing but evident magic". And behold! I inspired the disciples to have faith in Me and Mine Messenger. They said: "We have faith, and you bear witness that we bow down to God as those who surrender. Behold! The Disciples said: "O Jesus the Son of Mary! Can your Lord send down to us a table set (with viands) from heaven?". Said Jesus: "Fear God, if you have faith". They said: "we only wish to eat thereof and satisfy our hearts, and to know that you have indeed told us the truth, and that we ourselves may be witnesses to the miracle". Said Jesus the Son of Mary: "O God our Lord! Send us from heaven a Table set (with viands), that there may be for us – the first and the last of us – a solemn festival and a Sign from Thee; and provide for our sustenance, for Thou art the Best sustainer". God said: "I will send it down unto you; but if any of you after that resists faith, I will punish him with a penalty such as I have not inflicted on anyone among all the peoples"
(The Repast:110-115)

The Disciples of Jesus:

O ye who believe, champion God's (religion), like when Jesus, son of Mary said to the disciples: "Who will champion God's religion with me?". The disciples said: "We are the champions of God's (religion)". Then a group of the Children of Israel believed and a group disbelieved. So we supported those who believed against their enemy and they became victorious
(The Battle Array:14)

Then We sent after them Our Messengers, and We sent Jesus, son of Mary, and gave him the Gospel. And We put in the hearts of those who followed him compassion and mercy. But We did not command monasticism. Rather they invented it for themselves to please God with it
(Iron:27)

Ascension of Jesus:

Behold! God said: "O Jesus! I will take thee and raise thee to Myself and clear thee of those who blaspheme; I will make those who follow thee superior to those who reject faith, to the Day of resurrection; Then shall ye all return unto Me"
(Family Imraan:55)

They (Jews) said in boast: "We killed Christ Jesus, the Son of Mary, the Messenger of God". But they killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them when another was given his likeness (and they crucified him). And those who differ are full of doubts with no knowledge, but only conjecture to follow, for of a surety they killed him not – Nay, God raised him up unto Himself, and God is Exalted in Power, Wise. And there is none of the People of the Book (Jews and Christians) but must believe in him before his death; And on the Day of Judgement, he will be a witness against them
(The Women:153-159)

When we read these verses of the Qur'an, many things come to light about the life and times of Jesus. For one thing, it is clear from the Qur'an that Jesus was not born on December 25th. This even the West today acknowledges was the birthday of the Sun God which the early Christians adopted to ingratiate themselves with the powerful Roman Empire as well as to make it more appealing to its pagan masses.

In the Qur'an it is related of Mary:

And the pains of childbirth drove her to the trunk of a palm tree. She cried: "Ah, would that I had died before this! Would that I have passed into oblivion!". But a voice cried to her "Grieve not! For your Lord has provided a rivulet beneath you; shake towards yourself the trunk of the palm tree; it will let fall fresh dates upon you.So eat and drink and cool your eye".
(Mary:23-26)

This account suggests that Jesus could not have been born in Palestine during the winter, as no date trees fruit at that time. Interestingly, the Bible too supports this view. We read in the Gospel of Luke:

"*Now there were shepherds in that region living in the fields and keeping the night watch over their flock. The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were struck with great fear. The angel said to them: "Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For today in the city of David, a saviour has been born for you who is Messiah"* (Luke 2:8-11).

It is unlikely that if Jesus were born in December, shepherds would be out in the fields. So just as the shepherds could not have gone out in the cold with their flock, so don't dates grow in winter. Thus all the evidence suggests that Jesus was born in the summer.

It was a couple of centuries after his birth that the church fixed it as December 25 to coincide with the Roman festivals of *Dies natalis solis invicti*, 'Birthday of the unconquered sun' and the birthday of *Mithras*, an Iranian divinity popular with the Roman soldiers of the time, all of it part of an ancient solar cult that held that the sun commenced its annual journey around the heavens at the winter solstice.

The Qur'an tells us that Jesus was sent as a Messenger to the Children of Israel, confirming the law that came before him:

And remember Jesus, the Son of Mary said: "O Children of Israel! I am the messenger of God sent to you confirming the Law (which came) before me and giving glad tidings of a messenger to come after me, whose name shall be Ahmed"'
But when he came to them with clear signs, they said "'This is evident sorcery"
(The Battle Array:6)

This too is confirmed in the Bible what we read is that Jesus was a faithful Jew raised in the traditions of Israel. We read in the gospel of Luke that he was circumcised and named on the eighth day and that after Mary was purified, he was taken to Jerusalem as it was written "*Every male that opens the womb shall be consecrated to the Lord*" and that a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons were offered in sacrifice and that each year the family went to Jerusalem for the fest of Passover. In later years, he taught in a synagogue on the Sabbath and celebrated the Passover, the Jewish feast of unleavened bread which involved the sacrifice of a lamb, which is what the Last Supper celebrated with his disciples was all about (Luke 22:7-14).

Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount: "*Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish, but to fulfill. Amen, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or the smallest part of a latter will pass from the law, until all things have taken place. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do so will be called the least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever obeys and teaches these commandments will be called greatest in the kingdom of heaven. I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter into the kingdom of heaven*" (Matthew 5:17-20).

When a man asked Jesus: "*Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*" Jesus answered him: "*Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: You shall not kill; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; you shall not defraud; honour your father and your mother*" (Mark 10:17-19).

At the Feast of Tabernacles, Jesus went into the temple area and began to teach. The Jews were amazed and said: "*How does he know scripture without having studied?*". Jesus answered them: "*My teaching is not my own but is from the One who sent me. Whoever chooses to do His Will shall know whether my teaching is from God or whether I speak on my own. Whoever speaks on his own seeks his own glory, but whoever seeks the glory of the One who sent him is truthful*" (John 7:16-18).

That Jesus was a prophet there can be no doubt. He claimed to be no less and no more. We read in the Bible that when he was grown up, he proclaimed at a synagogue in Nazareth, in what was perhaps the first act of his mission: "*Amen, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own native place. Indeed, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah when the sky was closed for three and a half years and a severe famine spread over the entire land. It was to none of those that Elijah was sent, but only to a widow in Zarephath in the land of Sidon. Again, there were many lepers in Israel during the time of Ellisha the prophet; yet none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian".* When the people in the synagogue heard this, they were filled with fury and drove him out of the town (Luke 4:23-29). When some Pharisees told Jesus to go away, as Herod wanted to kill him, he replied: "*I must continue on my way today, tomorrow, and the following day, for it is impossible that a prophet should die outside of Jerusalem*" (Luke 13:33).

Being the forerunner of Muhammad, part of his mission was to convey the good news of the coming of this final messenger of God, as the Qur'an says, to give *glad tidings of a messenger to come after me, whose name shall be Ahmad*. In other words, he was to herald an era of a universal faith binding all humanity. Interestingly, the Qur'anic word for the New Testament *Injeel* comes from the Greek *Eu-angelion* meaning 'Good News". It is this Greek word that is also the origin of the English *Evangel*. So it seems that part of the good news Jesus was to convey was to announce the coming of the universal messenger. This was only part of his mission. A good part

of it had to do with conveying the news of the Heavenly Kingdom to Come, such as when he said to a crowd at Capernaum: "*To the other towns also I must proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God, because for this purpose I have been sent*" (Luke 4:43).

In the Qur'an we read that Jesus invited his people to the worship of the One True God:

The Messiah said: "O Children of Israel, worship God, my Lord and your Lord. Whoever sets up partners with God, God will forbid him Paradise, and the Fire will be his home"
(The Repast:72)

This is exactly what we read in the Bible as well. You only have to look at the Lord's Prayer taught by Jesus:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your Name, Your Kingdom come, Your Will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread; and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not unto temptation, but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom and the power and the glory are yours for ever.

Or what he preached in the Sermon on the Mount:

"Not everyone who says to me 'lord', 'lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. Many will say to me that day 'Lord. lord, did we not prophesy in your name? Did we not do mighty deeds in your name?' Then I will declare to them solemnly ' I never knew you. Depart from me, you evildoers"
(Matthew 7:21-23)

The real Jesus lived his life as a Servant of the One True God, keeping His Most Important Commandment in the Bible: "*You shall not have other gods besides Me. You shall not carve idols for yourselves in the shape of anything in the sky above, or the earth below or in the waters beneath the earth; you shall not bow down before them or worship them. For I, the Lord, your God, am a Jealous God, inflicting punishment for their father's wickedness on the children of those who hate me, down to the third and fourth generation; but bestowing Mercy down to the thousandth generation, on the children of those who love me and keep My Commandments*" (Exodus 20:3-6).

We read in the Bible that Jesus fasted for forty days and forty nights in the desert and refused to be tempted by the devil. The devil took him up to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in their magnificence and said: "*All these I shall give to you, if you will prostrate yourself and worship me". Hearing this Jesus said: "Get away Satan! It is written: "the Lord Your God, shall you worship and Him alone shall you serve*". And so the devil left him and the angels came and ministered to him (Matthew 4:8-11).

That he was clearly a Prophet he himself said, such as when he was rejected at Nazareth: "*A Prophet is not without honour except in his native place*" (Matthew 13:57) and: *'A prophet is not without honour, except in his hometown, and among his own kin, and in his own house*" (Mark 6:4). The people around him also

acknowledged him as such: "*The crowds answered: 'This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee*'. (Matthew 21:11).

But Jesus was also special. He was a Sign for mankind like no other man before him. Mary and Jesus are called in the Qur'an, *Ayatan Lil Alameen* - a Sign for all the Worlds: "*And (remember) she who guarded her chastity. We breathed into her of our spirit, and we made her and her son a Sign for all peoples*" (The Prophets: 91). We read of God telling Mary through the angel Gabriel: "*And we will make him (Jesus) a Sign unto men and a Mercy from us*" (Mary:21). We also read: "*And (Jesus) is a Sign of (the coming of) the Hour (of Judgement). So do not doubt it but follow me. This is the straight path (leading to God and paradise)*" (Ornaments of Gold: 61).

Jesus was a Sign of God for many reasons. He was miraculously born of a virgin mother without a human father; he was bring back the dead to life; and he will return to the earth to slay the Antichrist in the end times, all by the power of God.His virgin birth should however not be taken that God was his father, for God is above having a son. As we read in the Qur'an:

Relate in the Book (the story of) Mary, when she withdrew from her family to a place in the East. She placed a screen (to screen herself) from them; then We sent to her Our angel, and he appeared before her as a man in all respects. She said: "I seek refuge from you to the Most Gracious; (come not near) if you fear God. He said: "Nay, I am only a Messenger from thy Lord (to announce) to thee the gift of a holy son". She said: "How shall I have a son, seeing that no man has touched me, and I am not unchaste". He said: "So (it will be). Thy Lord says: 'That is easy for Me, and (We Wish) to appoint him as a Sign unto men and a Mercy from us'. It is a matter decreed"(Mary:16-21).

Likewise in the Bible there is nothing to suggest that the virgin birth meant God fathered Jesus:
"*The angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary. And coming to her, he said: "Hail, favoured one! The Lord is with you". But she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. Then the angel said to her: "Do not be afraid Mary, for you have found favour with God. Behold you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus". But Mary said to the angel: "How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?" And the angel said to her: "The holy spirit will come upon you*" (Luke 1:26-35).

We read in the Qur'an that God had only to say *"Be!*" and he was, just like in the case of Adam:

It is not befitting to God that He should beget a son. Glory be to Him!
When He determines a matter, He only says to it "Be" and it is
(Mary: 35)

The similitude of Jesus before God is as that of Adam. He created him from dust,
then said to him "Be!" and he was
(Family Imraan: 59)

O People of the Book! Commit no excesses in your religion, nor say of God aught but the truth. Christ Jesus the Son of Mary was a Messenger of God, and His Word, which He bestowed on Mary, and a Spirit proceeding from Him. So believe in God and His Messengers. Say not: "Trinity", desist, it will be better for you. For God is One God. Glory be to Him
(The Women:171)

Here we learn that Jesus was a Word of God which He bestowed on Mary. This Word cannot be anything but the word 'Be' which emanated from God when He wished to create Jesus: "*The similitude of Jesus before God is that of Adam. He created him from dust, then said to him 'Be', and he was*" (Family Imraan:59).

In John's Gospel we read that *the Word was with God and The Word became flesh, and made his dwelling among us* reflecting an early Christians held that Jesus came to be as a result of the Word of God. When God says in the Qur'an that Jesus was His Word, which He bestowed on Mary, it means exactly the same thing. He said *'Be!*' and he was!

Jesus also performed many miracles by the leave of God:

O Jesus the Son of Mary! Recount My Favour to you and your mother. Behold! I strengthened you with the Holy spirit, so that you spoke to the people in childhood and in maturity. Behold, I taught you the Book and Wisdom, the Law and the Gospel. And behold! You make out of clay, as it were, the figure of a bird, by My Leave, and you breath into it, and it becomes a bird by My Leave, and you heal those born blind, and the lepers by My Leave, and behold! You bring forth the dead by My Leave
(The Repast:110)

Here we find that the words "*By My Leave*" are repeated with each miracle to stress that it were only possible through God's Will and not due to any inherent power of Jesus.

Jesus many miracles are also found in the Bible, like when he said to a dead girl the words *Talitha Koum* (little girl, I say to you, arise!) and she arose immediately (Mark 5:41-42) or when he healed ten lepers met him who came pleading: "*Jesus, master have pity on us!*". They were cleansed, but only one, a Samaritan, returned to glorify God, whereupon Jesus said: *"Ten were cleansed were they not? Where are the other nine? Has none but this foreigner returned to give thanks to God?*" (Luke 17:11-18) or when he healed the blind like Bartimaeus whom he came across sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth who had come, he began to shout "*Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!*". Jesus stopped and said, "*Call him*" "*What do you want me to do for you?*" Jesus asked him. The blind man said, "*Rabbi, I want to see*" "*Go*" said Jesus, "*your faith has healed you*." Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road (Mark 10:46-52).

Jesus' miracles were a Sign from God and as the Qur'an says was by the leave of God. Even Jesus acknowledged this when he said: "*I can of mine own self do nothing. As I hear I judge, and my judgement is just, because I seek to do not my own will, but the will of Him who sent me"* (John 5:30). His disciples too accepted it as such, for did not Peter say about Jesus: "*Ye men of Israel, hear these words, Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you*" (Acts 2:22). Once they saw a man blind

from birth and his disciples asked Jesus "*Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?*". "*Neither this man nor his parents sinned*," said Jesus, "*but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. As long as it is day, we must do the works of Him who sent me*". He spat on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. "*Go*" he told him, "*Wash in the Pool of Siloam*". So the man went and washed, and came home seeing. When people saw him and asked how his eyes were opened, he replied: "*The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see*".

Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man's eyes was a Sabbath. Therefore the Pharisees also asked him how he had received his sight. "*He put mud on my eyes*," the man replied, "*and I washed, and now I see*." Some of the Pharisees said, "*This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath*". But others asked, "*How can a sinner perform such signs?*" So they were divided. Then they turned again to the blind man, "*What have you to say about him? It was your eyes he opened*." The man replied, "*He is a prophet*" Then they hurled insults at him and said, "*You are this fellow's disciple! We are disciples of Moses! We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don't even know where he comes from*." The man answered, "*Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does his will. Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.*" To this they replied, "*You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!*" And they threw him out (John 9: 1-34).

So there you are, Jesus himself says before giving sight to the blind man: "*As long as it is day, we must do the works of Him who sent m*e". And the blind man who had gained his sight himself says when asked about Jesus miracles: "*He is a prophet*" and "*If this man were not from God, he could do nothing*".

Jesus' disciples were in the early days of his mission wanting in faith in that they had a childish desire for miracles, though otherwise good men. They also seem to have been obsessed a bit too much with physical food than spiritual sustenance. This is perhaps why we find in the gospels many miracles concerned with food such as the conversion of five loaves and two little fishes into food for 5000 people, which interestingly is the only miracle recorded in all the four gospels. In the Qur'an we have an entire chapter named after the disciples' entreaty to Jesus to send them a table from heaven, in *Surah Al Maidah* or the Chapter of the Table: Behold! The Disciples said: "*O Jesus the Son of Mary! Can your Lord send down to us a table set (with viands) from heaven?*". Said Jesus: "*Fear God, if you have faith*". They said: "*We only wish to eat thereof and satisfy our hearts, and to know that you have indeed told us the truth, and that we ourselves may be witnesses to the miracle*". Said Jesus the Son of Mary: "*O God our Lord! Send us from heaven a Table set (with viands), that there may be for us – the first and the last of us – a solemn festival and a Sign from Thee; and provide for our sustenance, for Thou art the Best sustainer*".

Finally, the Qur'an clears Jesus of the charges of blasphemy his Jewish opponents had brought against him:

Behold! God said: "O Jesus! I will take thee and raise thee to Myself and clear thee of those who blaspheme; I will make those who follow thee superior to those who reject faith, to the Day of resurrection; Then shall ye all return unto Me"
(Family Imraan:55)

And behold! God will say: "O Jesus the son of Mary! Did you say unto men 'Worship me and my mother as gods in derogation of God?". He will say: "Glory to Thee. Never could I say what I had no right (to say). Had I said such a thing, Thou would have known it. Thou knows what is in my heart, though I know not what is in Thine. For Thou knows in full all that is hidden. Never said I to them except that which Thou commanded me to say: 'worship God, my Lord and your Lord'. And I was a witness over them whilst I dwelt among them; when Thou took me up Thou were the witness over them and Thou art a witness to all things"
(The Repast:116-117)

We gather from the Bible that the Jews never liked Jesus' moral teachings and sought various ways and means of ridding themselves of him before finally settling down to crucify him on a false charge of blasphemy. The charge brought against him was blasphemy. The chief priests tried to obtain false testimony against Jesus in order to put him to death, but they found none. When the high priest Caiaphas said to him: "I *order you to tell us under oath before the Living God, whether you are the Messiah, the Son of God*" Jesus replied: "*You have said so. But I tell you: from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming on the clouds of heaven*" whereupon the high priest tore his robes and said: "*He has blasphemed!*"(Matthew 26:59-66).

What Jesus was referring to was his imminent departure from earth and coming in the end times to rule the earth, which we Muslims also believe in and which finds mention in the Gospel of Matthew: "*Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heaven shall be shaken. And then shall appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven, and then shall all the tribes of earth mourn, and they shall see the son of Man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory*" (Matthew 24:29-30).

Now, if indeed Jesus had really blasphemed, one may ask why the Jewish priests could find no evidence of blasphemy against him. If indeed, saying that one was the '*Son of God'* amounted to blasphemy they would have used it against him, but they couldn't. Either because the expression was accepted to mean '*a man of God'* or because Jesus never employed it to refer to himself, rather calling himself '*the son of man*' as if to emphasize his human nature. Rather, it would appear that it was Caiaphas the High Priest who wanted to put the claim in Jesus' mouth when he cried out: "*I order you to tell us under oath before the Living God, whether you are the Messiah, the Son of God*".

But Jesus would have none of it, referring to himself simply as *barnasha* '*son of man'* not only on the above occasion, but also on numerous others: "*I tell you, everyone who acknowledge me before others the Son of Man will acknowledge before the angels of God. But whoever denies me before others will be denied before the angels of God*" (Luke 12:8-9). Interestingly, the Aramaic word *barnasha* 'Son of man' used by him, could also mean 'Son of woman' since *nasha* can mean man or woman or humanity in general. Thus we have in the Aramaic Bible the angel saying to Mary: '*barikta b'nasha'* 'blessed art thou among women' (Luke 1:28). In like manner, the Qur'an almost always refers to Jesus as *Isa Ibn Maryam* 'Jesus. Son of Mary'.

Indeed Jesus declared, as if seeing the things to come: "*But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men*" (Matthew 15:9). It seems that all Jesus wanted his followers to do to earn a place in the hereafter was to

acknowledge him as a human being, not as the '*Son of God'* or even '*God'* as most churches hold. Indeed he always distinguished between God and himself, as did his disciples.

The word *Lord* used by his disciples to address Jesus cannot be said to imply divinity since it was very likely expressed as *rabbi* 'my lord', the usual term of address by the Jews to their priests who are still known as such. While in Matthew's Bible, Peter says to Jesus: "*Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish I will make three tents here*" (Matthew 17:4) in Mark we read Peter saying: "*Rabbi, it is good that we are here! Let us make three tents*" (Mark 9:5). What all this shows is that Jesus never claimed to be God or the Son of God. Nor did his disciples regard him as such.

Unfortunately most Jesus' later followers concurred with the Jewish charge of blasphemy against Jesus and adopted the substance of the claim, to the extent of making it the cornerstone of their faith. Moreover, to stave off the stigma of his crucifixion the Jews taunted them with, they adopted it as a cardinal tenet of their faith, in the belief that they could elevate Christ through it, that he gave himself up as a willing sacrifice to save mankind from their sins inherited from Adam. It was henceforth nothing to be ashamed of, but rather boasted about with pride as the bed-rock of their faith. On the other hand, we Muslims reject both the Jews' charge of blasphemy against Jesus and his crucifixion which the Jews so much gloated about, and instead hold that this righteous messenger of God was saved by God and taken up to Himself. It follows then that Jesus neither blasphemed nor died on the cross, thus rendering invalid the Christian belief that Jesus claimed to be God and that he sacrificed himself on the cross to save humanity from their sins.

As we have seen above, Jesus' mission was to the children of Israel. That he was sent to the Jews and not the rest of humanity is seen from the incident where a Canaanite woman called out to him: "*Have pity on me lord, Son of David! My daughter is tormented by a demon*" to which he responded: "*I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs*". She replied: "*Please lord, for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters*" and Jesus said to her: "*O woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish*". And her daughter was healed (Matthew 15:21-28). What this shows is that although Jesus obliged this gentile woman out of his great compassion, his mission was to be confined to the Jews.

Despite all this, Jesus, the great prophet he was, knew what was coming to the Jews. Once, impressed with the pious words of a Roman Centurion in Capernaum, he said to his followers: "*Amen, I say to you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. I say to you, many will come from the east and the west, and will recline with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob at the banquet in the kingdom of heaven, but the children of the kingdom will be driven out into the outer darkness, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth*" (Matthew 8:5-12). Thus although Jesus made it clear that he was sent unto the lost sheep of Israel, he also observed that those of other nations would enter heaven and dine with the patriarchs while the rebellious children of Israel, who could not brook the idea of a gentile ever gaining salvation, would taste only sorrow and woe.

Islam went further. It recognized that other nations could also follow the teachings of Jesus. Although Jesus was sent as a messenger to the Jews, it does not mean that his teachings were not valid for others, since a prophet's teachings contain certain universal truths like the belief in One God, the need to do good and so on. The Jews, except for a very few who became the earliest Christians, rejected his mission. The

gentiles to whom it was not originally meant, embraced it. In the Qur'an we find God telling Jesus: "*I will make those who follow thee superior to those who reject faith to the Day of Resurrection. Then shall ye all return unto Me*" (Family Imraan: 55). What this tells us is that Christians would be superior to the Jews, which could also mean being numerically superior, which is only possible if converts from other races were also taken into the fold of Christ's followers.

Although Jesus wished to confine his mission to the Jews, some of his followers in Antioch who lived among the pagans thought otherwise and sent word to Jerusalem requesting the disciples there to send a learned man to spread the message of Jesus among the pagans. So they chose Barnabas who thus became the first missionary in Christian history. It was due to his efforts that "*much people were added unto the Lord*" (Acts II:24). The early Jewish Christians felt that the mission should be confined to Jews and ought not to be extended to the Pagans. In the end, Barnabas who felt the truth should be extended to everyone won out. However, it was not only Barnabas. The head of the apostles Peter as well as a later convert Paul thought likewise.

It happened one day that Cornelius the Centurion summoned Peter to his home where many people were gathered together. Peter told him: "*You know that it is unlawful for a Jewish man to associate with, or visit a gentile, but God has shown me that I should not call any person profane or unclean*". Cornelius replied: "*I was at prayer in my house when suddenly a man in dazzling robes stood before me and said 'Cornelius, you prayer has been heard'*". "*Now therefore*" said Cornelius "*We are all here in the presence of God to listen to all that you have been commanded by the Lord*". Peter responded: "*In truth, I see that God shows no partiality. Rather, in every nation whoever fears him and acts uprightly is acceptable to him*". He then proceeded to baptize Cornelius, much to the astonishment of the circumcised believers who had accompanied him. They were astonished to hear the gentiles speaking in tongues and glorifying God (Acts 10: 28-48). Peter in doing so was acting in the true spirit of his master Jesus whose mercy extended to all alike- Jew or Gentile.

When the Jewish Christians in Judea, the apostles and the brethren, heard that the gentiles had accepted the Word of God, they confronted Peter in Jerusalem: "*You entered the house of uncircumcised people and ate with them*". But they were convinced by Peter that this was the way to go, seeing that God had given them "*the same gift he gave to us*". Hearing this, they glorified God, saying: "*God has then granted life-giving repentance to the Gentiles too*" (Acts 11:1-8).

In Antioch too some Cypriots had begun to preach to the Greeks with success and when the news reached the ears of the church in Jerusalem, they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw the grace of God he rejoiced and encouraged them all to remain faithful to the Lord, for he was a good man filled with faith, so that a large number of people were added to the community (Acts 11:19-24). It also happened one day that the disciples were at Antioch. Almost the whole city had gathered to hear the word of the Lord and the Jews seeing the crowds were filled with jealousy. But Barnabas and Paul spoke out: "*It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first, but since you reject it and condemn yourselves as unworthy of eternal life, we now turn to the gentiles*" (Acts 13:44-46). Such incidents marked the break of Christianity from Judaism, for the gentile members of the community enabled it to stand out from Judaism.

But Paul of Tarsus whom Barnabas had enlisted to support him in the task betrayed that trust. Paul, who was to define Christianity as we know it today had

never known Jesus, nor was he acquainted with Jesus closest disciples. Indeed, he had been one of the greatest enemies of Jesus' teachings and persecuted the early church. He was earlier known as Saul and made a havoc of the church in Jerusalem, entering house after house and committing men and women to prison (Acts 8:1-3).

He breathed murderous threats against the disciples and even went to the high priest asking for letters to the synagogues in Damascus that if he found any belonging to the way, he might bring them to Jerusalem in chains (9:1-2) But suddenly Paul, then called Saul, changed. On his way to Damascus he claimed to have seen Jesus in a vision. Soon after his conversion, he stayed with the followers of Jesus in Damascus and "*begun at once to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God*" (9:20). This sudden change from orthodox Jew to virtual heretic, was a turning point in Christianity, defining what it would be.

It was Paul's handiwork that made Jesus what he was not; he it was who made '*the son of man*' the '*Son of God'* so that the true historical Jesus was obliterated in favour of a figure approaching divinity in the Greek tradition. Yes, it was Paul's magic that did that trick, making a 'god' out of a man!

Paul however did not have it that easy. When he sought out Jesus' disciples in Jerusalem, quite understandably they received him with suspicion as his persecutions were still fresh in their minds. As the Bible says: "*But they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple*". It was Barnabas, whom he would later fall out with, who spoke in favour of him, in spite of the unanimous opposition of the others. He took charge of and brought him before the apostles who admitted him into their fold (Acts 9: 26-30). It proved to be a costly mistake for Jesus himself had warned of men like Paul when he told his disciples on the Mount of Olives: "*See that no one deceives you. Many will come in my name saying "I am he" and they will deceive many*" (Mark 13:5-6).

If only his disciples had taken his words more seriously. Although Barnabas trusted that Paul would be a good Christian, the trust was betrayed. Paul's method was not only to reach out to the Pagans, but also to appeal to their Pagan beliefs, so that Christianity would be more readily acceptable to them, effectively clothing Jesus' teachings in Pagan garb. This was needless to say the point of departure between Barnabas and Paul.

So they went their separate ways, Barnabas to Cyprus to preach the message of Divine Unity and Paul to the rest of the Greek world to win the heathen to a Christianity he had corrupted and made palpable to them. The true disciples of Christ opposed him in the only way they could, with their tongues, and made some headway, which is why Paul was forced to justify his approach in his epistle to the Galatians as a revelation from Christ himself: "*I am amazed that you are so quickly forsaking the one who called you by grace for a different gospel. There are some who are disturbing you and wish to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let that one be accursed! I want you to know brethren that the Gospel preached by me is not of man, For I neither received it of man, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ*" (Galatians 1:6-12).

So here we are, the man's true arrogance exposed to the core, where he is even blaspheming the angels of God as accursed if they were to preach a gospel other than his own. Paul's compromise with Graeco-Roman beliefs meant that Pauline Christianity grew in numbers and strength in the Mediterranean region, where such beliefs were strong, and from there to the rest of Europe. The rest is of course history.

This is no better summed up than by Dr.Arnold Meyer, Professor of Theology at Zurich University:

"*If by Christianity, we understand faith in Christ as the heavenly son of God, who did not belong to earthly humanity, but who lived in the Divine likeness and glory, who came down from heaven to earth, who entered humanity and took upon a human form through a virgin, that he might make propitiation for men's sins by his own blood upon the cross, who was then awakened from death and raised to the right hand of God, as the Lord of his own people who believe in him, who hears their prayers, guards and leads them, Who, moreover dwells and works personally in each of them, who will come again with the clouds of heaven to judge the world, who will cast down all the foes of God, and will bring his own people with him unto the home of heavenly light so that they may become like His glorified body – if this is Christianity, then such Christianity was founded by St.Paul, and not by our Lord*".

18th Night

Johnny: It's strange don't you think. Nowhere did Jesus or his disciples ever prophesy that Christianity would grow to be the largest faith in terms of numbers. Even the early Christians before Constantine believed that the kingdom was "*not of this world*" as Jesus said. And to think that today Christianity is the greatest faith in terms of numbers. So my next question is:

Why don't Muslims believe that Jesus is the Son of God and in the Trinity which is a central tenet of Christianity?

There is no authority in either the Old or New Testament of the Bible for the existence of the Trinity. Christianity in the age of the apostles as we glean from the New Testament always speaks of God in the singular and is entirely devoid of the idea of a Trinity or attributing to Jesus a Divinity. Rather, it was the product of a gradual evolution when Christianity came under pagan influence and incorporated many of its features, finally to be summed up by Athanasius: '*The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, and yet there are not three but One God*'.

Thus it came to be known as the Athanasian Creed, though even Athanasius who is considered the father of the creed, was unsure of its truth, confessing that whenever he forced his understanding to mediate on the divinity of Jesus, his toilsome and unavailing efforts recoiled on themselves, and that the more he wrote, the less capable was he of expressing his thoughts. To this day, the idea of Trinity is unclear to most Christians. This core, this very foundation of the faith of the mainstream churches is not crystal clear to its adherents! What more can I say? How can you have blind belief in such an idea without being able to comprehend it? Not just little children, even ripened scholars find it difficult to come to grasp with it, so unlike the simple yet profound idea of God's Unity Islam teaches and which even little kids can understand. Yes, the very bedrock of Islam, its uncompromising monotheism is clear to all, while the church has built its foundations on a very faulty premise that even the most erudite of its flock cannot comprehend.

Biblical scripture nowhere teaches anything about a triple god known as the Trinity, this ridiculous idea that there are three separate beings, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost residing in the person of One God and who are both one and many at the same time. In fact the idea entered the church only a couple of centuries after Christ when Tertullian who lived in the second century officially introduced the term *Trinitas* into Christianity by way of his writings. It was further popularized by his contemporary Theophilus in the form *triados* and finally crystallised as a firm doctrine best captured in the words of the Catholic Church: *'The Father is God, the Son is God and the Holy Spirit is God, and yet there are not three gods but One God. The persons are co-eternal and co-equal; all alike are uncreated and competent'*.

The idea was not introduced all of a sudden. It had Pagan antecedents since a triad of divinities was found in many cultures of the old world, the result perhaps of sanctifying things in threes inspired by the three basic elements of earth, air and water, or the three basic states of solid, liquid and gas or three levels of material existence, mineral, plant and animal, or else inspired by an equally materalistic view of the deities forming a family as humans do, as seen in the Egyptian Osiris, Isis and Horus. Either way, it eventually led to a triad of deities as seen in the Sumerian Anu, Enlil and Enki, the Greek Zeus, Athena and Apollo, the Roman Jupiter, Mars, Quirinus and Old Germanic Wotan, Wili and Weh. The leading Pagan minds of the time, used as they were to the old order of things in threes to which they attached

great superstitious significance could not easily break free of the idea. It is no surprise therefore that when they adopted Christianity they simply passed it on by subverting its original message of monotheism by corrupting it to a belief in three gods in one.

So let's give it some serious thought. This idea of a Trinity is not just only a confusing notion, but more seriously, it undermines the Unity of God and hence ought to be anathema to the good Christian as it is to the good Muslim. The doctrine puts before the devotee three distinct beings having equal claim on his heart, thus depriving the One True Creator of our supreme affection which is His due, and His alone. But not only does it go against the Oneness of God, but also against reason.

Ask yourself: If God has three independent minds, wouldn't the result be chaos? So even the very order we see in the universe goes against this ridiculous idea. Ask yourself again, if indeed these three are one, being different forms of the manifestation of the same divine being, inseparable and containing one another, how is it that when Jesus died on the cross, the Father and the Holy Ghost did not die with him? This dilemma or rather trilemma has led to much hair-splitting arguments with scholars spilling ink over it and martyrs spilling blood over it, and still getting nowhere. Little wonder then that Paolo Sozzini, an Italian Unitarian and a good Christian felt it necessary to expose this error, writing that "*The spirit of the Anti-Christ hath not introduced more dangerous an error into the Church of Christ than this doctrine which teaches us that there are three distinct persons in the most simple essence of God each of which is itself God*".

This is why the Qur'an condemns such blasphemies in no vague terms:

It is not befitting to God that He should beget a son. Glory be to Him!
When He determines a matter, He only says to it "Be" and it is"
(Mary:35)

They do blaspheme who say: "God is Christ the Son of Mary". But said Christ: "O Children of Israel! Worship God, my Lord and your Lord". Whoever joins other gods with God- God will forbid him the Garden, and the Hellfire will be his abode
(The Repast: 72)

They do blaspheme who say: God is one of three in a Trinity;
for there is no god except One God
(The Repast:73)

Now, to the question of Jesus' birth without a human father, which both Muslims and Christians hold to be true. Is it really impossible for Jesus to have been created without a male? Take the case of Adam who was created without male or female or of Eve who was created without a female as she had no mother but was taken from Adam. Thus all possibilities of creation have been possible with God:

1) No male, no female (Adam)

2) Male, but no female (Eve)

3) Female, but no male (Jesus)

4) Male and female (Rest of humanity)

As I said, all things are possible with God. As God says in the Qur'an: "*The similitude of Jesus before God is as that of Adam. He created him from dust, then said to him "Be!" and he was*" (Family Imraan:59). God denounces the divinity of Christ with a further argument: "*If it were Our Will, we could make angels from among you, succeeding each other on the earth*" (Ornaments of Gold: 60). This is because angels are created without father or mother.

The early followers of Jesus regarded him as a prophet who had been bestowed many gifts by God, including working miracles, but not divinity. Indeed there is reason to believe that the early Christians were even more monotheistic than the Jews.

When a scribe asked Jesus about the commandments, he replied: "*The first is this: Hear O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these*". The scribe said to him: "*well said, teacher, you are right in saying 'He is One and there is no other than He'. And to love Him with all your heart, with all your understanding, with all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself is worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices*". When Jesus saw that he answered with understanding, he said to him: "*You are not far from the Kingdom of God*" (Mark 12:28-34).

Jesus claimed to be no more than a Prophet. When some Pharisees told Jesus to go away, as Herod wanted to kill him, he replied: "*I must continue on my way today, tomorrow, and the following day, for it is impossible that a prophet should die outside of Jerusalem*" (Luke 13:33). He also stressed again and again he was no more than a man of God: "*But now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth which I heard from God*" (John 8:40).

Jesus said to his disciples: "*The days will come when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, but you will not see it. There will be those who will say to you 'Look there he is' or 'Look, here he is'. Do not go off. Do not run in pursuit. For just as lightening flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be. But first he must suffer greatly and be rejected by this generation. As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be in the days of the Son of Man*" (Luke 17:22-26).

Here Jesus calls himself not only the *Son of Man* to emphasize his human nature, but also clearly implies he is a prophet who in the tradition of Noah will be rejected by his own people.

Even in later times, when Jesus had departed from the world, we read of Jesus' followers telling a traveler who had inquired about what sort of things they were discussing: "*The things that happened to Jesus the Nazarene, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people*" (Luke 24: 19). Indeed, Peter, his close disciple interpreted the saying of Moses: "*A Prophet like me will the Lord, Your God, raise up for you*" to refer to Jesus (Acts 3:22).

The apostles were very clear that Jesus was no more than a man. That's why we have Peter saying: "*Ye men of Israel, hear these words, Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you*" (Acts 2:22). That's why we read in the Gospel of John: "*Now this is life eternal, that they might know Thee, the Only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent*" (17:3).

How, it may be asked, if as the Trinitarians hold, Christ were indeed God, the apostles could continue to call Jesus a man in the Book of Acts which records their sayings, and in their many epistles? It is obvious that they regarded him as a man among men and nothing that could even approach the divine.

Now I ask how can Jesus be God or the Son of God when he himself beseeched God in the Garden of Gethsemane: "*Let this cup pass from me; yet, not as I will, but as you will*" (Matthew 26:39). Thus if God and Jesus have two different wills, how can they be one?

Jesus said, speaking of the Day of Judgement: "*Of that Day knows no man, no, not the angels of heaven, not the Son, but the Father only*" (Mark 13:32). If indeed Jesus were divine, how could he say that he does not know of that Day which God alone knows. Would that not put him in the ridiculous position of knowing and not knowing something at the same time?

Jesus expressly spoke of God as another, one other than himself. In John we read: "*The father is greater than I*" (14:28) and "*Of my self I can do nothing*" (5:30).

What all this shows is that Jesus never called himself God. All he claimed was that he was a Messenger of God to his people Israel.Did not Jesus say raising his eyes to heaven: "*Now this is eternal life, that they should know you, the only True God, and the one whom you sent, Jesus Christ. I glorified you on earth by accomplishing the work that you gave me to do*" (John 17:3-4).

That he was a prophet is clear from his own words: "*Whatsoever I have heard from Him, these things I speak*" (John 8:26). As he himself said: "*The first of all the commandments is Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is One Lord*" (Mark 12:29)

And as if that were not enough, Jesus warned his followers that he would be deified, but in vain: "*But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men*" (Matthew 15:9). Here Jesus is telling us explicitly not to worship him. What more proof do you need to show that Jesus is not God?

As for how the idea that Jesus was God's Son arose, this is not difficult to explain. For one thing, he was born without a human father of a virgin mother. But this does not make him any less human than you or I. Was not Adam created without a human father?. Just because God creates a being and give it life, it does not mean He is its father. Further, such expressions as Children of God were used metaphorically in the Old Testament itself like when Israel is told: "*You are children of the Lord, your God*" (Deuteronomy 14:1). Moreover, the children of Israel are called God's Children and He their Father in the Song of Moses:

A faithful God without deceit, how just and upright He is!
Yet basely has He been treated by His degenerate children, a perverse and crooked race! Is the Lord to be thus repaid by you, O stupid and foolish people?
Is He not your Father who created you?
(Deuteronomy 32:4-6)

We also read in the Song of Moses:

When the Most High assigned the nations their heritage
When he parceled out the descendants of Adam
He set up the boundaries of the peoples
After the number of the Sons of God
(Deuteronomy 32:8)

In John's Gospel we find the disciple Nathaniel declaring of Jesus: "*Rabbi, you are the Son of God, you are the King of Israel*" (John 1:49). This is simply a reiteration of the title of the Davidic King in the Old Testament, where God is said to promise David: "*When your time comes and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your heir after you, sprung from your loins, and I will make his kingdom firm. It is he who shall build a house for my name. And I will make his royal throne firm forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me*" (Samuel 7:12-14). A later Psalm has the Davidic ruler crying out "Y*ou are my Father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation*" while God is said to make him "*the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth*" (Psalm 89:26-27). This serves as the background of the cryptic Psalm 2:7 where Yahweh says to the king, "*You are my son; this day I have begotten you*."

It is this prophecy that forms the basis of the Jewish expectation of the Messiah, the fulfillment of which the Christians saw in Jesus. Now, we ask, how could Jesus have sprung from David's loins, if as Christians hold, he was conceived without a human father? Thus the words: "*I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me*" cannot apply to him. It was this paradox that prompted Paul to declare in Romans (1:3-4) that Jesus is of the seed or lineage of David in the flesh, but a "Son of God" in the Spirit.

When the Jews claimed to be the Children of God, saying "*We have one father, God*", Jesus said to them: "*If God were your father, you would love me, for I come from God and I am here; I did not come on my own, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I am saying? Because you cannot bear to hear my word. You belong to your father the devil and you willingly carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks in character, because he is a liar and the father of lies*" (John 8:41-44).

It is clear here that both Jesus and the Jews used 'father' for God in a metaphorical sense as their creator and cherisher. Indeed,references to Israel as the Son of God is not uncommon in the Bible. In Exodus we read: *Thus saith the Lord, Israel is My Son, even my Firstborn* (4:22). In Genesis we will find angels too being called Sons of God: *The Sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair, and they took wives of all that they chose* (6:1-2).

That Father was meant to be used metaphorically is seen even in the *Lord's Prayer* which Jesus taught his followers. Here you will find the word 'Father' being used in a general sense as a term of address to the almighty by the faithful and not in relation to Jesus.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your Name, Your Kingdom come, Your Will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread; and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors; and subject us not to the final test, but deliver us from the evil one

We also read in the Bible that Jesus said to Mary Magdalene: "*I ascend unto my Father and your Father; and to my God, and your God"* (John 20:17). Here Jesus uses the word Father for God not only in relation to himself, but to his followers, as if he were using '*Father'* in the sense of Creator or Lord. Thus if he used '*Father'*, it was only in a metaphorical sense.

However, it is also possible that in both the Lord's Prayer and his words to Mary Magdalene, Jesus actually used the word *rab* meaning 'lord' in his native Aramaic instead of *ab* 'father'. Although the Lord's prayer is called as such, we do not have a single reference to the word 'Lord' in it. This view is further supported by the fact that the Islamic Lord's Prayer, the Suratul Fatiha, addresses God as *Rabb* or 'Lord' in the opening lines: *Alhamdulillahi Rabbil Alameen* which means 'Praise be to God, Lord of the Worlds'. It may well be that in later times, copyists of the Bible, compelled by dishonest theologians, replaced the word *rab* with *ab*.

Further, Jesus probably referred to himself as servant of God or *abad alaha* in his native Aramaic. When the gospel was translated into Greek the term *abad* 'servant' or 'slave' was rendered as *pias* which meant in Greek both servant as well as child. Thus *pais Theou* used by Luke in the Acts came to mean *Son of God* replacing the original meaning of *Servant of God*. In fact Acts 3:13 is an allusion to Isaiah 52:13 which mentions 'the glorification of the servant' showing that servant, not son, was the original meaning.

Likewise other passages in the Bible have also been subject to interpolation, like when Jesus is supposed to have said:

When the Son of Man comes in His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates his sheep from the goats, and He will set the sheep on His right hand but the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those on His right hand, "Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you took Me in, I was naked and you clothed Me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me." (Matthew 25:31–36). Then He will also say to those on the left hand, "Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave Me no food, I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me. Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life. (Matthew 45–46)

Islam speaks in a very similar vein where it is not Jesus but God who judges men, as a saying of the Prophet has it:

God will say: "I asked you for food and you did not feed Me'. He (Man) will say: 'Lord, how could I feed You when You did not ask me for food and You are the Lord of the universe?' He will say: 'Do you not know that My slave so-and-so asked you for food and you did not feed him? Do you not know that if you had fed him, you would have found that action with Me? Son of Adam, I asked you for water and you did not give Me water.' The man will reply: 'O Lord, how could I give you water when You are the Lord of the universe?' He will say: 'My slave so-and-so asked you for water and you did not give him water. Do you not know that if you had given him

water, you would have found that action with Me? Son of Adam, I was ill and you did not visit Me.' He will say: 'O Lord, how could I visit You when You are the Lord of the universe?' He will say, 'Do you not know that My slave so-and-so was ill. If you had visited him you would have found Me with him" (Adab Al Mufrad).

Indeed, how we ask can Jesus judge all nations, when he was sent "only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" as he himself said.

To understand what really might have happened, we may have to go back in history a bit. First, you must understand that we do not have the original gospel in the very tongue spoken by Jesus, which is Aramaic, a Semitic speech adopted by Jesus' folk after the Babylonian captivity which is actually more closely related to Arabic than to Hebrew. Whatever has come down to us was translated into Greek and later other languages. But bear in mind that the Gospels as he have it today, are not eyewitness accounts of Jesus sayings and doings, but rather second-hand accounts derived from people who knew him. The earliest of the four gospels, that of Mark was written shortly before 70 AC while Matthew's was compiled by a tax collector who did not travel around with Jesus. Luke's followed somewhat later, drawing extensively from Mark and Matthew and finally came John's Gospel drawn from an altogether different source and written around 100 AC.

The oldest surviving manuscripts of the New Testament such as the Codex Vaticanus from which all the present translations originate date after the Council of Nicaea in 325 AC and it is very possible that they were subject to interpolation. Many other accounts of the life time of Jesus seem to have been suppressed or destroyed by the Pauline Church which upheld Trinitarianism following the Council of Nicaea.

One such condemned work was the Gospel of Barnabas, which is the only surviving gospel written by a true disciple of Jesus, that is one who spent much of his time in the actual company of Jesus during the short three years of his mission. Originally known as Joseph it is he whom Peter in the Acts of the Apostles names as one of the men that accompanied them the whole time Jesus lived among them (Acts 1:21-23). In fact Mark, the earliest of the gospel writers, could well have derived his knowledge of Jesus, his sayings and doings, from Barnabas as he was the son of Barnabas sister. In fact, the Gospel of Barnabas seems to have been accepted as a canonical gospel in the churches of Alexandria until 325 AC after which it fell into disfavour with the Council of Nicaea.

Even after the Nicaean Council, it seems to have somehow survived, since the Gelasian Decree of 496 included what it calls the *Evangelium Barnabe* in its list of the ten forbidden gospels. Fortunately, at least one copy of the gospel survived and found its way to the Hofbibliothek in Vienna before being translated into English by Lonsdale and Laura Ragg in 1907. It is from this source that we can glean some of Jesus teachings, which the other gospels are silent on. In it we do not find a single instance of Jesus ever addressing God as 'Father' or calling himself His 'Son'.

Greek culture, with its polytheistic associations, had a profound influence on the development of early Christianity, especially when the Bible came to be translated to that language from its original Aramaic. In fact, when Rome replaced Jerusalem as the centre of Christianity under Constantine, Jesus teachings were given a Greek garb.

The pace for all this was set by one man, Paul of Tarsus who had been earlier known as Saul. Paul, who had been enlisted by a disciple of Jesus named Barnabas to take Christianity to the heathen, felt the need for Christianity to concede to Pagan

ways if it was to make any headway. How much Pagan ways had taken hold of the Greek-speaking populace to whom they preached could be seen in an incident related in the Acts of the Apostles. At Lystra they healed a cripple and it was rumoured that "*the gods are come down to us in human form*". They even called Barnabas Zeus and Paul Hermes, and brought oxen for sacrifice, which when Barnabas and Paul heard of, they rent their clothes and rushed out into the crowd crying out: "*Men, why do ye these things? We are of the same nature as you, human beings, and proclaim to you good news that you should turn from these idols to the Living God who made heaven and earth and the sea and all that is in them*" (Acts 14:11-15).

And so it happened that Paul felt tempted to compromise the monotheism taught by Jesus while Barnabas resisted the temptation. Needless to say, in such an environment, it was Paul who prevailed. Remember the Greeks then were given to the worship of a multitude of gods, a pantheon headed by Zeus and his family who not only mixed freely with humans on earth, but even mated with them. What's more, they were part of the Roman Empire at the time and Greek deities were readily identified with the Roman gods. This development only consolidated the pagan view of a multiplicity of deities as against a Single All-Powerful Being. Paul therefore gave in to the ways of the Pagans.

But not Barnabas. He was not at all willing to concede Jesus' teachings in the manner Paul was thinking of. But Paul had an advantage over Barnabas. Being a Roman citizen, he probably spoke both Greek and Roman. Barnabas on the other hand was unable to preach in either Greek or Roman and was assisted by his Greek-speaking nephew Mark.

However Paul wished to be left to his own devices. To rid himself of Mark's presence as well as Barnabas' restraining hand, he refused to travel with Mark (Acts 15:37-38), knowing fully well that his uncle would then refuse to travel with him and prefer instead to travel with Mark as his interpreter. The ruse worked. Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus. Interestingly Barnabas who occupies the most important place after the disappearance of Jesus if we are to believe Luke, disappears from the pages of history no sooner he and Paul part company. No doubt the work of Trinitarian theologians who expunged him from history so that the only references we have to him are some allusions to him in the Acts of the Apostles and a little known gospel known as the Gospel of Barnabas.

Paul was now free to do as he pleased and formulated a new doctrine from which he sought to divorce the teachings of Jesus from the monotheism preached by the Hebrew Prophets of old. He famously proclaimed: "*Know ye not, brethren, how that the law hath dominion over a man as long as he liveth? For the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth, but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband. So then, if while her husband liveth, she be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress, but if her husband be dead, she is free from that law, so that she is no adultress, though she be married to another man. Wherefore, my brethren, ye also are become dead to the law by the body of Christ, that ye should be married to another, even to him who is raised from the dead, that we should bring forth fruit unto God*" (Romans 7:14).

Paul reasoned that the law that had bound Jesus and his early followers were no longer necessary. With one sweep he proceeded to teach a new Christianity far removed from the teachings of Jesus, though he pretended that Christ desired it such as when he said: "*For freedom Christ set us free; so stand firm and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery*" (Galatians 5:1). To Paul *slavery* meant the Mosaic code and Christ meant *liberation* from the law, despite the fact that Jesus always lived by

the Law. Paul very well knew that what he was doing was dishonest, but justified it on the grounds that the means justified the end such as when he said: "*But if the Truth of God's abounds through my falsehood, why am I still condemned as a sinner?*" (Romans 3:7). What Paul did not realize is that a lie could never uphold the truth, but he had already made up his mind.

He therefore introduced the idea of Jesus as the Son of God in a literal rather than in the figurative sense some of his earlier followers would have done, like when he announced: "*When God, who from my mother's womb, had set me apart and called me through His Grace, was pleased to reveal his son to me, so that I might proclaim him to the gentiles, I did not immediately consult flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me*" (Galatians 1:15). In doing so, however, Paul also resorted to Old Testament usages relating to men of God to assign to Jesus the Sonship of God, like: "*You are my son; this day I have begotten you*" and "*I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me*" (Hebrews 1:5). Such blasphemous statements of the Jews are not uncommon in the Bible, as in the Psalm of Ethan the Ezrahite where we read of God saying of David: "*He shall cry to me: 'You are my Father, my God, the Rock that brings me victory'. I myself make him firstborn, Most High over the Kings of the Earth*" (Psalm 89:27-28). Here David is supposed to address God as Father while God declares He will make him his Firstborn. The usage is also reflected in Hebrew Talmudic literature where God is said to address Hanina Ben Dosa as His Son: "*The whole universe is sustained on account of My Son Hanina*" (Talmud. B'Tan).

The idea went well with the surrounding Greek culture, for had not the Greek god Zeus fathered offspring through human women like Apollo by Latona and of Minos by Europa. So Paul found no difficulty pushing it down their throats that Jesus was the Son of God in Heaven through a human woman named Mary.

Another factor that would have contributed to the idea of the divinity of Christ, though in an indirect way, was the Jewish conception of God as a wrathful and vengeful tribal deity out to punish men for the slightest transgression. This was of course the result of the Jewish penchant for antagonizing their God over the ages, which is why we often find the God of the Old Testament as a very harsh and vindictive deity, so different in character from the All Merciful Oft Forgiving God of Islam. It is thus possible that some early Christians came to look upon Jesus as some sort of intercessor, standing between an incensed deity and a guilty humanity, both of which have their origins in the Jewish scripture. This was because when the Christian gentiles adopted the faith of Jesus they also inherited the Old Testament as part of the Bible, a scripture that was not only meant solely for the Jews, but also reflected God's Wrath towards them, which they had brought upon themselves with their transgressions through the ages.

By declaring that Christ was the Son of God, Paul elevated Jesus from the status of an ordinary human to something approaching divinity. Like when he pronounced: "*He is the Image of the Visible God, the firstborn of all creation. For in him were created all things in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers; all things were created through him and for him*" (Colossians 1:15-16) or when he declared: "*In him dwells the whole fullness of the deity bodily, and you share in this fullness in him, who is the head of every principality and power*" (Colossians 2:9-10).

Although Paul did not expressly preach the divinity of Jesus, he paved the way for it, and soon the doors, or rather flood-gates, were opened for more pagan ideas to permeate the Christian mind. Later Christians would hold that God became a

corporal being through his son Jesus Christ born in the form of a human being in a humble manger to atone for men's sins.

In the Gospel of John compiled long after Jesus departed from this world, around 90-100 AC a most unusual prorogue was inserted proclaiming Jesus as the preexistent and incarnate word of God who revealed the Father. "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. And the Word became flesh, and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the father's only son, full of grace and truth*". This passage which commences the Gospel of John seems to be a convoluted version of a belief the early Christians held that Jesus came to be as a result of the Word of God, "*Be*" and it was, held also by Muslims.

But John gave it a further twist with his metaphysical sophistry, implying that since the Word was with God, He was in the beginning with God before he became flesh, thus arguing that God and Jesus were co-eval or existing at the same time. It is also in John's Gospel that we come across passages like "*The Father and I are One*" (10:30) and "*The Father is in me and I am in the Father*" (10:38) and "*I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*" (14:6). Imagine Jesus with all his humility saying such a thing? Could such a holy, humble saintly figure like Jesus have said such a thing that comes between us and God, to spoil that beautiful relationship we enjoy with Him ?

What's more, Jesus is said to tell Nicodemus the Pharisee "*No one has gone to heaven except the one who has come down from heaven, the Son of Man, and just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave His only Son, so that everybody who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life*" (John 3:13-17). Here again, it's hard to imagine that Jesus who always stressed so much on humility as seen in the other gospels should have spoken in such a vein. Jesus always prayed to God with as much humility and resignation as the most dependent being in the universe could possibly do. Remember how he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane saying to God: "*Not my will, but yours be done*", how he knelt in prayer at the spot and fell prostrate in prayer (Luke 22:41-42, Matthew 26:39).

There is only a single verse of the Bible the Pauline and other established churches cite to support the idea of the Trinity. And that too is found in John's first epistle (5.7) "*For there are three that bear record in heaven – the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost, and these three are One*". Strangely this particular verse does not appear in the earliest Greek copies of the Gospel, nor in the oldest Latin or Syriac translations. Rather, the spurious verse seems to appear for the first time in the Third edition of Erasmus' New Testament. So there can be no doubt that it was a later interpolation, more so since it contradicts other verses of the scripture. In this very same John's Gospel and nowhere else, we find John the Baptist saying upon seeing Jesus: "*I have seen and testified that he is the Son of God*". This statement of the Baptist found in Greek manuscripts like the Bodmer Papyri and Vatican Codex is not found in any of the other gospels, while in an alternate version of this passage John has: "*God's chosen one*' instead of '*Son of God'*.

Such passages calling Jesus the Only Son of God and implying the existence of a Trinity in One Godhead are not found in the other gospels, showing that John's Gospel, though likely based on some genuine original source, was subjected to interpolation by a man given to Pagan ways which is also borne out by its questionable prorogue which the other gospels do not have. When you read the first

three gospels, that of Mark, Matthew and Luke, you will find they are very much similar which is why they are known as the synoptic bibles. John's on the other hand, differs considerably and was from very early days disputed as a reliable account of Jesus' teachings and whether it should be included in the scriptures at all. This John was not John the Baptist who was Jesus' cousin, nor John the disciple, but another man.

As a result of Paul's teachings and John's interpolations, it did not take long for the Pagan idea of tri-theism (three gods) found from Greece to India to seep into Christianity and soon the idea of "God the Father" and "God the Son" was born, to which was later added "The Holy Spirit", perhaps a Paganised version of the Archangel Gabriel who had in the first place announced the holy conception to Mary. But how we may ask can the Holy Spirit be God when in the Bible, he is clearly distinguished from God, for we are told that it was God who sent the Holy Spirit to the Israelites, so he cannot be God.

We are also told that the Holy Spirit speaks not for himself, which again shows he cannot be God. The duty of the Holy Spirit was to carry the message from God to Jesus. Thus he must have been an angel who came in the Name of God, no doubt the archangel Gabriel, the angel of revelation who brought glad tidings of the conception of Jesus to Mary. This is confirmed by the Qur'an where we read: "*To Jesus, the son of Mary, We gave clear Signs, and strengthened him with the Holy Spirit*" (The Heifer:253). The word used here for Holy Spirit is *Roohil Qudus* which we understand to mean the angel Gabriel.

So to conform to the pervasive pagan idea of a trinity of gods, the Holy Spirit was incorporated and so the third person of the Trinity was born. It now constituted of three persons – The Father who was God Proper, the Son who was a human and the Holy Spirit who was an angel, all morphed into a single Godhead. And as if that were not enough, to cap it all, the mother of Jesus, Mary, was placed in a most unique position as "The Mother of God".

It was not long before the idea of the Trinity, still nebulous and having no definite form, was surreptitiously introduced into other Christian scripture, but that too only in the Gospel of Matthew and in a very vague way. Only in it and in no other gospel synoptic gospel, either in Mark or Luke, do we find an indication of the three separate beings that would later be constituted into the Trinity. In it we read that after Jesus had been resurrected, he appeared to his disciples in a mountain in Galilee and said: "*All power on heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit*" (Matthew 28:16-19). On the face of it, these are very unlikely the words of Jesus who was known for his humility. Words like "*All power on heaven and on earth has been given to me"* are so unlike him. At any rate, even here, there is nothing to show that all the three mentioned beings, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, were to be considered three divine beings united in something called the Trinity.

However such innovations did not go unchecked. The true Christians who held on to God's Unity opposed the heresy tooth and nail. They were known as the Unitarians, that is those who held on to the Unity or Oneness of God. They also held that Jesus was no more than a man and that God had him begotten by the Holy Spirit, conceived by the operation of the Holy Ghost in the chaste womb of the virgin Mary. You can see how close their views were to that of us Muslims.

The best known of them was Arius who lived three hundred years before the days of the Prophet. In fact so closely associated was Arius with Unitarianism that

Christian Unitarianism eventually came to be called Arianism. The man was a Libyan and disciple of the Martyr Lucian of Antioch whom the Pauline Church cruelly put to death in 312 AC. He was a humble soul with an emaciated body and downcast look so different from the haughty leaders of the Pauline Church who led a life of ease at the expense of gullible folk. He nevertheless had a winsome manner and was held in such high esteem that even wealthy women had the greatest respect for him despite his haggard appearance. Indeed he had a following of no less than seven hundred good Christian ladies of Alexandria where he taught. He had a sweet and sure tongue, and though usually silent, would when occasion demanded, burst into fiery language to safeguard the Oneness of God.

Arius refuted Trinitarianism wherever he could by appealing to reason. He argued that if Jesus were indeed the Son of God, then it follows that the Father must have existed before the Son. Therefore there must have been a time when the Son did not exist. The Son was therefore a creature composed of an essence which had not always existed. And since God is in essence Eternal, Jesus could not be of the same essence as God. Thus there was a time Jesus did not exist whereas God did even then. Since Jesus was created by God, he was a creation of God and not one who shared in His Divinity. Why, because One has to be either divine or human, creator or created. Both simply cannot mingle in one. To do so, defies simple logic. Arius argued against the Sonship of Christ, saying that if the act of generation were attributed to God, it would destroy His Singularity, His Oneness. Besides, He is far above corporeality and Passion which are attributes of man, and not of God.

However even so great a teacher like Arius could not stem the Pagan tide that was flooding Christianity. The idea of Trinity that had taken shape over the years was given official sanction with the Council of Nicaea convened in 325 AC. The Council which was convened by Roman Emperor Constantine went further than espousing the idea of Trinity. It also incorporated other Pagan beliefs. Since the worship of the Roman Sun-god was widespread throughout the empire and as the emperor was deemed the manifestation of the sun god on earth, they resolved:

Firstly, that the Roman Sun-Day dedicated to the Sun-God be adopted as the Christian Sabbath in lieu of Saturday, and so you have Sunday as the Christian holy day

Secondly, that the traditional birthday of the Sun god, the twenty fifth of December be celebrated as the birthday of Jesus despite it being known that Jesus was not born that day, and so you have Christmas being celebrated that day

Thirdly, that the Sign of the Sun-god, the Cross of Light, be the emblem of Christianity, and so you have the cross as the symbol of Christendom despite the cross of the crucifixion being an instrument of torture

And so it was that the Nicene Creed came to be established. It is this creed that every mainstream church professes to this day. The Unitarian doctrine was declared anathema and driven underground. The true church of Christ soon found itself branded as heretics and persecuted. Why, simply because they refused to believe that Jesus was God or the Son of God. The Nicene creed, faulty as it was, soon paved the way for other hair-splitting dogmas centering around the divinity of Christ. While the Arians altogether rejected the divinity of Christ, the Monophysites believed that he had only one nature, a divine one, while the Catholics believed he had two, a combined divine and human nature. The Church of Rome rejected the Monophysite doctrine that prevailed in the provinces of the Byzantine empire on the grounds that it stressed the divine in Christ at the expense of the human and just as the Council of

Nicaea condemned Arianism in 325 AC, the Council of Chalcedon condemned Monophytism as heresy in 451 AC.

The Roman Church backed by the Roman Empire became conceited and arrogant and unleashed a bloodbath against not only the Unitarians, but also against the Monophysites. Needless to say, the notion of the divinity of Christ proved to be the bane of Christendom for ages. The persecution lasted centuries costing over a million Christian lives. As Emperor Julian noted of these persecutions: "*No wild beasts are so hostile to man as Christian sects in general are to one another*".

The Unitarians however would not give in. These humble folk far removed from the arrogance and pomposity of the established Roman Church lived simple lives in Antioch and elsewhere. One of their number, George of Cappadocia was known for his strong Unitarian views and even had no qualms beating Trinitarian women with the prickly branches of palm trees till they abjured their creed. Lynched by a mob, he eventually became the famous St.George of England. These early Unitarians quite rightly regarded the Catholic Church as evil priests working with the kings of the world, who relying on royal favours, had renounced Christ. They and their followers who came after them would not give up on their mission despite the odds against them and continued to preach the true Gospel, conveying their message far and wide to reach the German tribes of Western Europe in the 5th century and even Romanian royalty in the 16th century.

It is interesting, however, that the very emperor who should have convened the Nicaean Council that condemned Unitarianism, Constantine, should have himself died a Unitarian, as a believer in the Unity of God. That was due to the influence of his God-fearing sister Constantina. The emperor made his peace with Arius who had so fearlessly preached the Oneness of God and appointed him Bishop of Constantinople. The good bishop did not live long as he died shortly after from poisoning in 336 AC. The odious deed was thought to be the work of his foe Athanasius who had been accused of tyranny at the Council of Tyre a year earlier and soundly condemned by the bishops who gathered shortly afterwards in Jerusalem. The pagan emperor was so moved by the death of Arius that he became a Christian of the Arian Creed before dying a year later in 337 AC.

Fortunately, Unitarianism did not die with Constantine. It was even accepted by his successor Constantius and before long the Council of Antioch accepted Unitarianism as the basis of Christianity in 341 AC, five years after Arius' death. Arianism soon won out and was accepted by nearly all of Christendom. So much so that Saint Jerome could write "the whole world groaned and marveled to find itself Arian".

But as often happens Satan finds ways to ensure his religion prevails. The ways of the world are conducive to his schemes. The Nicaean Council which had been convened by Constantine in the first place still exerted a profound influence on the Roman clergy and it was not long before Trinitarianism crept back into the church. It was then left to the Germans to uphold Unitarianism, like the Gothic Arian King Odoacer who took Rome in 476. Unfortunately he was set upon by Catholic mobs and driven to Ravenna where he was barbarously done to death by Theodoric who in spite of the support of the Catholics chose to remain an Arian, as did his Ostrogothic heirs. Indeed it was only with the defeat of these German Arians in the Vandalic Wars of 533-534 by the Byzantine Emperor Justinian that Unitarianism suffered a blow, both in Europe and North Africa where it had thrived.

Although the Unitarians were outnumbered and persecuted by the church, they did not fear to express their views. The Unitarian Michael Servetus who lived in the 16th

century wrote a book called *De Trinitatis Erroribus* 'The Errors of Trinity' in which he railed against the complexities of this mad notion: "*We have become Atheists, men without any God. For as soon as we try to think about God, we are turned aside to three phantoms, so that no kind of unity remains in our conception. What else is being without God but being unable to think about God, when there is always present to our understanding a haunting kind of confusion of three beings, by which we are forever deluded into supposing that we are thinking about God*".

His writings however earned him the ire of the establishment and he was condemned to burn at the stake. The charge against him was that he had called the Trinity a diabolical monster with three heads when he wrote: , "*Instead of the one God, you have a three-headed Cerberus*". He had also dared call Christ a Prophet as the scriptures termed him. For setting himself against *The Divine Majesty and the Holy Trinity* and trying *to infect the world with your stinking heretical poison,* the poor fellow was condemned to be burned at the stake. He was bound to the stake with a wreath of leaves strewn with sulphur placed on his head. Bundles of wood were then piled around his legs before being lit. The poor man writhed in the fiery torment for a painfully long time before breathing his last.

If you think it were only men of the pen who were treated as such, you're sadly mistaken. Even already folk were brutally done to death for speaking out against the Trinity. Take the Flemish Surgeon George Van Parris who was burned to death in London by fellow Protestants in 1551 and Patrick Pakingham an English Fellmonger burned to death at Uxbridge in 1555, not to mention Edward Wightman, an English cleric burned at the stake at Lichfeld in 1612 by personal order of King James I.

Their only crime – affirming that God was One and not three. Such views were of course anathema to the established Church which arrogated to itself and to it alone the Knowledge of God. How the Catholic priesthood wanted to keep the Bible to themselves, without even allowing ordinary people to comprehend it can be gathered from the treatment they meted out to people who wanted toread the Bible in their vernacular rather than in Latin. Take the case of Catholic England, where in 1506 a young man was burned to death in Norwich for simply possessing the Lord's prayer in English while in 1519, a woman and six men in Coventry were burned to death for teaching their children English versions of the Lord' s Prayer and the Ten Commandments. These are the cases on record on how many more perished at the stake due to such repression can only be imagined.

And if you think, it was only the Catholic Church that engaged in such wickedness, you're again mistaken. The Protestant churches were no less repressive. The Church of England for instance played a big role in passing a law in 1648 decreeing that anyone who denied the Trinity, or the Divinity of Jesus or the Holy Spirit would suffer death. Even before this, in 1611, two men, Legatt and Wightman, were barbarously burnt alive for denying the Trinity. These are but a few examples of the brutal manner in which the established church repressed true Christians. I hope now you know how Trinitarianism triumphed. It simply prevailed by brute force.

But as Joseph Priestly, the 18th century English discoverer of Oxygen and himself a Unitarian wisely observed: "*Absurdity supported by power will never be able to stand its ground against the efforts of reason*". Priestley himself had to face the wrath of the mob when his home in Birmingham that included his science laboratory and the Unitarian church where he preached was burned down, compelling him to settle in Pennsylvania where he went on to establish the first Unitarian church in Philadelphia.

In an environment where Unitarians were allowed a free hand, they prevailed due to the simplicity of their dogma. Take for example the case of Francis David who also lived in the 16th century. A native of Transylvania in what is now Romania, he was able to convince people of the futility of Trinitarianism, so much so that not just his native town of Kolozsvar, but much of the country became believers in the One True God. In fact by 1571, there were almost 500 Unitarian congregations in Transylvania. But as usually happens when the church takes charge, Trinitarianism prevailed once again and poor Francis was imprisoned. When he died, they found a little poem scrawled in his cell. It read: "*One God not Three have I worshipped. Lightening, nor cross, nor sword of the pope, nor Death's Visible face. No power whatever can stay the progress of truth".*

However thanks to the subsequent Turkish rule in Transylvania sometime lter, Unitarianism thrived and gained in importance with the religious tolerance of the past few centuries. To this day the Unitarian movement survives in this part of Eastern Europe like an island unbreached by the tide of the Pauline Sea all round them. They will certainly be happy to learn that we Muslims share their views and agree with them wholeheartedly.

There is good reason to believe that most Unitarians, especially in North Africa where they were very strong, accepted Islam when it came to them, as it was nothing but an extension and indeed affirmation of the creed they were following. Likewise the crusades directed by the Roman Catholic Church against Muslims may be regarded as an extension of the massacres the church perpetrated against the Arians of old. Did you know that the Secret Society of Vinecenza which existed in Venice in the 16th century were labeled "*followers of the Arabian Prophet*". In a sense the story of Unitarianism is the story of Islam, the story of an unflinching belief in the One True God who created all.

19th Night

Johnny: Isn't it strange that in Islam Jesus is compared to Adam while in Christianity Christ is the antithesis of Adam. Sin and death came through Adam and salvation and life through Jesus Christ. This doctrine of human salvation is intimately connected to the idea that Jesus sacrificed himself on the cross to rescue humanity from their inherent sins. So to my next question:

Why don't Muslims believe that Jesus was crucified, that he made the supreme sacrifice of offering himself to the cross to save humanity?

The Janissary: I take it you mean the idea that all humans are condemned to eternal torment because of the original sin inherited from Adam, unless of course they accept atonement for their sins made by Jesus with his blood. It's ridiculous to say the least. Don't you think this is grossly unfair? On the one hand, it assumes that the offspring of Adam have to pay for their ancestor's sin and on the other it affirms that Jesus atoned for it on behalf of all men by giving himself to be crucified and so salvation is to be sought through him. Even if we suppose that Christ was indeed crucified, one may well ask how one being could atone for all the wrongs of men, past, present and future, bearing their whole load of punishment. In any case why should Jesus pay for the sins of Adam or for any others? Doesn't such an idea go against the very grain of what we call justice? Worse still, doesn't it assign to God the unimaginable trait of being unjust, punishing men for the sins of others?

Islam is very clear that none can bear the burdens of another. Each man or woman must answer to God for his or her own deeds. Sin is not inherited but acquired by doing evil just as merit is acquired by doing good. The Qur'an clearly says: "*No Bearer of Burdens can bear the burden of another. In the End, to your Lord is Your Return, when He will tell you the truth of all that ye did (in this life). For He knows well all that is in (men's) hearts*" (The Crowds:7).

There is no original sin in Islam. Firstly because we hold that God forgave Adam for his transgression:

Then learnt Adam from his Lord words of inspiration and his Lord turned towards him (in forgiveness). For He is Oft-Returning, Most Merciful
(The Heifer: 37)

But Satan whispered evil to him. He said: "Adam! Shall I lead thee to the Tree of Eternity and to a kingdom that never decays?" They both ate of the tree and so their nakedness appeared to them. They began to sew together for their covering, leaves from the Garden. Thus didAdam disobey his Lord and allow himself to be seduced. But His Lord chose him and turned to him in forgiveness and guided him
(TaHa: 121-122)

Just because Adam and Eve committed a sin, does not mean that they or their offspring were barred from God's Mercy. God is All Mercy and when they asked for forgiveness, He forgave them. So how could their offspring inherit a sin that no longer exists? Secondly, because all children are born pure and sinless, in a state known as the fitra. "*Every child*", said the Prophet "*is born in a state of fitrah and it is his parents who make him a Jew or Christian or Magian*"(Saheeh Al-Bukhari).

That all children are born sinless was preached not only by Islam, but by Christ himself when he said: "*Suffer not the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not; for such is the Kingdom of God. Verily I say unto you, whoever shall not receive the Kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein*"(Mark 10:14-15). It's therefore surprising that Christendom should have accepted the likes of Saint Augustine who condemned all unbaptised infants to eternal torment in the hellfire rather than the likes of well meaning men like Albert Midlane who wrote: *There's a Friend for Little Children Above the Bright Blue Sky, A Friend who never changes, Whose love will never die* which is more in keeping with the true teachings of Christ.

That Jesus came to die willingly for the sins of men is not even supported in the Bible itself. When he realized the impending danger from the Jews, he ordered his disciples to fetch swords even if they had to sell their cloaks. When he came to know that his foes were plotting to kill him he declared that his soul was "*exceedingly sorrowful unto death*" (Mark 14:34) and later he prayed to God, saying: "*Abba, Father, all things are possible unto Thee; take away this cup (death) from me; nevertheless not what I will, but Thou wilt*" (Mark 14:36). And if we are to suppose that the one who was crucified was indeed the Jesus who had come to sacrifice himself for humanity, how are we to explain his crying out in a loud voice shortly before the death pangs: "*Eli, Eli, Lema Sabachthani?*" (My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?) (Matthew 27:46).

Jesus never said that the way to eternal life was through his blood. What he said was "*If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments*" (Matthew 19:17). The fact is that Jesus came to rescue his people from sin through his teachings and to urge them to repent if they ever hoped for salvation. We see this countless times in the Bible like in Matthew (4:17) where we learn that when Jesus began to preach, he said: "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*". Never did he say that he was sent to atone for the sins of men.

It is only the Gospel of John that suggests Jesus came to take away the sins of the world. In it we come across a very questionable passage not found in any of the other Gospels: "*For God so loved the world that He gave His only Begotten Son, that whosoever beliveth in him, should not perish, but have everlasting life*" (John 3:16). It is also here that we find Jesus saying: "*I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the desert, but they died; this is the bread that comes down from heaven so that one may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the world.'*"" (John 6:48-52). These certainly cannot be the words of Jesus, but the work of some mischief-maker who surreptitiously introduced them to mock Christ.

Paul added fuel to this fire of lies. Unlike the immediate followers of Jesus who held no such view, he stressed on a belief in the crucifixion, that Christ died on the cross to pay for the sins of humanity. Henceforth it mattered not what sins men committed so long as they believed in Christ and in the sacrifice he made on behalf of man. Paul used some choice words to drive home his point:

"*All have sinned and are deprived of the Glory of God. They are justified freely by His Grace through the redemption in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as an expiation, through faith, by his blood, to prove his righteousness because of the forgiveness of sins previously committed*" (Romans 3:23-25)

"*Even when you were dead in transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, he brought you to life along with him, having forgiven us all our transgressions; obliterating the bond against us, with its legal claims, which was opposed to us, he also removed it from our midst, nailing it to the cross*" (Colossians 2:13-14)

Despite desiring a break from the Mosaic law, Paul was influenced by the Old Testament in coming up with the idea of the redemptive power of the crucifixion: "*If the blood of goats and bulls and the sprinkling of a heifer's ashes can sanctify those who are defiled so that their flesh is cleansed, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal spirit offered himself unblemished to God*". He adds: "*According to the Law almost everything is purified by blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness*". And in support cites the story of Moses who after proclaiming the commandments to the people, took the blood of calves and sprinkled it on all of them, saying: "*This is the blood of the covenant which God has enjoined upon you*" (Hebrews 9:13-22).

Thus Paul seems to have looked upon Christ as a sort of Paschal lamb, whose blood saved men from sin just as the blood of the sacrificial lamb celebrated in the Jewish Passover saved the Israelites of Egypt from certain death during Moses' time. The story is found in Exodus where God, in order to force Pharoah's hand to free the Children of Israel from their slavery tells Moses to apply the blood of a slaughtered lamb to the doorposts of the Israelite houses, a prelude to what would come to be known as the Passover, when God would go through Egypt, striking down every firstborn of the land dead, but pass over those houses that had been smeared with the blood of the lamb.

Thus you will see that the idea of redemption through the crucifixion has a basis in Old Testament sacrificial ritual where blood formed an essential ingredient for purification from sin, which was familiar to Paul, the orthodox Jew he once was. Had Paul been a Muslim, he would have perhaps seen a similitude between God's saving Jesus from crucifixion and God's saving Ishmael from Abraham's sacrificial knife. In the former case, another was given Christ's countenance and crucified in his stead while in the latter case a ram was sent to be sacrificed in lieu of Ishmael. If God would not allow Abraham to sacrifice his Son, would He allow Jesus, born of His Spirit, to be sacrificed ? Certainly not! But Paul was no Muslim and still had the Jew in him.

So let's see if Jesus was really crucified. When Jesus was brought before Pilate, the Roman Governor of Judea, to be sentenced to death, he said to the crowd as he was accustomed to release a prisoner they wished on the occasion of the Passover feast: "*Which one do you want me to release to you, Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus the Messiah?"* And they answered: "*Barabbas!*" Pilate said to them: "*Then what shall I do with Jesus called Messiah?*" and they all said: "Let him be crucified!". When he asked "*Why, what evil has he done?*", they only shouted the louder: "*Let him be crucified!*". When Pilate saw that he was not succeeding at all, and that a riot was breaking out instead, he took water and washed his hands in the sight of the crowd saying: "*I am innocent of this man's blood. Look to it yourselves*", and all the people replied: "*His blood be upon us and upon our children*". And so he released Barabbas to them and handed Jesus over to be crucified (Matthew 27:15-26).

So here we have it.Pilate gives the mob a choice between the Jewish insurgent *Yeshu Barabbas* Jesus Barabbas or *Yeshu meshika* Jesus the Messiah, a humble Jewish reformer, in other words between *Barabbas* 'the son of God' and *Barnasha* 'the son of man' which Jesus used to describe himself in all humility.. Thus it is

possible that Barabbas who is described as a rebel and murderer in the Bible like in the Gospel of Mark and whose name litereally meant '*Son of the Father* (i.e.Son of God)' in Aramaic was, in the ensuing melee, given Jesus countenance and taken to be crucified. It is also possible that the one who was really crucified was one Simon of Cyrene who was asked to bear Jesus' cross by the Roman soldiers. *Now as they led Him away, they laid hold of a certain man, Simon a Cyrenian. and on him they laid the cross that he might bear it after Jesus*." (Luke 23:26).

The Gospel of Barnabas, whose authority is disputed by the mainstream Christian churches, tells us that at the time of the arrest of Jesus by the Roman soldiers, Judas was transformed by the creator so that he resembled Jesus and that it was he who was crucified. Let's hear what Barnabas had to say about it:

Jesus retired into the garden to pray, according as his custom was to pray, bowing his knees a hundred times and prostrating himself upon his face. Judas, accordingly, knowing the place where Jesus was with his disciples, went to the high priest and said: "If you give me what was promised, this night will I give into your hand Jesus whom ye seek, for he is alone with eleven companions". The high priest answered: "How much seekest thou?". Said Judas: "Thirty pieces of gold". When the soldiers with Judas drew near to the place where Jesus was, Jesus heard the approach of many and withdrew into the house. And the eleven were sleeping. Then God, seeing the danger to his servant, commanded Gabriel, Michael, Rafael and Uriel to take Jesus out of the world. The holy angels came and too Jesus out by the window that looked toward the south. They bore him and placed him in the third heaven in the company of angels, blessing God for evermore.

Judas entered impetuously before all into the chamber whence Jesus had been taken up. And the disciples were sleeping. Whereupon the wonderful God acted wonderfully, insomuch that Judas was so changed in speech and in face to be like Jesus that we believed him to be Jesus. And he, having awakened us, was seeking where the master was. Whereupon we marveled, and answered: "Thou lord art our master, hast thou now forgotten us?". And he smiling said: "Now are ye foolish that know not me to be Judas Iscariot!". And as he was saying this the soldiery entered, and laid their hands upon Judas, because he was in every way like to Jesus. We having heard Judas' saying and seeing the multitude of soldiers, fled as beside ourselves. And John who was wrapped in a linen cloth, awoke and fled, and when a soldier seized him by the linen cloth, he left the linen cloth and fled naked. For God heard the prayer of Jesus, and saved the eleven from evil (Barnabas: 214-216).

Barabbas or Simon or Judas or some other it may be, but not Jesus who was crucified. This explains why the crucified one, whom his followers thought to be Jesus cried out in a loud voice shortly before the death pangs: "*Eli, Eli, Lema Sabachthani?*" (My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?) (Matthew 27:46). It is unimaginable that a Prophet of God, much less a 'Son of God' could have spoken such words. It is still more unimaginable that if he were indeed God in human form – as today's Christians hold him to be – that he should have uttered these words which was tantamount to saying: "*Myself, Myself, why have I forsaken myself*?". And not just that. If indeed he had come to sacrifice himself for the sins of men – as today's Christians believe – how could he have uttered these words? We also read that the crucifixion was not witnessed by any of the disciples of Christ as "*they all forsook him and fled*" (Mark 14:50). It is difficult to imagine that the disciples of Jesus would

have done this, unless of course they had come to realize that the crucified one was not Jesus.

Despite all this there are those who argue that the one who died on the cross at Golgotha was indeed Jesus as he cried out a final prayer to the Almighty to forgive his tormentors: "*Father, father, forgive them, they know not what they do*" (Luke 23:34). But little do they know that this expression which occurs only in the gospel of Luke does not occur in the oldest papyrus manuscript of Luke or in other early Greek manuscripts, showing that it is nothing but a later interpolation.

Also very telling is the account of the resurrection, where we read that when Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James entered the rock hewn tomb in which Jesus was said to have been laid, they did not find his body. But two men in dazzling garments appeared to them and said: "*Why do you seek the living one among the dead? He is not here, but he has been raised*" (Luke 24: 1-6). This shows that Jesus was still living when he was raised up to heaven and that he never suffered crucifixion.

The supposed crucifixion led to a very questionable concept in Christianity, the doctrine of atonement, which simply put, sought to absolve men of their sins. Since Christ had died on the cross, it was argued, he had died to pay for the sins of all men which they inherited as a result of Adam's disobedience to God. Adam's misconduct by eating of the forbidden fruit meant that all humans were born in a state of sin, and so Jesus crucifixion was a sacrifice he made to atone for this state of original sin. But that's not all. It was held that Jesus' sacrifice was also for the wrongdoings of those who would come after him and who take baptism in his name and follow him. Thus baptism coupled with a belief in Christ ensured salvation and little or nothing else matters.

Not only does it go against natural justice, but also contradicts the Bible itself which is very clear that no child can be penalized for the sins of his or her parents. We read in Deuteronomy (24:16): "*Fathers shall not be put to death for the children; neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers. Every man shall be put to death for his own sin*". In Ezekiel (18:20) we read: "*The soul that sinneth, it shall die. He son shall not bear the inequity of the father. Neither shall the father bear the inequity of the son*". Jesus himself stressed very clearly that each one was to bear the burden of their sins when he said: "*Then He shall reward every man according to his works*" (Matthew 16:27).

How could Christ have offered an infinite sacrifice for sin when he suffered for only a relatively short time? That fate had even been meted out to the slaves led by Spartacus who rose up against Roman rule and were crucified along the Apian Way. But how, we may ask, could it compensate for the punishment people are liable to when they commit grave sins such as murder?

How could God's law then be binding, if the penalty for all sins has already been paid in full by Jesus? Wouldn't that mean that man is absolved of accountability for his deeds, that he will be at full liberty to do as he likes, whether it be ingratitude to his Creator or oppression of his fellow man or the fair nature that God had created and expects us to respect. Why? because it would mean that God has lost all power to enjoin on man a pious life since by it he loses the prerogative of punishing the wrongdoer. Such an idea is very dangerous because it can lead man to discard the Divine Law and all the good that springs from it as we seen on countless occasions in the history of mediaeval Christendom and the subsequent colonial era when the oppression of man by man reached horrendous proportions.

It also raises other questions, like for instance, if indeed Christ had come to the world to die on the cross, why then did he get angry at the Jews when he turned the tables of the moneylenders or declared that if one's hand sins, to cut if off, or if one's eye sins, to pluck it out? What about the fate of those who died before Jesus and had no opportunity to accept Christ's atonement? Would they be doomed to eternal torment just for being born before Christ? It also conveys the ridiculous idea that God Himself chose to sacrifice Himself for the sins of His Creation, much like a Judge punishing himself for a crime committed by a criminal appearing in his court. What can be more ridiculous than this? Little wonder George Bernard Shaw pondered in *Major Barbara* whether not Christianity should be called *cross-tianity!*

The fact is that Jesus never came to die on the cross. That was not his destiny and he himself did not desire it. For did he not beseech God in the Garden of Gethsemane: "*Let this cup (death) pass from me; yet, not as I will, but as you will*" (Matthew 26:39). This is exactly what happened. God answered his prayer and saved him. Remarkably Jesus' name in his original Aramaic *Yeshua* meaning 'God Saves' itself seems to have been Prophetic, for he was indeed saved by God.

Even Paul who was responsible for the ridiculous idea that Jesus came to die on the cross had this to say of him: "*In the days when he was in the flesh, he offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence*" (Hebrews:5-7). So we have to take it that Jesus prayer to God to save him from being crucified by the Jews was indeed answered. Finally I can only say that good Christians will be relieved, not pained, to hear from their Muslim brothers that their beloved Jesus was not done to death by the Jews, but that God took him up to Himself, preserving him for a day he shall send him back to earth to usher in a new era of peace and justice.

They (Jews) said in boast: "We killed Christ Jesus, the Son of Mary, the Messenger of God". But they killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them when another was given his likeness (and they crucified him). And those who differ are full of doubts with no knowledge, but only conjecture to follow, for of a surety they killed him not – Nay, God raised him up unto Himself, and God is Exalted in Power, Wise. And there is none of the People of the Book (Jews and Christians) but must believe in him before his death; And on the Day of Judgement, he will be a witness against them (The Women:153-159).

I only have to cite the words Simon Carabello who wrote a very touching book called *My Great Love for Jesus Led Me to Islam*. It happened one day that this pious Christian's eyes fell on just two sentences that filled him with such joy that tears started flowing. They were from the Quran: "*They (the Jews) said (in boast):"We killed Christ Jesus, the Son of Mary, the Messenger of God. But they killed him not, nor did they crucify him*" (The Women:157). So his beloved Jesus to whom he had prayed twice a day in a small altar in his house, had not been crucified after all. "*To me it seemed as if the weight of the cross allegedly carried by Jesus to Mount Calvary vanished and disintegrated in the same manner that great buildings and firm mountains crumble when demolished by dynamite*" he would later recall "*A man who, by the Will of God, had returned sight to the blind, who had walked on water, healed a leper, made the lame walk, multiplied bread and fish to feed thousands of people and who had given life back to the dead, undoubtedly could not have been crucified!*". He resolved to belong to the religion that said so, in his own words: *I wanted to be a Muslim!*

20th Night

Johnny: Thanks for last night's talk, it really got me thinking. This idea that Jesus came to die on the cross to save us. I agree it's ridiculous. So here's my next question:

Despite all this, Muslims are supposed to be the closest to Christians, how come?

The Janissary: Most Christians I know are very pious people, who if not for the overriding authority of their churches and their ridiculous dogmas, would love to live the way Jesus had wished them to live, worshipping God and God alone, keeping the commandments and doing good to their fellow men.

This is in sharp contrast to the Jews, many of whom are to this day a proud, arrogant lot, thinking of themselves as the chosen people and looking down on the rest of humanity. If you read the Bible you might find the answer to that. When Sarah saw Ishmael, the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham playing with her son Isaac, she ordered Abraham: "*Drive out that slave and her son! No son of that slave is going to share the inheritance with my son Isaac!*". Little doubt much of that arrogance would have rubbed off on her descendants.

However Jesus would have none of it. Did he not defend his cure of a woman on the Sabbath on the plea that she was a 'daughter of Abraham' and befriend the tax collector Zacchaeus because he too was 'a son of Abraham'. Although at first sight it would seem that Jesus wished to single out the Jews for special treatment, reading deeper into his words, it seems that he was preparing his people not to think just in terms of the tribe of Israel founded by Jacob, but in terms of a larger cause represented by Abraham, the friend of God and the common ancestor of both Jew and Arab in spite of the fact that the Jews of his time looked down upon their Arab cousins as children of a slave woman. By calling his people children of Abraham rather than of Israel he was preparing them for the higher mission to come in the person of Muhammad who was himself a descendant of Abraham.

Likewise those who followed Christ including his earliest Jewish followers however did not have the racial pride and spite for others the rest of their tribe tribe had. They were pure men and women and wished all well in their desire to earn the Grace of God. Did not his closest disciple Peter say that God would pour out His spirit "*On all people*" (Acts 2:17) and that "*He accepts anyone who worships Him and does what is right. It is immaterial what nation they come from*" (Acts 10:35). Thus while the Christian wishes to share his message of love, the Jew jealously keeps his faith to himself; while the Christian wishes well for all, the Jew wishes evil to those not of his kind; while the Christian is sincere, the Jew is conceited; while the Christian is generous, the Jew is tight-fisted and while the Christian is willing to lend an ear to another, the Jew remains firm as a rock.

This is why we read the Qur'an referring to Christians in very endearing terms, while condemning the Jews as the enemies of the believers in the strongest possible terms:

Strongest among men in enmity to the believers will you find the Jews and Pagans; and nearest among them in love to the believers will you find those who say "We are Christians". Because among them are men devoted to learning and men who have renounced the world, and they are not arrogant. And when they listen to the revelation received by the Messenger, you will see their eyes overflowing with tears, for they recognize the truth. They pray: "Our Lord, we believe. Write us down among the witnesses. What cause can we have not to believe in God and the truth which has come to us, seeing that we long for our Lord to admit us to the

company of the righteous?" And for this their prayer has God rewarded them with Gardens with rivers flowing underneath – their eternal home
(The Repast:82-85)

This genuine love for God was seen even in the days of the Prophet, like when the Negus, the ruler of Abysinnia (present day Ethiopia) heard the words of the Qur'an regarding Mary from a companion of the Prophet. He wept so hard that his beard was wet and the tears that poured down the cheeks of his bishops were so copious that their scrolls were soaked in it. In the Qur'an, God tells us Himself that He has out compassion and mercy into the hearts of Christians:

Then We sent after them Our Messengers, and We sent Jesus, son of Mary, and gave him the Gospel. And We put in the hearts of those who followed him compassion and mercy. But We did not command monasticism. Rather they invented it for themselves to please God with it
(Iron:27)

The disciples of Jesus are called by *God Al Hawariyyun* 'the Purified Ones', which can also mean 'the white ones' as they were not only pure in heart, but were always seen dressed in white. They are also called God's Helpers: "*O ye who believe! Be ye helpers of God. As said Jesus, the Son of Mary, to the Disciples "Who will be my helpers to God?" Said the disciples: "We are God's helpers!*" (The Battle Array:14). The Arabic word used here for God's helpers is *Ansarullah* and it is this word that gives us the Muslim term used for a Christian, which is *Nasara* meaning 'helper'. In contrast, the very word Christian, by which we know the followers of this great religion was given not by the friends of the early Christians, but by their foes, the Jews and Pagans.

The first mention of it is found long after Jesus had left this world, in Acts 11:26 where we read: "*the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch*". Jesus never used the word Christianity for his teachings or Christian for his followers. In fact, what Islam teaches us was that his disciples were Muslims, meaning those who surrendered to God. We read in the Qur'an that when Jesus found unbelief on the part of his Jewish compatriots, he asked "*Who will be my helpers to (the work of) God?*" and the disciples answered: "*We are God's helpers. We believe in God and bear witness that we are those who surrender (to God)*" (Family Imraan:52). The Arabic word used here for 'those who surrender' is Muslim.

The Prophet of Islam always had a soft spot for the Christians, many of whom were also Arabs. In fact it was a Christian priest named Bahira who first noticed the signs of prophethood in the young Muhammad and told his uncle Abu Talib: "*Take your nephew back to his country and guard him carefully against the Jews, for by God, if they see him and know about him what I know, they will do him evil. A great future lies before this nephew of yours. So take him home quickly*". Bahira was a good Christian who did not like the idea of a Jewish Herod hunting down the young Arab boy who would follow in the footsteps of Jesus. His name which has come down to us is actually the Syriac word *bhira* meaning 'reverend'.

And who can forget Addas, the young Christian boy from Nineveh who gave a plate of grapes to Muhammad after he was set upon by a mob in the walled city of Taif. Muhammad who had then commenced his mission had been met with hostility in his hometown of Mecca and as if that were not enough was now set upon by urchins in this beautiful town on the hills where he had fondly believed folk would

listen to him. He was in such despair that he cried out to God: "*O God to Thee I complain of my weakness, little resource and lowliness before men. O Most Merciful, Thou art the Lord of the weak and Thou art my Lord. To whom wilt Thou confide me? To one afar who will misuse me? Or to an enemy to whom Thou hast given power over me? If Thou art not angry with me, I care not. The Favour is more wide for me. I take refuge in the light of Thy countenance by which the darkness is illumined and the things of this world and the next are rightly ordered*". It was then that Addas appeared before the Prophet as if a 'Sign' that his prayers were answered.

When he saw the Arab prophet blessing the meal in the "*name of God*' before he ate, he was astonished. He was elated when the prophet told him that he, like the Prophet Jonah of his hometown Nineveh, was also a Prophet and therefore a brother of Jonah. Addas was so overcome with Joy that he kissed the Prophet's hands. The Prophet was overjoyed at the kind reception he got from one of the People of the Book, giving him hope to continue his mission.

And which Muslim can ever forget that it was a Christian King, the Negus of Abyssinia in present-day Ethiopia who first gave refuge to the early Muslims fleeing the persecution of the Quraysh in Mecca. Eighty Muslims thus forsook their homes and emigrated to Abyssinia where the Negus gave them protection, in spite of the pleadings of the emissaries of the Meccan chiefs to send them away. Said he: "*Nay, by God, they shall not be surrendered, a people that have sought my protection and made my country their abode and chosen me above all others! Give them up I will not*"

The Prophet, when he emerged victorious against the Pagans and Jews, reciprocated the kindheartedness of the Christians who had been so kind to him and his followers in their most difficult days. Once, when a delegation of Christians from Najran near Yemen visited the Prophet in Medina, he warmly welcomed them and even let them pray in his mosque. He even entered into a covenant with them, guaranteeing their religious freedom:

The people of Najran and their dependents shall remain under the protection of God, and Muhammad the Prophet, the Messenger of God. Their persons, their religion, their lands, their possessions and their churches shall remain safe. This treaty holds good for all people of Najran, whether present or not. No bishop shall be removed from his bishopric, no monk from his monasticism and no devotee from his devotions
(Tabaqat al Kubra, Ibn Sa'd)

That's not all. The early Muslims did their best to win the hearts of Christians, demonstrating that Islam was merely a continuation of the teachings of Christ, like when the Prophet's envoy Hatib Ibn Abi Belta had this to say to the Christian ruler of Alexandria named Muqawqis:

We invite you to Islam, the faith that God most High chose for his people. Muhammad invites not only you, but all of mankind. The people who were the harshest and cruelest to him were the people of Quraysh. And the people that were the most hostile to him were the Jews. However, those who are the closest to him are the Christians. Just as Moses heralded Jesus, so too Jesus gave good news of the coming of Muhammad. Our calling you to the Qur'an is like you calling to the Gospels those who follow the Torah. Everybody should follow the Prophet who was sent in his own time. You too are living in the time of Muhammad. As such, by calling

you to Islam, we do not want to separate you from the religion of Jesus. On the contrary we propose that you do what is in accordance with the message he brought.

The fact is that despite the obvious dogmatic differences between Islam and the established Christian churches, Christians come closest to Muslims in their piety, love of God and liking to do Good. Indeed, in many ways, Jesus' teachings of love and compassion some close to the Islamic ideal as taught by our Prophet. Did not Jesus, upon whom be peace, teach men not to make a show of their good deeds, but to do it for the sake of God and God alone?

"*When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, who love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on street corners so that others may see them*" (Matthew 6:5)

"*When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites. They neglect their appearance, so that they may appear to others to be fasting*" (Matthew 6:16)

"*When you give alms. Do not blow a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and the streets to win the praise of others. Amen I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your almsgiving may be secret*" (Matthew 6:2-4).

Jesus could certainly not brook the hypocrisy that had taken hold of the Jews of his time, like when he overturned the tables of the money changers in Jerusalem, crying out that it was written: "*My house shall be a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of thieves*" (Matthew 21:12-13). He pointed out that despite the commandment of God to Moses to '*Honour your father and mother'* they claimed "*If a person says to father or mother "any support you might have had from me is qorban (dedicated to God)" you allow him to do nothing more for his father or mother. You nullify the Word of God in favour of your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many such things*" (Mark 7:10-13). Like any good prophet, he exposed the futility of erecting tombs and monuments for prophets and righteous men to make a show of it:"*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous*" (Matthew 23:27–29).

Besides expecting his followers to follow the law to the letter, he also expected them to follow it in spirit, like when he said: "*You have heard that it was said: "You shall not commit adultery". But I say to you, everyone who looks at a woman with lust has committed adultery in his heart*" (Matthew 5:27).

And if that were not enough, he expected a very high moral standard for his followers, such as when he pronounced: "*If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better to lose one of your members than to have your whole body thrown into Gehenna. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better to lose one of your members, than to have your whole body go into Gehenna"* (Matthew 5:29-30).

And if even that were not enough, he expected his followers to be detached from the world as much as possible and to trust in and depend on God absolutely, like when he said: "*Do not worry about your life and what you will eat, or about your*

body and what you will wear. For life is more than food and the body more than clothing? Notice the ravens. They do not sow or reap; they have neither storehouses nor barn, yet God feeds them. How much more important are you than birds! Can any of you by worrying add a moment to your life-span? If even the smallest things are beyond your control, why are you anxious about the rest? Notice how the flowers grow. They do not toil or spin. But I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of them" (Luke 12:22-27).

Indeed, when you read the Bible you will find that the moral teachings of Jesus were higher than any found in the Old Testament such as when he advised:

"*When you hold a banquet, invite the poor, crippled, the lame, the blind. Blessed indeed will you be because of their inability to repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous*" (Luke 14:13-14)

In like manner, Muhammad, upon whom be peace, told his followers how helping God's creatures was related to Godliness in a very powerful narration:

God will say: "I asked you for food and you did not feed Me'. He (Man) will say: 'Lord, how could I feed You when You did not ask me for food and You are the Lord of the universe?' He will say: 'Do you not know that My slave so-and-so asked you for food and you did not feed him? Do you not know that if you had fed him, you would have found that action with Me? Son of Adam, I asked you for water and you did not give Me water.' The man will reply: 'O Lord, how could I give you water when You are the Lord of the universe?' He will say: 'My slave so-and-so asked you for water and you did not give him water. Do you not know that if you had given him water, you would have found that action with Me? Son of Adam, I was ill and you did not visit Me.' He will say: 'O Lord, how could I visit You when You are the Lord of the universe?' He will say, 'Do you not know that My slave so-and-so was ill. If you had visited him you would have found Me with him" (Adab Al Mufrad).

Another very important moral teaching of Jesus was God's love for the repentant sinner and the need to move away from a 'holier than thou' attitude' like we see in the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector:

Two people went to the temple area to pray; one was a Pharisee and the other was a tax collector. The Pharisee took up his position and spoke this prayer: "O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity – greedy, dishonest, adulterous – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, and I pay tithes on my whole income". But the tax collector stood off at a distance and would not even raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast and prayed: "O God, be merciful to me, a sinner". I tell you, the latter went home justified, not the former, but everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted (Luke 18: 10-14).

Jesus stressed on repentance that much, why, because man is prone to sin, though he may not even know it. That is why he said, again speaking in parable:

What man among you having a hundred sheep and losing one of them would not leave the ninety-nine in the desert and go after the lost one until he finds it? And when he does find it, he sets it on his shoulders with great joy, and upon his arrival home, he calls together his friends and neighbours and says to them: "Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep". I tell you, in just the same way, there will

be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance"(Luke 15:4-7).

In similar vein did Muhammad declare:

God is more delighted with the repentance of His slave when he repents, than any of you would be if (he found his) camel, which he had been riding in a barren desert, after it had escaped from him carrying his food and drink. After he despaired of it, he came to a tree and laid down in its shade. Then while he was despairing of it, the camel came and stood by his side, and he seized its reins and cried out in joy, 'O God, You are my servant and I am your Lord!' – making this mistake (in wording) out of his excessive joy" (Saheeh Muslim).

Such teachings of Jesus are closer to that taught us by Muhammad than the Jewish view and way of life that stressed more on following the letter of the law than its spirit. Still, there are a few teachings of Jesus that must be viewed in the context in which they were uttered. One such is the other worldliness which Jesus preached, like when he said: "*Whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple*" (Luke 14:33) or when he advised his followers to make themselves eunuchs *"for the sake of the kingdom of heaven*" (Matthew 19:12). What all this shows is that what Jesus preached was in diametrical opposition to the vulgar materialistic worldview of the Jews of his day who exceeded all other nations in their love for gold and the pleasures of the flesh. Islam took a middle path, teaching moderation in all things, allowing one to enjoy the delights of this world while at the same time exercising control with regard to both wealth and sexual pleasure and being mindful to one's duties to God and grateful for his blessings, so that you don't find the extremisms you find in Christendom today, the abstemtious celibate lives of monks and nuns and the worldly if not licentious lifestyles of their flock.

The same holds true about what he preached about non-resistance to evil: "*But I say unto you, that ye resist not evil, but whoever that shall smite theee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also*" (Matthew 5:39). What Jesus wished to drive home was to be forgiving, especially in view of the overly literal observance of the Mosaic Law of eye for an eye which could lead to a very vindictive and hard-hearted attitude if the circumstances are not considered. In all these respects, Islam took the middle course more compatible with human nature. It gave its followers the option to avenge oneself, like for like as stated in the Mosaic law, while at the same time urging them to be forgiving, bearing in mind that God is watching over them. Indeed, even the best of Christians find it hard to observe this teaching of Jesus as a general rule for all occasions, especially if such evil affects not just one's self, but others or humanity as a whole. Yet still the Qur'an agrees with the moral principle that Jesus sought to teach his followers when it declared: "*The good and the evil are not alike. Repel (evil) with what is better, then he between whom and thee there was enmity will become as though a bosom friend*" (Expounded:34).

Thus while Moses brought the Law and Justice, Jesus brought Grace and Flexibility. Muhammad showed us the middle way between the Law of Moses and the Grace of Jesus. As much as it focused on ritual as the Old Testament did, it also stressed on piety and doing good to others as the New Testament does.

Among other things that unite us, Christian and Muslim, is our common belief in the virgin birth of Jesus, and in his ministry and his second coming to pave the way for a better world, a bright future which we both equally look forward to.

Finally, all I can say is that we Muslims are closer to Jesus than most of those who profess Christianity today. Jesus was circumcised, and so are we. Jesus fasted, and so do we. Jesus prayed, falling on his face before the Almighty, and so do we. Jesus was bearded and so are a good many devout Muslim men. He dressed modestly in long robes much like most Arab Muslim men. Even in nativity plays in Christian lands today, you will see Mary and her friends dressed in typical Arab fashion with Mary with her hood or headscarf and the men around her in typical Arab robes and headdresses. Nay, even our greeting is the same, for did not Jesus, standing in the midst of a gathering, say unto them: *Peace Be Unto You* (Luke 24:36). This very likely took the Aramaic form *shlama lokhum* 'Peace Be Upon You'. This is exactly what we Muslims do when we greet somebody. We say *Assalam Alaikum* which means the same thing 'Peace Be Upon You". Thus in a sense we Muslims are more 'Christian', in the sense of being followers of Christ, than those in the West are. Indeed we're more like the *'Jesus freaks'* people in the West today look down upon!

21st Night

Johnny: Thanks for last night's talk, Sheikh. It was really enlightening to see how much we really have in common. As remarkable is the fact that the two greatest faiths on the face of the earth today, Christianity and Islam, should ultimately have their origins in Abraham. Of course the Jews who are not as numerous as ours, also regard Abraham as their father just as the Arabs do. There are also a lot of similarities between these three monotheistic faiths. This brings us to my next question:

Why this antipathy towards the Jews?

There was a time when the Jews had it all. But that was a long time ago. They were the 'Chosen people' by virtue of being the seed of Abraham whom God had befriended. God would have loved them had they kept His Commandments, that they Love Him with all their Heart and Soul:

Hear O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord. You shall love the Lord your God withall your heart, with all your soul, with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates (Deuteronomy 6:4-9)

But they threw it all way in their arrogance, rebelliousness and racial pride. They took the name of God in vain and spurned his prophets, even going to the extent of slaying those who did not agree with their views. They followed the letter of the law with pride, but held its spirit in contempt. They had this ridiculous idea that since they were the Chosen People, that God was beholden to them and that they could get away with anything.

They took immense pride in being the 'Chosen People' often quoting the Bible to prove their point, like when God says of the Children of Israel: "*You are a people sacred to your Lord, your God; He has chosen you from all the nations on the face of the earth to be a people peculiarly His Own; it was not because you are the largest of all nations that the Lord set His Heart on you and Chose you, for you are really the smallest of all nations*" (Deuteronomy 7:6-7).

But what they did to vindicate this special status which God Himself had given them is another story. Little wonder John the Baptist warned them:
You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit that will be worthy of repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up (instead of you) children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. (Matthew: 3: 7-10).

While they could have been an example to the nations, they were the very antithesis of it. They portrayed God as peculiarly their own, as a tribal god of the Jews, not of the universe. We find in the Bible numerous instances of women of other nations married to Jewish men worshipping their own gods and even turning their husbands' hearts towards them, perhaps the most famous being King Ahab's wife Jezebel who led her husband to worship Baal. That these non-Jewish women did not embrace their husbands' God wholeheartedly shows just one thing, that the Jews

themselves in their tribal zeal portrayed their god as a Jewish god, supposing that other gods could exist for other peoples. Had they really been keen to portray their god as a universal God, they could have easily convinced their wives of it, nay even insisted on a mark that could absorb them into the community and distance them from their old beliefs, maybe something like the circumcision their males underwent. But nay, they would not bother.

So first they irked God claiming Him as solely theirs to the exclusion of others; then they in their fickleness took other gods in his place, and when they gave it up, they oppressed their fellow men, engaging in one mischief after another. Little wonder Paul, himself a Jew, observed in his Epistle to the Romans that because of the Jews: "*The Name of God is reviled among the Gentiles*" (Romans 2:24).

You may wonder when you read the Old Testament of the Bible, which is the scripture of the Jews, why the God of Israel is so full of wrath, enjoining stern laws and demanding endless sacrifices. It might even lead you to believe that God is not merciful, but rather vengeful, that He is capricious and changes overnight from a Loving Lord to a Terrible Taskmaster. But hold on, it is not God who changes, but man, and the Jews changed even more than other men. God spoke through the Prophet Malachi: "*I am He Who Is. I do not change*" ((Malach 3:6). So it was not God who had changed, but the people he at one time favoured, the Children of Israel, and they provoked his anger like no other nation.They throughout proved to be a fickle-minded people, often lapsing into idolatry or even flirting with it, even letting themselves be tempted to sacrifice their children to the Canaanite deity Molech, which is why God ordained that anybody in Israel who gave his offspring to Molech shall be put to death (Leviticus 20:2).

That is why in the Bible we often find God metaphorically addressing Israel as a harlot, harlotry being equaled to idolatry:

I swore an oath to you and entered into a covenant with you; you became mine says the Lord God. Then I bathed you with water, washed away your blood and anointed you with oil. I clothed you with an embroidered gown, put sandals of fine leather on your feet; I gave you a fine linen sash and silk robes to wear. I adorned you with jewellery. I put bracelets on your arms, a necklace about your neck, a ring in your nose, pendants in your ears, and a glorious diamond upon your head. Thus you were adorned with gold and silver; your garments were of fine linen, silk and embroidered cloth. Fine flour. Honey and oil were your food. You were exceedingly beautiful, with the dignity of a queen. You were renowned among the nations for your beauty, perfect as it was, because of my splendour which I bestowed on you, says the Lord God. But you were captivated by your own beauty, you used your renown to make yourself a harlot, and you lavished your harlotry on every passer-by, whose own you became. You took some of your gowns and made for yourself gaudy high places, where you played the harlot. You took the splendid gold and silver ornaments that I had given you and made for yourself male images, with which also you played the harlot. You took your embroidered gowns to cover them; my oil and my incense you set before them; the food that I had given you, the fine flour, the oil, and the honey with which I fed you, you set before them as an appeasing odour, says the Lord God. The sons and daughters you had borne Me you took and offered as sacrifices to be devoured by them! Was it not enough that you had become a harlot? You slaughtered and immolated my children to them, making them pass through fire. And through all your abominations and harlotries you remembered nothing of when you were a girl, stark naked and weltering in your blood" (Ezekiel 16:8-22)

Their arrogant nature is seen in the Bible itself. In Genesis we read that Jacob, the father of the twelve tribes of Israel, was called *Israel* after he had wrestled with the Almighty. What greater blasphemy than this I ask you ? And to think they had a law penalizing those who blasphemed with death which they did not shy away from using against innocents like Jesus who did not agree with them.

If you read the Bible you will find a common thread, a pattern of rebelliousness that ran through the Jews in all ages, from the days of their very beginnings, as children of that great patriarch Jacob even well before they became the twelve tribes with the passage of time. You don't have to look far. The Bible says it all, like how when Joseph, Jacob's favourite son, was showing signs of greatness, his own brothers said to one another on seeing him approach: "*Here comes that master dreamer! Come on, let us kill him and throw him into one of the cisterns here; we could say that a wild beast devoured him. We shall then see what comes of his dreams*" (Genesis 37:19-20); How Judah, another well known son of Jacob and eponym of the Jews (He gave his name *Yehud* to the Jews) mistook his daughter-in-law Tamar for a whore and entreated her to have sex with him and when told that she had played the harlot and was with child, cried out '*Bring her out. She shall be burned*" (Genesis 38:24); How two more of Jacob's sons Simeon and Levi (by the way Levi became the father of the Jewish priestly class) slaughtered the Hivite males of Canaan who were still in pain after being circumcised in spite of entering into an agreement with them that they would give them their daughters and take them in marriage if they did so, and as if that were not enough the rest sacked their city, seized their flocks, looted their houses and carried off their women and children, which needless to say caused great distress to their father who later said of the two upstarts: "*Let not my soul enter their council, or my spirit be joined with their company; for in their fury they slew men, in their willingness they maimed oxen. Cursed be their fury so fierce and their rage so cruel*" (Genesis 34:14-30, 49:5-7).

And when we come to the days of Moses we find that they had only got worse. They scorned and spurned the God who led them out of slavery in Egypt and even parted the Red Sea for them so they could escape from Pharaoh's army. But what did they do, as soon as Moses was away for a few days, they took to worshipping a golden calf. Is it any wonder that Moses railed against them:

"*Ye have been rebellious against the Lord from the day I knew you*"
(Deuteronomy 9:24)

"For I knew thy rebellion, and thy stiff neck. Behold, while I am yet alive with you this day, ye have been rebellious against the Lord; and how much more after my death?"
(Deuteronomy 31:27)

Is it any wonder that Moses sang of Israel:

They spurned the God who made them and scorned their saving Rock. They provoked him with strange gods and angered him with abominable idols. They offered sacrifice to demons, to "no-gods", to gods whom they had not known before, to newcomers just arrived of whom their fathers had never stood in awe. You were unmindful of the rock that begot you, you forgotthe God who gave you birth. When the Lord saw this

he was filled with loathing and anger toward his sons and daughters. "I will hide my face from them" he said "and see what will then become of them. What a fickle race they are, sons with no loyalty in them. Since they have provoked Me with their 'no-god' and angered me with their vain idols, I will provoke them with a no-people, with a foolish nation I will anger them. For by my wrath a fire is enkindled that shall rage to the depths of the netherworld, consuming the earth with its yield, and licking with flames the roots of the mountains. I will send on them woe upon woe and exhaust all my arrows against them. Emaciating hunger and consuming fever and bitter pestilence, and the teeth of wild beasts I will send among them, with the venom of reptiles gliding in the dust. Snatched away by the sword in the streets and by the sheer terror at home shall be the youth and the maiden alike, the nursing babe and the hoary old man. I would have said: "I will make an end of them and blot out their names from men's memories".Had I not feared the insolence of their enemies, feared that these foes would mistakenly boast "Our own hand won the victory; the Lord had nothing to do with it"

(Deuteronomy 32:15-27)

That is why God, knowing well their ways, swore if they did not observe his commandments, they would be visited by the curse of disease, drought, destruction:

The Lord will strike you with wasting and fever, with scorching, fiery drought, with blight and searing wind, that will plague you until you perish. The sky over your heads will be like bronze and the earth under your feet like iron. For rain the Lord will give your land powder dust which will come down upon you from the sky until you are destroyed. The Lord will let you be beaten down before your enemies; though you advance against them from one direction, you will flee before them in seven, so that you will become a terrible example to all the kingdoms of the earth. Your carcasses will become food for all the birds of the air and for the beasts of the field, with no one to frighten them off

(Deuteronomy 28:22-26)

The curse of invasion and siege:

The Lord will raise up against you a nation from afar, from the end of the earth, that swoops down like an eagle, a nation whose tongue you do not understand, a nation of stern visage, that shows neither respect for the aged nor pity for the young. They will consume the offspring of your livestock and the produce of your soil, until you are destroyed; they will leave you no grain or wine or oil, no issue of your herds or young of your flocks, until they have brought about your ruin. They will besiege you in each of your communities, until the great unscalable walls you trust in come tumbling down all over your land. They will so besiege you in every community throughout the land which the Lord, your God has given you, that in the distress of the siege to which your enemy subjects you, you will eat the fruit of your womb, the flesh of your own sons and daughters whom the Lord your God has given you

(Deuteronomy 28:49-53)

And exile:

Just as the Lord once took delight in making you grow and prosper, so will he now take delight in ruining and destroying you, and you will be plucked out of the land you are now entering to occupy. The Lord will scatter you among all the nations

from one end of the earth to the other, and there you will serve strange gods of wood and stone, such as you and your fathers have not known. Among these nations you will find no repose, not a foot of ground to stand upon, for there the Lord will give you an anguished heart and wasted eyes and a dismayed spirit. You will live in constant suspense and stand in dread both day and night, never sure of your existence

(Deuteronomy 28:63-66)

Interestingly here, the Israelites are not threatened with punishment in the hereafter, but rather in this worldly life itself. Perhaps it may be because they were even then a very fickle, worldly-minded, hard-hearted people to whom an other worldly punishment like hellfire would not have made them give up their evil ways, and so we have the threat of invasion and exile which actually took place many times in the history of Israel.

God's warning to Moses soon proved to be true, for not long afterwards we hear of the Israelites abandoning the Lord, the God of their fathers, and serving the Baals and the Asherahs, the deities of the Canaanites and Phoenicians, thus inviting the wrath of God who let them fall into the power of Cushon, King of Aram; when they had been saved, they again offended their Lord who strengthened Eglon, King of Moab, who went on to conquer Israel (Judges 3:7-14). After Gideon, who had delivered them from Midian, they again abandoned themselves to the Baals, this time making Baal of Berith their god, forgetting the Lord their God and showing their ingratitude to the family of Gideon in spite of all the good he had done Israel (Judges 8:33-35).

Idolatry again raised its ugly head after Solomon's death, when the kingdom split into two, the kingdom of Judah comprising of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin led by Solomon's son Rehoboam centred in Jerusalem and the rest of the tribes of Israel founding what they called the Kingdom of Israel under his rival Jeroboam. Jeroboam, thinking to himself that the kingdom would return to the House of David if his people went to the temple in Jerusalem, had two calves of gold made and said to the people: "You *have been going up to Jerusalem long enough. Here is your God O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt"*. He placed one idol in Bethel and the other in Dan (Kings 12:26-30). Judah under Rehoboam went one worse, building for themselves sacred poles upon every high hill and under every green tree, even going to the extent of having cult prostitutes, imitating all the abominable practices of the nations that the Lord had cleared out of the Israelites way (Kings 14:22-24). God their Cherisher spoke about their abominations through the Prophet Jeremiah:

"*As numerous as your cities, are your gods O Judah! And as many as the streets of Jerusalem are the altars you have set up for Baal*"
(Jeremiah 2:27-28)

"*The people of Judah have done what is evil in my eyes. They have defiled the house which bears my name by setting up in it their abominable idols. In the valley of Ben-Hinnom they have built the high place of Topheth to immolate in fire their sons and daughters, such a thing as I never commanded*"
(Jeremiah 7:30)

"*The bones of the kings and princes of Judah, the bones of the priests and the prophets, and the bones of the citizens of Jerusalem will be emptied out of their graves and spread out before the sun and the moon and the whole army of heaven*

(the stars) which they loved and served, which they followed, consulted and worshipped. They will not be gathered up for burial, but will lie like dung upon the ground. Death will be preferred to life by all the survivors of this wicked race who remain in any of the places to which I banish them"
(Jeremiah 8:1-3)

The retribution God had promised soon came in the form of Nebuchadnezzar, King of the Assyrians who in the 6th century laid siege to Jerusalem and carried away its inhabitants to Babylon. Not until the days of Cyrus, King of Persia were they allowed to go back. And when they did, it was only the tribes of Judah, Benjamin and Levi that made it to Jerusalem. The rest of the tribes were lost. None knows what happened to these lost tribes of Israel. When they returned they had almost forgotten their Hebrew speech and soon Aramaic, a Semitic language closely related to Arabic spoken by their neighbours replaced it. Aramaic was of course the speech of the folk of Aram (Syria) who had in earlier times actually fought against the Israelites under Ben Hadad (Kings 20:26). Thus Aramaic that had actually been the speech of the enemies of Israel now came to be spoken by the Jews themselves. So thorough was the transition that when the Romans took over Palestine it was Aramaic that was spoken. It was Aramaic that Jesus spoke.

The Jews of course returned to Palestine under Ezra ever the wiser not to irk their Lord. They became very strict Sabbatarians which even Jesus found disconcerting. That was in the 6th century before Christ. The Talmud, a well known body of Jewish writings supposed to have been written by their learned people regards Ezra as a second Moses, even claiming that the Torah would have been given to Ezra had not Moses preceded him. So strong was the adulation for Ezra that God would, in the Qur'an, accuse the Jews of calling Ezra *'a son of God'* (The Repentance: 30).

Ezra who was then chief priest of the Jews focused more on ritual than right, more on the letter of the law than its spirit. He exhorted his fellow Jews following their return to Jerusalem from captivity in Babylon: "*The land you are entering to take possession is a land unclean with the filth of the peoples of the land, with the abominations they have filled it from one end to the other in their uncleanliness. Do not then, give your daughters to their sons in marriage, and do not take their daughters for your sons. Never promote their peace and prosperity; thus you will grow strong, enjoy the produce of the land, and leave it as an inheritance to your children forever*" (Ezra 9:11-12).

Ezra's ideas needless to say were at odds with the Law of Moses which prohibited the oppression of non-Jews and contains some valuable moral lessons:

You shall not molest or oppress an alien, for you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt. You shall not wrong any widow or orphan. If ever you wrong them and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry. My wrath will flare up and I will kill you with the sword; then your wives will be widows and your children orphans
(Exodus 22:2023)

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not be so thorough that you reap the field to its very edge, nor shall you glean the stray ears of grain. Likewise you shall not pick your vineyard bare, nor gather up the grapes that have fallen. These things you shall leave for the poor and the alien. I, the Lord, am your God.
(Leviticus 9:9-10)

You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind, but you shall fear your God. I am the Lord. You shall not act dishonestly in rendering judgement; show neither partiality to the weak or deference to the mighty, but judge your fellow men justly. You shall not go about spreading slander among your kinsmen; nor shall you stand by idly when your neighbour's life is at stake. I am the Lord
(Leviticus 9:14-16)

The Talmudist followers of Ezra could not be bothered with what the scripture taught. They were more concerned about preserving the Jews as a 'Master Race' and assiduously weeding out any threats to this idea, even to the extent of engaging in racist diatribes of the worst kind which would have paled in comparison to Hitler's rantings:

Even though God created the non-Jew they are still animals in human form. It is not becoming of a Jew to be served by an animal. Therefore he will be served by animals in human form
(Midrasch Talpioth)

Every Jew who spills the blood of the godless (non-Jews), is doing the same as making a sacrifice to God
(Bammidber raba & jalkut)

All gentile children are animals
(Yebamoth)

Gentile girls are in a state of filth from birth
(Abodah Zarah)

And then came Jesus to put the Jews on the correct path. As they had become strict ritualists he sought to reform them by stressing on the spiritual wisdom behind the law. Had not God spoken through the Prophet Hosea: "*Your piety is like a morning cloud, like the dew that early passes away. For this reason I smote them through the prophets, I slew them by the words of my mouth, for it is love that I desire, not sacrifice, and knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings*" (Hosea 6:4-6). Jesus in his wisdom knew it would be no easy task to reform his people, for did he not tell his twelve disciples when he sent them to the Jews: "*Behold! I am sending you like sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and simple as doves*" (Matthew 10:17).

Jesus condemned his Jewish fellows for being too obsessed with ritual. In his time the Sabbath was very rigidly observed as the Jews had by then become very strict Sabbatarians following their return from the Babylonian captivity under Ezra. In the Bible we read that once Jesus was going through a field of grain on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick the heads of grain and eat them. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him: "*See, your disciples are doing what is unlawful to do on the Sabbath*". He said to them: "*Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry, how he went into the house of God and ate the bread of offering, which neither he nor his companions, but only the priests could lawfully eat?*" (Matthew 11:1-4). On another occasion, when he was about to cure a man with a withered hand, they questioned him: "*Is it lawful to cure on the*

Sabbath?" so that they might accuse him. He responded: "*Which one of you who has a sheep that falls into a pit on the Sabbath will not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable a person is than a sheep. So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath*" (Matthew 12:10-14).

He condemned the hypocrisy of their priests in the strongest possible terms:

They preach, but they do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on people's shoulders, but they will not lift a finger to move them. All their works are performed to be seen. They widen their phylacteries and lengthen their tassels. They love places of honour at banquets, seats of honour in synagogues, greetings in marketplaces and the salutation of Rabbi (My lord)" (Matthew 23:3-7)

And strongly condemned their fickleness and lack of love for God:

You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: 'These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men. (Matthew 15:7-9)

And as if that were not enough, Jesus stressed that piety could also be found among gentiles. Did not he, impressed with the pious words of a Roman Centurion in Capernaum, say to his followers: "*Amen, I say to you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. I say to you, many will come from the east and the west, and will recline with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob at the banquet in the kingdom of heaven, but the children of the kingdom will be driven out into the outer darkness, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth*" (Matthew 8:5-12). Thus Jesus, being a messenger of God made it clear that not only the children of Israel, but gentiles too could also enter heaven. All this the Jewish leaders of the time found very distasteful and did all in their power to put him away. Finally they brought a false charge of blasphemy against him and sought to nail him on to the cross. God however saved him by taking him up to Himself.

But let us see how great the malice of the Jews was towards this final prophet of theirs. You will find in the Bible that when Jesus was condemned to death by the high priests, the Roman Governor Pilate tried in vain to save him, seeing no wrong in the man. But when he saw the mob calling for his blood and that a a riot was about to break out, he took some water and washed his hands in front of the crowd, saying, "*I am innocent of this Man's blood; see to that yourselves*." And what did all the Jews gathered there say? They all said, "*His blood be on us and on our children!*" (Matthew:27:24-26). So the Jews of that day brought upon the curse of God not only on themselves, but also their offspring!

As if rejecting Jesus was not enough, they went one worse by rejecting the message of the universal messenger that would have brought them into the league of mankind and helped them shed their racial pride and the accursed existence that came with it. The Jews surpassed others in their rejection of Islam for two reasons. Firstly because of their racist bigotry, and secondly because they had a long history of rejecting even their own prophets and killing them with impunity. As God says of them:

Miserable is the price for which they have sold their souls, in that they deny (the revelation) which God has sent down; in insolent envy that God of His grace should

send it to any of his servants He pleases. Thus have they drawn upon themselves wrath upon wrath,and humiliating is the punishment for those who reject faith (The Heifer: 90)

Although the Jews at first seemed to welcome the Prophet when he migrated to Medina from Mecca, they soon realized that he was destined for greatness. It did not take them long to go back to their tribal ways. They threw in their lot with a few malcontent Medinans and even assembled in the mosque during the service to listen to what the Muslims had to say and laugh and scoff at them openly. Once some Jews came to the Prophet and said, "*Poison be upon you*" (Using the word *Sam* "Poison' instead of *Salam* 'Peace'). Ayisha, the Prophet's wife huffed: "*And upon you and may the curse of God!*" The Prophet said, "*Easy, Ayisha, you must be gentle.*" She said: "*Didn't you hear what they said?"* He said, "*Didn't you hear what I said? I repeated it to them (and upon you) and what I said about them will be accepted and what they said about me will not be accepted*" (Adab al Mufrad).

They plotted incessantly to destroy the young Muslim community in Medina that had been formed of migrants from Mecca and the Arab tribes of Aws and Khazraj who had welcomed them with open arms. This hate campaign took the form of composing provocative and vulgar verses against the Prophet's wives and Muslim women by the likes of Ka'b bin Ashraf. But that's not all, they did their utmost to undermine the unity of the young Muslim community like when the Jew Shaas bin Qays got a Jewish youth to recite some poems composed about the old pre-Islamic Battle of Buath to a gathering of Muslims comprising the tribes of Aws and Khazraj till they got so worked up that they challenged each other, one saying: *if you wish we will do the same again* and the other responding: *We will. To arms! To arms!*. As soon as the Prophet got the news he rushed to them and said: "*O Muslims, remember God, remember God. Will you act as Pagans while I am with you after God has guided you to Islam and honoured you with it and made a clean break with Paganism, delivered you from unbelief, made you friends?*" (Sirat Rasul Allah, Ibn Hisham).

In spite of all their mischief-making, the Prophet entreated them to become Muslim:

"O Jews, beware lest God bring you the vengeance that he brought upon the Quraysh and become Muslims. You know that I am the Prophet who has been sent -you will find that in your books and God's Covenant with you"

Only to have the Jews insolently reply*:*

"By God if we fight you, you will find we are real men" (Ibn Hisham)

Huyay Ibn Akhtab, the chief of the Jewish tribe of Banu Nadir, whose tribe was ensconced in the fortress of Khaybar even visited the arch-enemy of the community, Abu Sufyan, in Mecca, promising to support him in his struggle against Muhammad. Abu Sufyan asked him: "*You O Jews, are the people of the first scripture and know the nature of our dispute with Muhammad. Is our religion the best or is his?*". Huyay replied that the religion of the Quraysh was definitely the best, in spite of the fact that it was seeped in idolatry. His successor Abu Rafi Sallam went further, using his tribe's wealth to induce neighbouring Arabs and especially the powerful tribe of

Ghatafan to join them against the Muslims so that he was able to raise a large army. Fortunately he was assassinated by the Ansar supporters of the Prophet and it was not long after that Khaybar was besieged by the Muslims and surrendered.

There was also the Jewish tribe of Qurayzah who plotted to attack the Muslims from the rear by allowing their fellow Jews of the Banu Nadir into the settlement so that they could slaughter the women and children who were housed in a nearby fortress. The Qurayzah despite being bound by an agreement with the Prophet to help in the defence of the city against the Meccans now changed sides. Seeing the large army of the Quraysh filling the plain in front of the city for the great Battle of the Trench, they threw in their lot with the enemy. They grew defiant and challenged the Muslims: "*Who is the Messenger of God? There is no pact between us and Muhammad nor any agreement!"*. Their efforts to slay the women and children could thankfully not be carried out as a Jew dispatched to the fort to spy was spotted by the Prophet's aunt Safiyyah, who taking a large peg nail off a tent struck the Jew in his head with such force that he fell dead. She then cut off his head and threw it amongst the Jews, who believing that there were fighters inside the fort, dared not attack it. They were further disheartened when the Quraysh army whom they counted on to defeat the Muslims beat a hasty retreat.

The Prophet, now inspired by the angel Gabriel, summoned the Muslim army and surrounded the Qurayzah. The Jewish chiefs in typical Jewish fashion told their people that they could kill their women and children and attack the Muslim army. If they died, they argued as the godless do, they would not have to worry about their dependants, and if they won they could easily find new wives. To put it in their Chief Ka'b bin Asad's words: "*Let us kill our wives and children and send men with drawn swords to Muhammad and his companions leaving no encumbrances behind us. If we do perish, we shall not leave children behind to cause us anxiety. If we conquer we can acquire other wives and children*".

Now, killing their wives and children was an accepted Jewish tradition in times of war like they did during the siege of Masada in the First Jewish War against the Romans in 73 A.D when the Jewish leader Eleazar observed that God had turned against the Jewish people and ordered: "*Let our wives die before they are abused, and our children before they have tasted of slavery, and after we have slain them, let us bestow that glorious benefit upon one another mutually*". The men then embraced their wives and children and put them to the sword. Ten men were then chosen to take the lives of their comrades with the one who killed the rest falling on his own sword. That the Jews of the Prophet's time thought likewise is not surprising.

The Qurayzah, confident that their allies among the Medinites would save them surrendered unconditionally, and as expected the Medinan tribe of Aws pleaded with the Prophet to be merciful to the Jews. The Prophet asked them whether they would accept the decision of one of their number, a chief named Sa'd and they agreed. The man, who was on the brink of death due to the treachery of the Jews judged that all their 600-900 fighting men be killed and their wives and children taken into slavery. To put it in his words: "*Slay the fighting men and take captive their women and children*". Only one woman, who took part in attacking the Muslim army by throwing a millstone during the siege was beheaded.

This sad incident has been termed by some an extermination of the Jews, but the facts are different. The Medinan chief had chosen to apply the Jewish law of war, not in its full rigour which demanded:

"*You shall not let live anything that breathes*"
(Deuteronomy 20:16)

But rather a more lenient form prescribed for enemies of far-off cities:

"*You shall smite every male with the edge of the sword, but the women and the little ones and the cattle, and all that is in the city, even all the spoil thereof, you shall take unto yourself and you shall eat the spoils of your enemies, which the Lord your God has given you*"
(Deuteronomy 20:13-14)

Even in this case, it was not all adult men who were killed since the old men and those unable to bear arms would have been spared. The word used by Sa'd for the fighting men of the tribe who were liable to be killed was *muqaatil* or '*those who kill or can kill'*. If you think this is harsh, know then had it been the Jews who triumphed, they would have applied the more rigorous rule since they were not in a far-off city, but in the territory of Medina itself. It is of them that it is said in the Qur'an:

God took them down from their strongholds and cast terror into their hearts (so that) some you slew, and some you made prisoner. And He made you heirs of their lands, their houses and their goods
(The Confederates: 26 -27)

What they had done to others, had now turned a full circle and come back to them. These were after all the very Jews who had incited the tyrannical Dhu Nuwas to massacre the Christians of Najran in the year 522 when as many as two thousand innocent souls were martyred by being burnt in a huge pit, an incident that even finds mention in the Qur'an which condemns in no uncertain terms the makers of the pit (of fire) (The Constellations: 4-8). Despite all this, the Jews were given the chance to embrace Islam again and again:

O People of the Book! There has come to you our Messenger revealing to you much that ye used to hide in the Book, and passing over much (that is now unnecessary). There has come to you from God a Light and a Clear Book, wherewith God guides all those who seek His Good Pleasure to ways of Peace and Safety, and leads them out of darkness by His Will, unto the light- guides them to a path that is straight
(The Repast:15-16)

It was only a very few who took up the offer. The majority of them rejected this last handhold which could have saved them. That's not all, they could not content themselves living under Islamic rule and did their best to do away with him when the opportunity arose, like when one of their number, a Jewess brought the Prophet and his comrades poisoned sheepmeat to eat. He had hardly tasted a morsel of it when he was inspired not to swallow it and lost no time warning his companions that it had been poisoned. One of his companions who had swallowed a mouthful died.

When the woman was brought before the Prophet, she admitted that she had poisoned the meat, why, because her peple, she claimed, had been humiliated by the Muslims. She had taken the Muslims kindness for weakness, and despite all this the Prophet forgave her. When his companions asked, "*Should we not kill her?*" he firmly replied"*No*". The woman was executed only after the companion of the

Prophet who had eaten of the meat died (Aboo Dawood). Anas, a close companion of the Prophet says: "*I continued to recognise the poison in the sighs of the Messenger of God, may God bless him and grant him peace*." (Adab al Mufrad). Just as they had tried to kill Jesus, they had now almost succeeded in killing Muhammad. In fact the ill effects of the poisoned meat continued to plague the Prophet until his demise.

And so the Jews became a condemned people, a cursed people enduring persecution wherever they went, in the ghettos of mediaeval Europe, the pogroms of Russia, Hitler's gas chambers. Is it not strange that the word holocaust used of the animal sacrifices at the temple of Solomon should have come to refer to the extermination of Jewry by the Nazis? Is it not odd that a nation that prided itself in calling itself the 'Chosen people' and regarded others as little more than dirt should be labeled an inferior, nay subhuman race by the Germans of that age? Is it not strange that a nation that tried to kill Jesus and claimed they did, should be done to death by another that claimed to follow Jesus? Is it not bizarre that a nation that denied the hell of the hereafter should have been made to go through hell in this earth, in the gas chambers and the crematoria of Auschwitz, Belsec, Treblinka?

Such was their fate which they continue to suffer to this day. By hating others, they made a ghetto of their own making to which they confined their small minds and so the outside world made ghettos for them, confining them to these special quarters meant for them and them only where they had to live away their miserable existence cursing at every gentile who crossed their path.

As you have seen, the God of the Bible does not mince His words when condemning His 'Chosen People'. He promises them all sorts of terrible punishments if they disobeyed him and slew his prophets, much of which came to pass. In the Qur'an, which is in a sense a continuation of the Biblical message, you will find the Jews being addressed in a similar vein.

For one thing their constant rebelliousness and hard heartedness is condemned:

We divided them into twelve tribes or nations. We directed Moses by inspiration, when his people asked him for water "strike the rock with your staff", out of it there gushed forth twelve springs. Each group knew its place for water. We gave them the shade of clouds and sent down to them manna and quails (saying)" eat of the good things We have provided for you". (But they rebelled); to Us they did no harm, but they harmed their own souls
(The Heights:160)

God did aforetime take a covenant from the Children of Israel, and We appointed twelve captains among them. And God said: "I am with you: if ye establish regular prayers, practice regular charity, believe in My Messengers, honour and assist them, and loan to God a beautiful loan; verily I will wipe out from you your evils and admit you to Gardens under which rivers flow; But if any of you, after this, resists faith, he has truly wandered from the path of rectitude. But because of their breach of the covenant, We cursed them and made their hearts grow hard. They change the words from their places and forget a good part of the message that was sent them, nor will you cease to find them-barring a few-ever bent on deceit; but forgive them and overlook (their misdeeds) for God loves those who are kind"
(The Repast:12-13)

The People of the Book ask thee to cause a book to descend to them from heaven. Indeed they asked Moses for an even greater (miracle), for they said: "Show us God

in public" but they were dazed for their presumption by thunder and lightning. Yet they worshipped the calf even after clear signs had come to them. even so we forgave them and gave Moses manifest proofs of authority. And for their covenant We raised over them (the towering height) of Mount (Sinai); and we said: "enter the gate with humility" and we commanded them: "Transgress not in the matter of the Sabbath".

And we took from them a solemn covenant. (They incurred Divine displeasure) in that they broke their covenant; that they rejected the Signs of God; that they slew the messengers in defiance of right; that they said "Our hearts are the wrappings" – nay God has set the seal on their hearts for their blasphemy, and little is it they believe- That they rejected faith; that they uttered against Mary a grave false charge; That they said (in boast): "We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary, the Messenger of God". But they killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them. and those who differ are full of doubts with no knowledge, but only conjecture to follow, for of a surety they killed him not- Nay God raised him up unto Himself, and God is Exalted in Power, Wise. And there is none of the People of the Book but must believe in him before his death; and on the Day of Judgement he will be a witness against them
(The Women:153-159)

This attitude of the Jews is confirmed in the Bible where we read the Almighty commanding the Jews:

"*Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and be no longer stiff-necked*"
(Deuteronomy 10:16)

'For the sake of the Lord, be circumcised, remove the foreskins of your hearts, O men of Judah and citizens of Jerusalem; lest My anger break out like fire, and burn till none can quench it, because of your evil deeds"
(Jeremiah 4:4)

God told the Jews that the mere rite of external circumcision would be of no avail unless it was accompanied by the removal of the hardened heart. But the Jews treated it with scorn. The Qur'an says of this attitude:

And we took from them (The Jews) a solemn covenant. (They incurred Divine displeasure) in that they broke their covenant; that they rejected the Signs of God; that they slew the messengers in defiance of right; that they said "Our hearts are the sheaths" - nay God has set the seal on their hearts for their blasphemy
(The Women:155)

The Arabic expression used here for "Our hearts are the sheaths" *quloobuna ghulfun* could also mean 'Our hearts are uncircumcised'.

And again and again we hear of their slaying the prophets sent them:

We took the covenant of the Children of Israel and sent them messengers. Every time there came to them a Messenger with what they themselves desired not, some they called impostors, and some they (go so far as to) slay, they thought there would be no

trial; so they became blind and deaf; yet God (in His Mercy) turned to them; yet again many of them became blind and deaf- But God sees well all that they do
(The Repast:70-71)

We gave Jesus, the son of Mary, clear signs and strengthened him with the Holy Spirit.Is it that whenever there comes to you (Jews) a messenger with what ye yourselves desire not, ye are puffed up with pride? Some ye called impostors, and others ye slay!
(The Heifer:87)

They (the Jews) drew on themselves the wrath of God. This because they went on Rejecting the Signs of God and slaying His Messengers without just cause, This because they rebelled and went on transgressing
(The Heifer: 61)

This Jewish tendency to slay their own prophets is likewise confirmed in the Bible, both in the Old and New Testament. The Prophet Jeremiah who had warned them against their idolatry was murdered by his Judean compatriots in Egypt. Zechariah, another prophet who lived in the reign of King Joash and who warned them against their idolatry was stoned to death in the court of the Lord's temple (Chronicles 24:18-21). This was no doubt the Zechariah mentioned by Jesus whose death between the altar and the temple he blamed on the Jews (Luke 1I:49-51).
Did not God Himself accuse Israel:

"*Your sword devoured your prophets like a ravening lion*"
(Jeremiah 2:30)

Did not Jesus lament:

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you. How many times I yearned to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were unwilling. Behold your house will be abandoned"
(Luke 13:34-35)

Did he not cry out:
"*Woe to you Scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the memorials of the righteous and you say: "If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have joined in shedding the prophets' blood. thus you bear witness against yourselves that you are the children of those who murdered the prophets; now fill up your ancestors measured out! You serpents, you brood of vipers, how can you flee from the judgement of Gehenna?"*
(Matthew 23:29-33)

Another presumptuous attitude of the Jews condemned in the Qur'an is their racial arrogance in holding themselves to be the Chosen People to the exclusion of all other nations. Thus we have God challenging the Jews: "*If the last Home, with God, be for you specially, and not for anyone else, then seek ye death, if ye are sincere*" but then it adds: "*Thou wilt indeed find them, of all people, most greedy of life – even more than the idolators. Each one of them wishes he could be given a life of a thousand years. But the grant of such life will not save him from punishment. For God sees well all that they do"* (The Heifer: 94-96).

Also condemned is their constant mischief making and war mongering:

The Jews say: "God's Hand is tied up". Be their hands tied up and be they accursed for what they utter. Nay, both His Hands are widely outstretched. He gives and spends (of His Bounty) as He Pleases. But the revelation that comes to you from God increases in most of them their obstinate rebellion and blasphemy. Amongst them We have placed enmity and hatred till the Day of Judgement. Every time they kindle the fire of war, God extinguishes it; but they strive to do mischief on earth, and God loves not those who do mischief
(The Repast: 64)

And their indulging in exploitative practices like usury:

For the inequity of the Jews we made unlawful for them certain (foods) good and wholesome which had been lawful for them- in that they hindered many from God's way – That they took usury, though they were forbidden; and that they devoured men's substance wrongfully- We have prepared for those among them who reject faith a grievous punishment
(The Women:160-161)

And in shirking their obligations to Non-Jews with flimsy excuses:

Who if entrusted with a single gold coin, would not return it to you unless you constantly stood over demanding it. This is because they say: We have no duty toward the gentiles", but they utter a falsehood concerning God, and they know it
(Family Imraan:75)

Finally, we find the Qur'an, like the Bible, reminding the Jews of their rebelliousness and the punishments He visited on them:

And We gave warning to the Children of Israel in the Book that twice would they do mischief on the earth and be elated with mighty arrogance (and twice would they be punished). When the first of the warnings came to pass, We sent against you our servants given to terrible warfare. They entered the very inmost parts of your homes. And it was a warning fulfilled. Then did We grant you the Return as against them. we gave you increase in resources and sons, and made you the more numerous in manpower. If ye did well, ye did well for yourselves; if ye did evil (ye did it) against yourselves. So when the second of the warnings came to pass (We let your enemies) to disfigure your faces and to enter your temple as they had entered it before, and to visit with destruction all that fell into their power. It may be that Your Lord may (yet) show Mercy unto you, but if ye revert (to your sins) We shall revert (to our Punishments). And We have made Hell a prison for those who reject (faith)
(The Night Journey: 4-8)

The first wave of destruction referred to here came with Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC when the Jews were carried off into captivity. They had rejected the pleadings of their Prophet not to lapse into idolatry and now had to face the consequences. Their foes were in a sense Servants of God as they were the instruments through which God's wrath was visited on the Jews. The second destruction came with their

rejection of Jesus' mission by the Jews, resulting in the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman general Titus in 70 AC. Since then the Temple of Solomon destroyed by Titus has never been rebuilt. In its place the Muslim Caliph Umar built a fine mosque that stands to this day. All that remains of the old temple is a bit of wall today known as the 'Wailing Wall' – the holiest site in Judaism. Thus Jesus warning came to pass:

"*When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, know that its desolation is at hand. Then those in Judea must flee to the mountains. Let those from the city escape from it, and let those in the countryside not enter the city, for those days are the days of punishment when all the scriptures are fulfilled*" (Luke 21:20-22).

The Qur'an goes further, saying that the Jews will continue to suffer misery at the hands of other nations, assuring them that it would continue to the Last Day unless they repented and accepted the truth:

Behold! Your Lord declared that He would send against them (Jews), to the Day of Judgement, those who would afflict them with grievous penalty. Your Lord is swift in retribution, but He is also oft-forgiving, Most Merciful
(The Heights: 167)

Finally there's a moral to be learned from the Jews being condemned in such scathing terms. It is a warning to Muslims not to become like them. It is a warning not to become arrogant like them, selfish like them or brutal like them. When the Jews were scattered following the destruction of their temple in 70 AC, we often hear of the persecutions they faced at the hands of others, especially Christians who held them responsible for Jesus' death. We hear of the ghettos, of the pogroms, of concentration camps, but little do we hear of what they did during all this time they lived in Europe and elsewhere. So why not go back to history and see what the wandering Jew did all that time. True he was oppressed, but this oppression had a basis, and it all boiled down to the attitude of the Jews themselves especially their narrow racist attitudes.

This is why Christians whose kindness they took undue advantage of, persecuted them throughout much of their history. Is it surprising that *anti-Semitism* is unique in that it describes a phenomenon so widespread throughout history that it transcended both time and space as if it were more of a natural rather than an unnatural development. And what may this be? Nothing but the outcome of Jewish attitudes towards the rest of humanity.

The Jews were avaricious by nature and left no stone unturned in finding ways to make money, even resorting to scriptural license to charge usury from non-Jews despite being prohibited from doing so from their own tribe: *Unto a stranger thou mayest lend upon usury, but unto thy brother thou shalt not lend upon usury* (Deuteronomy 23:20). In fact Jewish Jurists such as Maimonides considered it mandatory to exact as much usury as possible on a loan to a gentile.

Thus while the good Christian, like the good Muslim, eschewed usury on religious grounds, the Jew thrived on it, for as he argued the Torah prohibited taking interest only from his own kind, not others. So they became astute moneylenders charging exorbitant rates of interest from innocent people. You can get an idea of what they were like if you read Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice where the character of the typical Jew is personified in Shylock with his insistence on his 'pound of flesh'.

Even though they were confined to the ghettoes in Europe, they carried on their money-lending activities with such vigour and made so much money that even the governments in these countries where Christians themselves were forbidden to exact interest, found them useful as milch cows to tax. The total wealth of English Jewry in the 13th century amounted to no less than a third of the coinage circulating in England at the time. Such were the ill-gotten gains they made at the expense of others. This of course made them the target of popular purges and eventually mass expulsions as happened in England in the 14th century when they could not return for more than 300 years.

Their greed told in many other ways as well and as if exploiting people was not enough, they exploited the rest of God's creation as well, in some horrible ways, like inventing that dish called *Foie Gras* which is today considered a delicacy in French-speaking countries. It was the Jews of the ghettos who pioneered the practice of breeding geese in crammed up conditions and forcefeeding them to make them as big as possible so they could fetch a higher price. The geese so bred were forced to stay in one position amidst great suffering so that all the food they were force fed with were converted into fat. This led to another development, fattened goose liver which eventually became that well known French 'delicacy' *Foie gras* still produced in the west in spite of the immense suffering to the animal concerned. This has always been the nature of the Jew - thriving on the misery of both man and the rest of nature.

But that's not all, they have always taken life with a pinch of salt. The Talmud, that body of orthodox Jewish law is clear that a non-Jew is like an animal and could be killed with impunity. That is why Rabbi Simon Ben Yohai declared: *Tob shebe goyyim harog (Even the best of the gentiles should all be killed) (*Minor Tractates. Soferim). Is it any wonder then that a disproportionately high number of American doctors performing abortions are Jews. Why, because they have no qualms about taking gentile lives, in this instance the most helpless of them – the unborn.

While Europe gave a free hand to the Jew and persecuted him whenever he revealed his true nature, the Muslim controlled him for his own good and the good of all. The Jew could not engage in his exploitative practices like usury, but still he was not oppressed. He was given all the rights the Christians were given as People of the Book. Indeed when Jerusalem, then ruled by the Christians, capitulated to Caliph Umar in the 7th century, the Caliph agreed to a condition of the Christian leaders that the Jews would be kept out of the city. The Caliph at first agreed, but later revoked this condition as he did not want to oppress the Jews in any way or treat them any differently from Christians. Such was the fair treatment the Muslims meted out to the Jews.

Despite all this, what the Jews did to the Muslims is a different story. From the days of the Prophet onwards they conspired to create mischief and rouse up wars, but all to no avail. Although much of what they did are lost in the mists of time, we can never forget what they did in Palestine in their quest for a homeland of their own, because all this took place within living memory.

Palestine, as you know, was inhabited by Arabs, both Muslim and Christian, who had lived there in peace for centuries. But then came the Zionist movement started in Europe by a fellow named Theodor Herzl which called for the Jews to return to their ancient homeland after almost 2000 years of exile. The Jews, you will recall, had been exiled from Jerusalem with the sacking of the city in 70 AC by the Romans, thus beginning the Jewish diaspora which spread all over the world, especially Europe. The Muslims took the city from the Romans, who had now become

Christians, in and in the many centuries that followed all lived in peace under Muslim rule.

Those were the days when Palestine was ruled by the Ottoman Turks and the Zionists soon realized that the Turks, being good Muslims would never betray their Palestinian subjects. The Ottomans allied itself with Germany when the First World War broke out and now they saw the ideal opportunity. In 1916, a disastrous year for Britain, they prevailed on the British government that they would push America to enter the war on the side of the Britain if it promised to support a Jewish home in Palestine. Not long afterwards in 1917 British Foreign Minister Lord Balfour issued the Balfour Declaration pledging that Britain would "*view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people*". The Jewish Press in the US soon got to work and before long had involved the US in an European War. Germany lost and its Ottoman allies were dispossessed of their choicest lands in Palestine, Syria and Lebanon that came under a British Mandate. But the act would cost Jewry a terrible price, for Adolf Hitler who would in the years to come rise to become Germany's leader took his revenge, wiping out millions of them in what would come to be known as The Final Solution to the Jewish Problem.

However it was the poor Palestinians who had nothing to do with it who had to pay the heaviest price. Jewish settlers from all over Europe now came to settle in their land. Well armed terror groups created by the Zionists such as the Irgun and Stern Gang engaged in countless atrocities and by the time Israel's "War of Independence" had ended in 1949, over 750,000 Palestinian men, women, and children had been ruthlessly expelled.

To force the Palestinians out of their lands, the Zionists perpetrated brutal massacres never seen since the days Joshua took Canaan to pave the way for the promised land by killing everything that breathes. Take what they did in the little neutral Palestinian village of Deir Yassin in April 1948, even before a single Arab army had entered the fray. They wiped out the village by lining up men and women and shooting them dead and as if that were not enough slashed the little children's throats and carved out the unborn while still in their mothers' wombs with butchers' knives. News of the killings sent shockwaves among the innocent Palestinians who had never heard of such brutality. Before long the Zionists had taken over their lands. It was from such unspeakable acts of terror that the modern state of Israel was born.

And to think that the heads of the two militias that perpetrated these crimes, Menachem Begin and Yitzakh Shamir, would later become Prime Ministers of Israel. When Begin was interviewed on American television and asked "How *does it feel, in the light of all that's going on, to be the father of terrorism in the Middle East?*" he proudly proclaimed, "*In the Middle East? In all the world!*" Yes my friend, the Zionists were the first to light the fuse of terrorism in the Middle East, nay the entire world. All other acts of 'terrorism' like what the PLO did, pale in comparison to it.

As if that were not enough Zionist Jews have become as bad as or worse than the Nazis in spewing out racist drivel, ideas, no doubt inspired by works such as the Talmud. Take for instance what Menachem Begin said before the Knesset *"Our race is the master race. We are divine gods on this planet.We are as different from the inferior races as they are from insects. In fact, compared to our race, other races are beasts and animals, cattle at best. Other races are human excretment. Our destiny is to rule over the inferior races. Our earthly kingdom will be ruled over by our leader with a rod of iron. The masses will lick our feet and serve us as our slaves".* Such arrogance has been there throughout much of Jewish history, which is why even to

this day Israel celebrates the fall of Masada, when some Jewish fanatics took their lives and those of their families rather than surrender to the Romans.

But the tide now turns against Israel, which is already an anachronism in today's world. Israel remains the only state that has race as the cornerstone of its very existence, founded as it was on the theme of racial superiority. It discriminates against the Palestinians, whether Muslim or Christian and despoils their religious sites. It kills those who protest its repression with impunity. It continues to illegally occupy lands captured in war such as Arab Jerusalam and the West Bank, and on top of it build Jewish settlements there in contravention of international law.

With the fall of the Apartheid regime of South Africa, its very existence as a racist nation state is threatened. It is now a pariah in the international community and might even remain so till the end of days, when Jesus comes to take his due place.

Racist views are now giving way to more egalitarian ideas the world over. You have only to watch the latest films produced in the West to realize how true this is, how the native peoples of old are now being cast in a positive light and the pioneer Americans who took their lands sparing neither man nor beast shown for what they really were, a band of bloodthirsty barbarians. The days of the gun-totting cowboy hero killing the poor Red Indians like flies so common until the 1970s are now long gone as the west reappraises its bloody past. Even Hollywood actors and actresses are now supporting the Palestinians and speaking out against Israeli brutality. American universities are increasingly voting to boycott Israel thanks to its wonderful young people, who know better than their elders about what is really going on there. In Europe it is stronger as a growing Muslim population has a greater say in the policies of these nations with regard to Israel.

All this is not going in Israel's favour and they know it; but they cannot do anything about it, but recede deeper and deeper into their cocoon of race, into a shell of exclusivity from which they already find difficult to come out of due to their hard heartedness inherited from their Israelite ancestors. Yes, Israel today is nothing but a large ghetto of their own making.

So let us wait until Jesus comes, for when he comes, he will come as an instrument of God's Vengeance against the Jews who had constantly laid thorns in the path of His Messengers and even slain them. Had they not tried to kill Jesus who was sent to reform them? and to add insult to injury they would cast their lot with another who will claim to be the Messiah. But Jesus will not have any of it. He will slay this false Messiah, the Anti-Christ to take his rightful place. Once he has put an end to his arch-foe, the trees and the stones will cry out: *"Oh Spirit of God, here is a Jew hiding behind me"* so that none will be left from among the followers of the Antichrist whom he will not kill. The Muslims too will join Jesus in this final battle.

As our Prophet said:

The last hour will not come until the Muslims will fight against the Jews and the Muslims would kill them until the Jews would hide themselves behind a rock or a tree and the rock or tree will say: O Muslim, the servant of God, there is a Jew behind me; come and kill him;but the tree Gharqad (a thorny tree known as Boxthorn) would not say so, because it is the tree of the Jews
(Saheeh Muslim)

And so the rebellious Jews will meet their end at the hands of Jesus and his followers, never to bother man or the rest of nature till the Day of Judgement comes.

But this does not mean that just because one is born a Jew, he is cursed. Rather, God's Mercy is open to all, be he Jew or Gentile. It is only those Jews who persist in their arrogance and reject the mission of their own Prophet Jesus and of the final universal prophet Muhammad who will have to pay the price for their disbelief. Why have the weight of three thousand years of annoying God and oppressing their fellow men bear on them, when they can simply acknowledge Christ as their Prophet and Muhammad as his successor and join the league of nations?

Jews too are after all only human. Once the Prophet saw a corpse being taken, and stood up, followed by his companions who were with him. Later they said: "*O Messenger of God, it was the corpse of a Jew!"*. He promptly replied: *"Is he not a human too?*" (Saheeh Al-Bukhari).

Thus in Islam, no Jew can be harassed on account of his being born a Jew as the Nazis did in Germany. The way is open to them to embrace the universal faith and join the universal brotherhood of Islam anytime and Muslims worldwide are then obliged to treat them as one of theirs. In fact there have been a few born Jews who have seen the light of Islam and even written extensively about their new found faith. One such was Leopold Weiss who even took on the Arabic name of Muhammad Asad, Asad being the Arabic rendition of his first name Leo meaning 'Lion'.

22nd Night

Johnny: Salams Sheikh, last night's talk with you really got me wondering about it all, why the wandering Jew has been so ubiquitous throughout history. But there are some wonderful people among them as well, especially back in the US. Perhaps there's a need for Jews to follow the teachings of Jesus who was sent to them and seriously consider Islam as well. After all there's not such a great difference between any of our faiths. My next question:

You believe in Angels, so what's the evidence they exist?

Angels exist, my friend, just like you and me. It's just that they cannot be seen in the flesh because they are created from light. In fact, belief in the angels comes only second to the belief in God in the Islamic scheme of things. They belong to the realm of the unseen which we Muslims are required to believe in. When you believe in the unseen, you acknowledge that there is more to the world than its fleeting material aspects; that there is another dimension to our existence - a purely spiritual one that longs to serve God and do good.

Angels also remind us of the spirit that is in us, the soul that cannot be seen but nevertheless exists within us and is taken at death from our lifeless bodies. Thus when we become highly spiritual we are said to have angelic qualities, just as when we go the other way, we are said to have Satanic qualities. Since angels are godly creatures, they cannot disobey God or do evil. This is why we Muslims do not believe that Satan is a fallen angel, but rather a creature made out of fire known as a jinn. Angels, pure and sinless as they are by their very nature cannot ever stoop to the level of a devil.

Angels, to put it in a nutshell, are the agents of God, doing His Will on earth. They are the intermediating beings between the One Divinity and the vast mass of Humanity. They are with us from cradle to grave and will be with us even in the hereafter by God's Grace. Belief in these angels is a source of comfort to the believer as he or she knows that the universe abounds with these kind, friendly, helpful spirits who are there to assist people in times of trouble, bring blessings into their households and convey the news of their good deeds to the Almighty.

It's not only we Muslims who believe in angels. Many cultures of the ancient world believed in angelic figures which shows that they must be grounded in reality, that the men of old were told of them or comprehended them in some form or other. Besides the Biblical accounts of angels, we find similar beings occurring in other religious traditions, like for example the *Amesha Spentas* of that ancient Iranian faith known as Zoroastrianism. Tradition has it that when its Prophet Zarathustra was thirty years old, he went to the Daiti river to draw water when he saw Vohu Mana who took him to the other six *amesha spentas*. These seven heavenly beings we are told, had been created by the Supreme Being to assist him in the affairs of the world. They resemble the archangels with Vohu Mana occupying a place similar to that of Gabriel in the Biblical and Islamic traditions. Ordinary angels also seem to have been known to the ancient Persians as *Peris* who are described as winged spirits.

Other ancient civilizations also knew of angelic beings, like the *Lamassu* of Mesopotamia, guardian spirits with wings who help people fight evil and the *Liosalfar* or 'Light Elves' of Norse belief who inhabit a luminous region called Alfheim between heaven and earth and have been described as very radiant beings, even fairer to look upon than the sun. They are also said to be always benevolent towards humans. They have also been seen in modern times, though rarely. In July 1984, Russian cosmonauts aboard the Soviet space station Salyut 7 reported

experiencing a warm orange light and then seeing the faces of seven angels who were hovering just outside the space station. They told ground control they were humanoid in appearance, meaning that their faces and bodies looked human, but they had wings and halos. These beings kept pace with the space station for ten minutes before vanishing. The crew was then joined by another team of three from the Soyuz T-12 spacecraft comprising of Svetlana Savitskaya, Igor Volk and Vladimir Dzhanibekov and shortly afterwards, the Salyut 7 was once again bathed in a warm orange light, and like clockwork, they immediately looked out the portholes, and once again, saw the angelic beings. They were reportedly the size of an "airliner", according to the cosmonauts. All these traditions and experiences when taken as a whole agree that these heavenly beings are luminous and winged, a fact that is reflected in Islamic teachings as well.

Islam takes the belief in angels to a much higher level than the Bible does, holding that the belief in angels comes only next to belief in God. As the Qur'an says: "*Whoever denies God, His angels, His Books, His Prophets and the Day of Judgement have gone far, far astray*". (The Women:136). Indeed so pervasive is this belief in angels that we are left wondering whether not the modern Christian belief in angels as guardians and benefactors of humanity have been influenced by Islam rather than Judeo-Christian teachings. True, the Bible knows of angels, but they do not figure as prominently as they do in Islam with descriptions of them being few and far between. Perhaps the earliest mention of one is found in the account of Hagar, Abraham's Egyptian spouse who is mistreated by his first wife Sarah. Here we read that Hagar is visited by the Lord's Messenger who says to her: "*You are now pregnant and shall bear a son. You shall name him Ishmael (God has heard) for the Lord has heard you*" (Genesis). Interestingly, this first angelic visitation mentioned in the Bible has to do not with the Children of Israel about whom the Bible is concerned about, but the son of Hagar, Abraham's firstborn, who gave rise to the Arabian nation. Even the name bestowed on him *Ishmael* or in Arabic *Ismaeel* (God has heard) is more like an angelic name which we can liken to names like Gabriel, Michael and Raphael.

In later times we hear of one visiting the children of Israel before the parting of the Red Sea in the days of Moses: "*The angel of God, who had been leading Israel's camp, now moved and went around behind them. the column of cloud also, leaving the front, took up its place behind them, so that it came between the camp of the Egyptians and that of Israel*" (Exodus 14:19-20). We also read that Joshua saw one standing facing him, drawn sword in hand, and he asked him: "*Are you one of us or of our enemies?*". The other replied: ""*Neither, I am the captain of the host of the Lord*" (Joshua 5:13-14). He is also called on other occasions '*The Angel of the Lord*' (Judges 6:11-12). This unnamed angel was probably the archangel Gabriel who finds mention by name for the first time in the Book of Daniel, a later part of the Bible more in the apocalyptic tradition compiled about the 6th century BC: "*While I Daniel, sought the meaning of the vision I had seen, a manlike figure stood before me and I heard a human voice that cried out: "Gabriel, explain the vision to this man*" (Daniel 8:15-16).

The archangel Michael too is mentioned by name for the first time in Daniel: "*At that time there shall arise Michael, the great prince, guardian of your people*" (Daniel 12:1). As for Raphael, he occurs for the first time in the Book of Tobit where we read of Tobit's son Tobiah coming across the angel standing before him, though he did not know that he was an angel of God as he was in the form of a young man

(Tobit 5:4-5). We later hear of the angel pursuing the demon Asmodeus into Egypt and binding him hand and foot (Tobit 8:3).

In the New Testament of the Bible we do come across references to angels, but they are not as pronounced as in Islam. Even the idea of guardian angels is found only in reference to Jesus' mission, as in the Gospel of John where Jesus tells Nathanael: "*Amen, amen. I say to you, you will see the sky opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man*" (John 1:51). When Jesus had withdrawn from his disciples about a stone's cast, and kneeled down, and prayed, Saying to God *"If thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done"* there *appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him* (Luke 22:42-43). He also said when he was arrested: *"Do you think I cannot call upon my Father and He will not provide me at this moment with more than twelve legions of angels?"* (Matthew 26:53).

In Islam, angels occupy a very high place in the Divine scheme of things. Indeed they are the purest and noblest created beings we can think of. They are immaculate and free of sin. They praise God often and also pray for those on earth, reflecting as it were God's Mercy on all of creation.

O ye who believe! Celebrate the praises of God and do so often. And glorify Him morning and evening. He it is who sends blessings on you, as do His angels, that He may bring you out from the depths of Darkness into Light
(The Confederates: 41-43)

The heavens are almost rent asunder from above them (by His Glory). And the angels celebrate the praises of their Lord, and pray for forgiveness for all beings on earth
(The Consultation:5)

The Day the heaven shall be rent asunder with clouds, and angels shall be sent down, descending (in ranks)
(The Criterion:25)

Islam teaches us that angels were created even before man:

Behold thy Lord said to the angels: "I will create a vicegerent on earth" They said "Wilt thou place one therein who will make mischief therein and shed blood? -Whilst we celebrate Thy praises and glorify Thy Holy (Name)?"
(The Heifer:30)

Since God told the angels about His intention to create man, we have to suppose that they existed before Adam was created. We Muslims believe that the angels are created from light for our Prophet Muhammad informed us of it when he said:

The Angels were created from light and the Jinns were created from the smokeless fire and Adam was created from that which has been described to you (in the Qur'an, from clay)
(Saheeh Muslim)

As angels have been created from light, they are essentially non-material beings which is why we cannot see them in their original form with the naked eye or perceive them with our other senses. They may however take a physical form to be

seen by men as and when required. Islam tells us that the angels are winged and that they are primarily messengers (of God):

Praise be to God, who created the heavens and the earth, Who made the angels messengers with wings – Two, Three or Four. He adds to creation as He Pleases, for God has Power over all things
(The Originator of Creation:1)

This belief that angels are messengers is even shared by Christianity. Did you know that the English word angel comes from Greek *angelos* 'messenger'. The Arabic word for angel *malak* also literally means messenger. Thus we may suppose them primarily to be the heavenly messengers of God.

The angels are also winged as the Qur'an tells us. Some of them have two pairs of wings, some three, some four, and some have more than since our Prophet saw Gabriel in his usual form on the Night Journey to the heavens and he had six hundred wings (Saheeh Al-Bukhari). Angels are also able to take on forms other than their own. We read in the Qur'an that angel Gabriel appeared before Mary to announce the birth of Jesus in the form of a man: "Then We sent her our angel, and he appeared before her as a man in all respects. She said: "I seek refuge from thee in the Most Gracious (God). (Come not near) if you fear God". He said: Nay, I am only a Messenger from Thy Lord (to announce) to thee the gift of a holy son" (Mary:17-19)

Likewise, angels were sent to Abraham in human form: "*There came our Messengers to Abraham with Glad tidings. They said "Peace!" He answered "Peace!" and hastened to entertain them with a roast calf. But when he saw that their hands went not (towards the meal), he felt some mistrust of them, and conceived a fear of them. They said: "Fear not, We have been sent against the people of Lot*" *And his wife was standing, and she laughed. But We gave her Glad Tidings of Isaac, and after him, of Jacob. She said: "Alas for me! Shall I bear a child seeing I am an old woman, and my husband here is an old man? That would indeed be a wonderful thing!". They said: "Dost thou wonder at God's Decree? The Grace of God and His Blessings on you, O ye people of the house" For He is indeed worthy of all Praise, full of all Glory*"(Hood:69-73).

Angels were also reported to be seen as bright lights in the times of Prophet Muhammad. A companion of the Prophet named Usayd Bin Hudayr has left this account:

"*One night I was reading the Chapter of the Heifer. My horse was tied up near me. At one point, it rose up on its two hind legs. I stopped reading; the horse calmed down. I began to read again, and the horse started again. I was afraid that the horse was going to stomp on my son Yahya, so I went near it. When I looked up the sky, I saw something that looked like candles. Then they rose up towards the sky and disappeared*"

When he informed the Prophet about it the next morning, he said: "*They were angels who had come down to listen to you recite the Qur'an. If you had continued to read, they would have listened to you until the morning. They would not have remained invisible to the people who would have been able to see them*" (Saheeh Al-Bukhari).

However angels generally cannot be seen with the naked eye, unless they wish to reveal themselves to the beholder, a privilege they usually give to the chosen messengers of God. The Prophet once turned to his wife Ayisha and said: "*O Aish! This is Gabriel greeting you"* whereupon she said: *"Peace and God's Mercy and Blessings be on him, you see what I don't*" (Saheeh Al-Bukhari).

Much of the work of God on earth is accomplished through the agency of the angels. From the moment a baby is conceived in its mother's womb, angels commence their good work by the leave of God, breathing the soul into the embryo and marking its genome, setting it on the path towards its genetic destiny, and predisposing it to many things that determine the course of its life including its lifespan. Prophet Muhammad said:

When forty two nights have passed over the embryo, God sends an angel to it, who shapes it and creates its hearing, vision, skin, flesh and bones
(Saheeh Muslim)

At every womb God appoints an angel who says, 'O Lord! A drop of semen, O Lord! A clot. O Lord! A little lump of flesh." Then if God wishes (to complete) its creation, the angel asks, (O Lord!) Will it be a male or female, a wretched or a blessed, and how much will his provision be? And what will his lifespan be?' So all that is written while the child is still in the mother's womb
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

Thus it is the angels who turn our genes on and off in a complex cascade of biological events that lead to the formation of a human being. Modern scientists still wonder why only certain genes are turned on or off as if in random fashion, allowing cells to develop into specialized organs in its early stages and adapt to environmental changes in later life and affecting developments as diverse as hair colour, disease resistance and even longevity, not knowing that there are hidden hands at work here.

Interestingly, placentas, the interface between womb and foetus have yielded genomes where at least a third is switched off, compared to ordinary human tissue where two thirds of the genome is switched on. Thus placentas are now looked upon as a window into embryological or foetal development, a veritable time capsule when many genetic events would have occurred to determine our genetic destiny.

So it is the angels who are the unseen factor switching genes on or off, stacking the odds of survival in favour of or against us, giving us our sex and our looks, a process that has been in operation throughout human history. Think about it, if this sifting of genes did not occur, we would be alike as peas, or like identical twins, all men looking like Adam and all women like Eve.

Mutations to suit the environment or an anticipated environment at some point in future are also very likely the work of angels that do God’s bidding. If not for these changes that affect the information in our DNA, there would not be different races accustomed to different climes. Why, because environment cannot impact one’s genes; rather genes have to adapt to the environment. How else could you explain how people acquired lighter skin in cold climates to synthesize vitamin D and prevent bone degeneration, or how people in hot tropical climates took on darker skin to prevent the harmful effects of ultra-violet rays that could cause skin cancer, or how pastoral people have become lactose tolerant to benefit from the nutrition obtained from cow milk?

As evident from the sayings of the Prophet, even human longevity and behaviour are inscribed into people’s genetic code and modern science upholds this view. Scientists today know that altering genes can induce different behaviour in animals. It’s only that the genes determining or influencing human behavior are inscribed in the human genome somewhere still undetermined which scientists find difficult to untangle. The same holds true of the aging process. Why do we age, why do our cells

go into reverse mode, what impels them to do so, but for the fact that it is already preset in our genes, a phenomenon even evolutionary theory cannot explain, which is why God asks us to ponder about it: "*If We grant long life to any, We cause him to be reversed in nature, will they not then understand?"* (Ya Sin: 68).

But that's not all, angels may well play a greater role in our environment than we can imagine in our wildest dreams. Who knows? It is perhaps they who carry out all mutations in nature, changing the colours of flowers so that from one flower of a single hue you have flowers of different colours and from the rose of a few petals that lived centuries ago, you have the multi-tiered rose you have today. Who knows, it may well be they who are responsible for certain inexplicable natural phenomena we take for granted like bringing down rain drops or snowflakes without allowing them to collide with one another to show us how beautifully God created the nature around us.

The idea of guardian angels is also found in Islam as it is in Christianity. They are known to help people in distress, for was it not an angel who dug the well of Zamzam in Mecca so that Hagar, the mother of Ishmael could drink of it (Saheeh Al-Bukhari). The inexplicable manner in which little infants or children sometimes escape death or injury unscathed despite all the odds being against them could easily be explained on this basis. In the Qur'an angels are sometimes referred to as guardians over us: *He is Irresistible (watching) from above over His Worshippers, and He sets guardians over you* (The Cattle: 61). The word used here is *hafazatan* which literally means 'those who protect or preserve'. Indeed, there is no human being standing on earth who is without angels in charge of protecting him or her.

There is no soul but has a protector over it
(The Night Star:4)

For each (person) there are (angels) in succession. Before and behind him.
They guard him by command of God
(The Thunder:11)

For those who say: "Our Lord is God" and stand straight and steadfast, the angels descend on them (from time to time). "Fear not" they say "Nor grieve! But receive the Glad Tidings of the Garden (of bliss) that you were promised. We are your protectors in this life and in the Hereafter. There shall you have all that your souls shall desire, there shall you have all that you ask for!
A hospitable gift from one Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful"
(Expounded:30-32)

In the Qur'an we are told that God, the angel Gabriel and the angelic host would protect Muhammad in his mission:

Truly God is His Protector, and Gabriel, and every righteous oneamong those who believe, and moreover the angels will back him up
(The Prohibition:4)

Angels also help the believers in times of war, for it was Gabriel and his army of angels who came to the assistance of the ill-armed Muslim army of no more than 300 men, enabling them to rout the 1000-strong army of the Quraysh in the decisive Battle of Badr.

The Prophet raised his hands in prayer and implored his Lord loudly:

O God! Grant me what you have promised. O God, grant me victory. O God, if you destroy this community of Islam, then there will be nobody on the face of the earth to worship you.

God revealed:

Remember when you called on your Lord, and He answered you: "I will assist you with a thousand angels, ranks on ranks"

Remember He covered you with a sort of drowsiness, to give you calm as from himself, and He caused rain to descend on you from heaven to clean you with, to remove from you the stain of Satan, to strengthen your hearts, and to plant your feet firmly therewith. Remember your Lord inspired the angels: "I am with you, give firmness to the Believers. I will instill terror into the hearts of the unbelievers, smite ye above their necks and smite all their fingertips off them"
(The Spoils of War: 9-11)

Among the Angels, there are three who occupy the foremost place. These are the archangels Gabriel whom we call Jibreel, Michael whom we call Mikail and Raphael whom we call Israfeel, Peace be on all of them. The Prophet used to say in his supplication to His Lord:

"*O God, Lord of Gabriel, Michael and Raphael, Bringer of the heavens and the earth into being, Knower of the seen and unseen*"
(Saheeh Muslim)

Gabriel occupies the foremost place among them. He figures in all three monotheistic faiths –Islam, Christianity and Judaism. It was Gabriel who announced the birth of Jesus to Mary and brought down the Qur'an to Muhammad. God tells us that on the Resurrection Day "the Spirit and the Angels will stand forth in ranks" (The Great News: 38). The Spirit here refers to angel Gabriel and shows the high rank he occupies among the angelic host. He is also referred to as such in the verse speaking of Laylat al-Qadr or The Night of Power: "The Night of Power is better than a thousand months. Therein descend by God's permission the angels and the spirit (Gabriel) with every decree. Peace, it is, until the rise of Morn!" (The Night of Power: 3-5). Gabriel whose name literally means 'Power of God' is described in the Qur'an as the Holy Spirit –*Roohul Qudusi*:

Say, the Holy Spirit has brought the Revelation from thy Lord in Truth, in order to strengthen those who believe
(The Bee:102)

And the Trustworthy Spirit- *Roohul Ameen:*

Verily this is a Revelation from the Lord of the Worlds brought to your heart (O Muhammad) by the Trustworthy Spirit
(The Poets 192-194)

Whoever hates Gabriel is indeed lost for his duty is a most sacred one:

Say (O Muhammad): "Whoever is an enemy to Gabriel, for indeed he has brought it (this Quran) down to your heart by God's Permission, confirming what came before it (The Torah and the Gospel) and guidance and glad tidings for the believers. Whoever is an enemy to God and His angels and prophets, to Gabriel and Michael – Lo! God is Enemy to those who reject faith"
(The Heifer 97-98)

Gabriel, as the angel of revelation was present at Prophet Muhammad's side throughout his mission of over twenty years, not only revealing the Qur'an piece by piece, but also giving him strength and questioning him on matters of faith to edify his followers. The Prophet's first impression of him was, as can be imagined, was an awe-inspiring one. When Muhammad was shaken by the first mystical experience he had when Gabriel embraced him, bidding him read the first verses of the Qur'an to him, he became so scared that he rushed from the cave he had been meditating in and while midway in the mountain, he heard a voice as if from heaven: "*O Muhammad thou art the Messenger of God and I am Gabriel*". He would later recall: "*I raised my head towards heaven to see who was speaking, and lo, Gabriel in the form of a man with feet astride the horizon. I stood gazing at him, moving neither backward or forward. Then I began to turn my face away from him, but towards whatever region of the sky I looked, I saw him as before*".

It happened one day that the companions of the Prophet were sitting in his company, and there appeared before them a man dressed in pure white clothes. None recognized him nor were there any signs of travel in him. He knelt before the Prophet, placed his palms on his thighs and questioned him: "*Inform me about faith*" he asked Muhammad. The Prophet replied: "*That you affirm your faith in God, in His Angels, in His Books, in His Prophets, in the Day of Judgement and faith in the Divine Decree*". The inquirer said: "*You have spoken the truth*".

He then inquired about good deeds and the Prophet replied: "*That you worship God as if you are seeing Him, for though you don't see Him, He verily sees you*". He then inquired: "*Tell me about the Hour (of Doom)?*" whereupon the Prophet remarked: "*The one who is asked knows no more than the one who is inquiring". He said: "Tell me some of its Signs*" and the Prophet replied: "*That the slave girl will give birth to her mistress; that you will find barefooted herdsfolk vying with one another in constructing magnificent buildings*".

He then went his way, and the prophet asked his companion: "*Umar, do you know who the inquirer was?*" Umar replied: "*God and His Messenger know best!*". The prophet said: "*That was Gabriel. He came to instruct you in matters of faith*" (Saheeh Muslim)

The other archangel Michael is named once in the Qur'an where he is called *Mikaal*.

Whoever is an enemy to God and His angels and prophets, to Gabriel and Michael - Lo! God is Enemy to those who reject faith
(The Heifer: 98)

Michael is responsible for scattering the rain and dispensing it to wherever God wishes, moving the clouds to join them and produce rain to revive the earth. The Prophet once asked Gabriel: "*What is Michael in charge of?*" and he replied: "*The*

plants and the rain" (Tabarani). The archangel Raphael has been entrusted with the responsibility of blowing the trumpet on the Day of Judgement. He will blow three blasts at the command of God and Majestic. The first is the Blast of Terror, the second the Blast of Swooning, and the third the Blast of the Rising for the Lord of Heaven and Earth. The Prophet once said: "*How can I enjoy myself when the one with the Trumpet, has raised the Trumpet to his mouth, knitted his brow and is waiting to blow*" (Ahmad).

There are also angels responsible for recording the deeds of man, good and bad. One angel on the right of a person records his or her good deeds and the other on the left records his or her evil deeds. These are known as the *Kiraman Katibin* or 'Honourable Scribes'. The Qur'an speaks of such angels in very clear terms:

Behold two (angels) appointed to learn (his doings) learn (and note down)
one on the right, and one on the left, Not a word does he utter,
but there is a sentinel by him, ready (to note it)
(Qaf:17-18)

Or do they think that We hear not their secrets and their private counsels?
Indeed (We do), and Our messengers are with them recording
(Ornaments of Gold: 80)

These angels have specific instructions how they are to record the doings of men in their register of good and bad deeds. God has instructed these angels: "*If My slave intends to do a bad deed then (O Angels) do not write it unless he does it; if he does it, then write it as it is, but if he refrains from doing it for My Sake, then write it as a good deed (in his account). (On the other hand) if he intends to do a good deed, but does not do it, then write a good deed (in his account), and if he does it, then write it for him (in his account) as ten good deeds up to seven-hundred times" (Saheeh Al-Bukhari).*

There are also angels who take the souls of the dead. Death will find us when our time comes, and it is the angels who accomplish this. As God reminds us: "*Wherever ye are, Death will find you out, even if ye are in towers built up strong and high*" (The Women:78).

Thus wherever we be, the angels will be there to take our souls:

When angels take the souls of those who die in sin against their souls, they say: "In what plight were you?"They reply: "Weak and oppressed were we in the earth".
They (the angels) say: "Was not the earth of God spacious enough
for you to move away from evil?"
(The Women: 97)

How (will it be) when the angels take their souls at death,
and smite their faces and their backs?
(Muhammad: 27)

If you could but see how the wicked (fare) in the flood of confusion at death.
The angels stretch forth their hands (saying): "Yield up your souls"
(The Cattle: 93)

By those (angels) who tear out (the souls of the wicked) with violence

and those who gently draw out (the souls of the blessed)
(Those Who Tear Out:1-2)

The Holy Book mentions a specific angel who will accomplish the task- the *Malakul Maut* meaning *'The Angel of Death'*. The Qur'an rehearses for us what the unbelievers used to say about the coming meeting with their Lord: "*What! When we lie hidden and lost, in the earth, shall we indeed be in a creation renewed?*", and rejoins: "*The Angel of Death put in charge of you will take your souls. Then shall you be brought back to your Lord*" (The Prostration: 10-11). This Angel of Death is popularly known as Azrael and may even come in the form of a man, visible only to the person whose soul he is about to take. It once happened that Prophet David saw the figure of a man sitting in the middle of his abode in spite of his having secured it well. "*Who are you?*" he asked, only to be told by the mysterious figure: "*I am the one who fears no king, nor are any veils an obstruction for me*". David replied: *"By God, you are the Angel of Death. Welcome by God's Command!*". A while later his soul was taken by the angel (Ahmad).

A companion of the Prophet, Bara Ibn Aazib sheds further light on the role of the angels at death. Says he: "We went out with the Prophet (peace and blessings of God be upon him) for the funeral of a man from among the Ansaar, and we reached the grave whilst it was still being dug. The Messenger of God sat down and we sat down around him, and it was as if we had birds on our heads. In his hand was a stick with which he was scratching in the earth. He raised his head and said, 'Seek refuge with God from the punishment of the grave,' two or three times. Then he said, '*Verily, when the believing slave is about to depart this world and enter the Hereafter, there come down to him angels from heaven with white faces, as if their faces are the sun. They bring with them one of the shrouds of Paradise and some of the perfume of Paradise. They sit with him as far as the eye can see. Then the Angel of Death (peace be upon him) comes to him and sits by his head and says, 'O pure soul, come out to the forgiveness and pleasure of God.' Then his soul comes flowing out like a drop of water flowing from a cup. Then he takes the soul, and no sooner does he seize it but they take it and place it in that shroud and perfume. Then out of it comes the most excellent fragrance of musk to be found on the face of the earth. Then they ascend with it and they do not pass by any group of angels but the angels ask, 'Who is this pure soul?' and they reply, 'It is So and so the son of So and so' – using the best names by which he was known on earth. Then they bring it to the lowest heaven, and ask for it to be opened, and it is opened for him. Those who are of high rank in each heaven accompany it until they approach the next heaven, and so it goes until it reaches the seventh heaven. Then God, may He be glorified and exalted, says: 'Record the book of My slave in Illiyoon (the highest heaven) and take him back to the earth, for I created them from it, and I shall return them to it, then I shall take them out from it again.'. Then his soul is returned to his body"*.

The Prophet continued: "*When the disbelieving slave is about to depart this world and enter the Hereafter, there come down to him angels from heaven with black faces, bringing with them sackcloth. They sit with him as far as the eye can see. Then the Angel of Death comes to him and sits by his head and says, 'O evil soul, come out to the wrath and anger of God.' Then his soul disperses in his body and is dragged out like a skewer being pulled out of wet wool. Then he takes the soul, and no sooner does he seize it but they take it and place it in that sackcloth. Then out of it comes the most putrid stench of rotten flesh to be found on the face of the earth. Then they ascend with it and they do not pass by any group of angels but the angels ask, 'Who*

is this evil soul?' and they reply, 'It is So and so the son of So and so' – using the worst names by which he was known on earth. Then they bring it to the lowest heaven, and ask for it to be opened, and it is not opened for him. Then God, may He be glorified and exalted, says: 'Record the book of My slave in Sijjeen (the lowest Hell) in the lowest earth. Then his soul is cast down" (Musnad of Ahmad).

The angels who question the dead in their graves are two in number and are called Munkar and Nakeer. The Prophet has informed us about them: "*When one of you is buried, there come to him two blue-black angels, one of whom is called Munkar and the other Nakeer*". The angels make him sit up, and ask him, '*Who is your Lord*.' He says '*God*.' They ask, '*What is your religion?*' He says, '*My religion is Islam*' They ask, '*Who is this man that was sent amongst you?*' He says, '*He is the Messenger of God*.' They ask him, '*What knowledge do you have?*' He says, *'I read the Book of God and I believed in it*.' Then a voice will call out from heaven, '*My slave has spoken the truth. Prepare for him a bed from Paradise and give him clothes from Paradise, and open for him a door to Paradise*.' And he will feel its breeze and smell its fragrance, and his grave will be widened for him as far as his eye can see.

As for the disbeliever, two angels would come to him, make him sit up, and ask him, '*Who is your Lord*.' He says, '*Oh, oh, I don't know*.' They ask, '*What is your religion?*' He says, '*Oh, oh, I don't know*.' They ask, '*Who is this man that was sent amongst you?*' He says, '*Oh, oh, I don't know*.' Then a voice will call out from heaven, '*He is lying. Prepare for him a bed from Hell and open for him a door to Hell*.' And he will feel its hot winds and smell its stench (Musnad, Ahmad).

And as if that were not enough, there are even angels who serve as the guardians of hell:

We have set none but angels as Guardians of the Fire
(The Wrapped up One:31)

O ye who believe! save yourselves and your families from a Fire whose fuel is Men and Stones, over which are (appointed) angels stern (and) severe, who flinch not (from executing) the Commands they receive from God, but do (precisely) what they are commanded
(The Prohibition:6)

The keepers of hell are nineteen in number led by one called Malik literally meaning '*Master'*. In the Qur'an we read that the dwellers of hell will cry out:

"O Malik! Let your Lord make an end of us." He will say: "Nay, ye shall abide!"
(Ornaments of Gold:77)

23th Night

Johnny: Salams Sheikh, last night's talk about the angels was quite revealing, to think that there are other intelligent beings in the universe, that there is much more in the world than beholds the eye. I guess even children like to believe in angels because they are thought to be kind and loving, and to think you regard it as part of your faith. Now to my next question:

How do you know there's going to be a Resurrection?

The Janissary: We Muslims believe that our short life on earth does not end here. Rather it is only a trial in preparation for a better eternal life in the hereafter. It is a test to determine whether we deserve a better world or not. So we reap what we sow, sowing what we can in this short life to achieve everlasting bliss. This means that we have to decide whether we wish to sacrifice the transitory glitter of this world for a permanent everlasting life; whether we want to hanker after a mirage in preference to an oasis that can provide us the water of life.

Belief in the afterlife allows man to rise above his mortality and attain the elixir of immortality. For he or she knows the Day will surely come when the dead will be resurrected by God to enjoy a life that will never end, each according to his or her desserts. This great resurrection of humanity will be followed by what we call the Day of Judgment. That is the Day when God Himself will judge us, rewarding or punishing according to our beliefs and our deeds. The pious will be rewarded with paradise and the evildoers punished in the hellfire.

How fine a belief this is. It guides men on the straight path and keeps them away from evil deeds. The fear of being brought into account, if not in this world, then in the next, compels them to be good if they are already not so in their hearts and prevents them from using and abusing wealth and power to get away with injustices. God is Fair and Just and its only natural that he reward the good and punish the unrepentant sinners. This is in the fitness of things. How many good men and women suffer patiently in this world and die unsung in unmarked graves? How many evil men and women get away with their sins and crimes, taking them as it were to their graves with costly tombs or mausoleums erected over their dead bodies? Thus a Day of Judgement where all are brought before the Divine Court to receive their just deserts is absolutely necessary, if nothing else, then at least for the sake of justice. Only when evil-doers are punished and their victims avenged can true justice be done and if this is not possible in this life as sometimes happens- where cutthroats, warlords and mass murderers get away with it all – then it will certainly be true in the next and this we can rest assured. We all have to die one day. It will find us whether we like it or not. God tells us:

Every soul will taste death. Then to Us will you be brought back
(The Spider:57)

Wherever ye are, Death will find you out, even if ye are in towers built up strong and high
(The Women:78)

The Death from which ye flee will truly overtake you. Then will ye be sent back to the Knower of Things secret and open, and He will tell you the things that ye did!
(Friday:8)

So finally it's your choice, whether you want to go before God with a clean record on the Day of Judgement when He will judge each and every one of us and accordingly reward us with paradise or punish us in the hellfire.

As God says:

Every soul shall taste of death and only on the Day of Judgement shall you be paid your full recompense. Only he who is saved from the Fire and admitted to the Garden will have attained the object (of life); for the life of this world is but goods and chattels of deception
(Family Imraan:185)

One Day We shall remove the mountains and you will see the earth as a level stretch, and We shall gather them all together, nor shall we leave out any one of them. And they will be marshaled before your Lord in ranks (and it shall be told them) "Now have you come to Us (bare) as We created you first. Aye. You thought We shall not fulfil the appointment made to you to meet (Us)!
(The Cave: 48)

What is the life of this world but amusement and play? Verily the Home in the Hereafter – that is life indeed – if they but knew
(The Spider: 64)

His Prophet said comparing the life of this world with the Hereafter:

The value of this world compared to that of the Hereafter is like what your finger brings from the sea when you put it in and then take it out
(Saheeh Muslim)

If a woman of the people of Paradise were to look at this earth, she would light up everything in between and fill it with her fragrance; the veil on her head is better than this world and all that is in it
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

So some day, we all have to go back to God our Creator in keeping with the dictum "*To God we belong and to Him we shall return*" (The Heifer:156). This verse is recited when a Muslim hears of another's death, reminding us of our origin and our ultimate destiny. *From (the earth) did We create you, and into it shall We return you, and from it shall We bring you out once again (Ta Ha:55*). Not just us, there will come a day when our entire earth, nay our entire universe will be destroyed. But it does not end there. As God reminds us: "*What is the life of this world but play and amusement? But best is the Home in the Hereafter*" (The Cattle:32).

God speaks of the Resurrection many times, and asks in the Qur'an if He originated creation in the first place, why should it be impossible for him to recreate such creation:

He it is Who originates creation, then repeats it, and for Him it is most easy
(The Romans: 27)

He does not stop there, He gives us many reminders of the resurrection:

It is He who sends the winds like heralds of glad tidings, going before His Mercy, when they have carried the heavy laden clouds, We drive them to a land that is dead, make rain descend upon it, and with it produce every kind of harvest. Thus shall We raise up the dead, perchance ye may remember
(The Heights:57)

And as if even that were not enough, he asks us to reflect further:

O mankind, if you have a doubt about the resurrection (consider) that we created you out of (a lifeless thing like) dust, then out of sperm, then out of a leech-like clot, then out of a morsel of flesh, partly formed and partly unformed, in order that we may manifest (Our Power) to you, and We cause whom We will to rest in the wombs for an appointed term, then do We bring you out as babes, then (foster you) that you may reach your age of full strength, and some of you are called to die, and some are sent back to the feeblest old age, so that they know nothing, after having known (much). And you see the earth barren and lifeless. But when We pour down rain on it, it is stirred (to life), it swells, and it puts forth every kind of beautiful growth in pairs. This is so, because God is the Reality. It is He who gives life to the dead, and it is He who has Power over all things. And verily the Hour will come.There can be no doubt about it, or about (the fact) that God will raise up all who are in the graves
(The Pilgrimage:5-7)

Yes, everything in nature testifies to a resurrection. Like the spring of life following the winter of death even the seasons testify to it. There can be no doubt about it, because God is so very clear about it:

Does man think that We cannot assemble his bones ? Nay, We are able to put together in perfect order the very tips of his fingers
(The Resurrection: 3-4)

How telling indeed. God is telling us that he could restore our very fingertips –each of which you know has a different signature, differing in every individual- when we are dead and gone.

Strong language no doubt, but it doesn't end here. God speaks of the hereafter in many other passages of the Qur'an so that one might think that there is no scripture that focuses so much on the afterlife than Islam. This is because as the final revelation it is more complete and describes the hereafter in more detail than covered in any earlier revelation.

One day the earth will be changed to a different Earth, and so will the heavens, and (men) will be marshaled before God, the One, the Irresistable; and you will see the sinners that day bound together in fetters-their garments of liquid pitch, and their faces covered with fire
(Abraham:48-50)

God gives you life, then causes you to die, then He will assemble you on the Day of Resurrection about which there is no doubt. But most of mankind know not. And to God belongs the Kingdom of the heavens and the earth. And on the Day that

the Hour will be established-On that Day the followers of falsehood shall lose. And you will see each nation humbled to their knees, each nation will be called to its Record(of deeds). This Day you shall be recompensed for what you used to do
(The Kneeling Down: 26-28)

Those who patiently persevere, seeking the Countenance of their Lord; establish regular prayer, spend of what We have bestowed for their sustenance, secretly and openly, and turn off evil with good; for such there is the final attainment of the eternal Home - Gardens of perpetual bliss. They shall enter there, as well as the righteous among their fathers, spouses and offspring and angels shall enter unto them from every gate (with the salutation) "Peace Unto You for your perseverance in patience! Now how excellent is the final Home!". But those who breach the covenant of God, after having plighted their word, and cut asunder those things which God has commanded to be joined, and work mischief in the land - On them is the Curse;for them is the terrible Home!
(The Thunder:22-25)

The worldly minded may scoff at the idea just as the unbelievers of old did when they said:

When we are dead and have become dust and bones, Shall then we indeed be raised again? – (We) and our fathers of old?
(The Inevitable::47-48)

And they say: "What is there but our life in this world? We shall die and we live, and nothing but Time can destroy us"
(The Kneeling Down:24)

The unbelievers, like the Jews of old, mocked and laughed at the Prophet when he spoke of the resurrection, thinking it impossible that their dead, decayed and disintegrated bodies should be resurrected. The worldly-minded still doubt the possibility. People have died, but no one has come back alive to tell their tale, they argue. How can a body that has lost all signs of life and decayed into dust come back to life they ask. But little do they stop to ponder that a belief in a life after death is reflected in all faiths of the world from time immemorial which shows that mankind shares such a belief and that it must have some basis. In some cultures people even went to the extent of burying their dead with material objects in anticipation of the afterlife.

Yes, man has an inexplicable longing for immortality and this instinctive longing for an afterlife is itself strong proof of its existence. Why because God has implanted the seeds of such conviction in the hearts of men. Can the theory of evolution explain this, this belief in an afterlife? Nay, because it is something beyond worldly experience and belongs to a higher realm of spirituality. Since the soul has no physical properties, how can it decompose after death like the body does? There has to be another explanation.

Indeed a good many scientists believe in an afterlife based on scientific reasoning. One such was Werner Von Braun, the German-born American scientist responsible for putting man on the moon. He querried: "*In this modern world of ours many people seem to think that science has somehow made such religious ideas as immortality untimely or old fashioned. I think science has a real surprise for the*

skeptics. Science, for instance, tells us that nothing in nature, not even the tiniest particle, can disappear without a trace. Nature does not know extinction. All it knows is transformation. If God applies this fundamental principle to the most minute and insignificant parts of His universe, doesn't it make sense to assume that He applies it to the masterpiece of His creation, the human soul?"

In fact, there are many people who have experienced what are known as *Out of Body Experiences* or *Near Death Experiences*. These are people who were on the brink of death, but were brought back to life through resuscitation and other means. Some have reported getting this impression that they floated above their lifeless bodies to rest their sight on their corporeal forms and see their doctors or nurses desperately trying to save them. Others have reported feeling an overwhelming sense of peace and wellbeing, going through a sort of tunnel to encounter a being of light who is described as being brighter than the sun. Yet others describe a place of exquisite beauty much like the heaven described in scripture, illuminated by a light that radiates life and love that allows them to feel so at home with a divine presence that they cannot even think of going back to this worldly life.

These accounts come from people from all walks of life across all ages and cultures and includes children and even people blind from birth who say they see an awe-inspiring picture of the afterlife when on the verge of death. They say that in this spiritual body they feel more alive than ever before, as if they had not five, but countless senses. In fact, many come to look upon this exhilarating experience as a preview of the life to come.

Thus even scientifically there are grounds to suppose that an afterlife does exist as held by all great faiths. Further, one still cannot rationally explain how the life spirit that is in us all disappears after death without a trace, except to suppose that it has moved to another realm of existence. If life is a journey to death could not death be a passport to another life ?

Take Christianity, good Christians like Muslims believe that the immortal soul will be freed from its mortal clay and will be reunited with their bodies at the resurrection in anticipation of the final and eternal judgment by God of every nation. The righteous would be rewarded with everlasting bliss in the *Malkutha D'Alaha* 'Kingdom of God'and the wicked condemned to eternal torment in *Gehenna* 'Hellfire'.

Did not Jesus say: "*I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing more. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear Him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear Him!*" (Luke 12:4–5). Did he not say in the Sermon on the Mount: "*Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven*" (Matthew 5:10). The reality of the afterlife is also illustrated in the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus told by Jesus:

There was a rich man who dressed in purple garments and fine linen and dined sumptuously each day. And lying at his door was a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who would have gladly eaten hill fill of the scraps that fell from the rich man's table. When the poor man died, he was carried away by angels to the bosom of Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried, and from the netherworld, where he was in torment, he raised his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he cried out 'Father Abraham, have pity on me. Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am suffering torment in these flames". Abraham replied "My child, remember that you received what was good during your lifetime, while Lazarus received what was bad; but now

he is comforted here, while you are tormented. Moreover between us and you a great chasm is established to prevent anyone from crossing who might wish to go down from our side to yours or from your side to ours'. He said 'Then I beg you, father, send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them, lest they too come to this place of torment'. But Abraham replied 'They have Moses and the Prophets. Let them listen to them'. he said "O no father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent. Then Abraham said 'If they will not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone should rise from the dead" (Luke 16:19-31).

The Jews, as could be seen from this parable, disputed the resurrection. Why, because they held that the day of judgment happens every year on *Rosh Hashanah*, a day known as *Yom Ha Din* 'Judgement Day'. They therefore held that there was no need for it and that if it were indeed so it applied only to other nations and not the Jews. This is in spite of God's saying through his prophet Isaiah: "*Lo I am about to create new heavens and a new earth. The things of the past shall not be remembered or come to mind. Instead, there shall always be rejoicing and happiness in what I create*" (Isaiah 65:17) and his Words spoken through the Prophet Daniel: "*Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake; some shall live forever, others shall be an everlasting horror and disgrace. But the wise shall shine brightly like the splendour of the firmament, and those who lead the many to justice shall be like the stars forever"* (Daniel 12: 2-3).

However, certain Biblical passages have been taken as denying the hereafter. Thus in the Psalm of Asaph we read of God's Mercy to Israel: "*Time and again, He turned back his anger, unwilling to unleash all His Rage – He was mindful that they were flesh, a breath that passes and does not return*" (Psalm 78:38-39). In another Psalm said to be by Moses, we read: "*A thousand years in Your eyes are merely a yesterday. But humans you return to dust saying: "Return you mortals!". Before a watch passes in the night, you have brought them to their end; they disappear like sleep at dawn; they are like grass that dies. It sprouts green in the morning; by evening it is dry and withered*" (Psalm 90:4-6).

It is unlikely that these words were uttered by prophets like Moses, even if they were, they only stress on the impermanence of life and not a denial of the afterlife. As seen from the Parable of Jesus, Moses had indeed warned his followers of an afterlife. As Jesus told the Jews who denied the afterlife: *That the dead will rise even Moses made known in the Passage about the Bush, when he called 'Lord', the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob; and He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive* (Luke 20:27-38). What Jesus meant was that in the Old Testament God speaks of Himself in the present as the God of the patriarchs who died centuries ago. He identifies Himself in relation to them, and because of their relation to Him, the Living God, they too must be alive.

That the Jews were promised paradise if they did good is also seen in the Qur'an where it is said:

God did aforetime take a covenant from the children of Israel, and We appointed twelve captains among them. and God said: "I am with you: If ye establish regular prayers, practice regular charity, believe in My Messengers, honour and assist them,and loan to God a beautiful loan; verily I will wipe out from you your evils and admit you to Gardens under which rivers flow"
(The Repast: 12)

It may well be that the Biblical *'land flowing with milk and honey'* (Deuteronomy 6:3) promised to the Children of Israel was indeed paradise and not just the terrestrial realm they called 'the promised land' in other words Palestine. Why, because Palestine the '*promised land'* did not really flow with milk and honey, but the Qur'an does contain a parable comparing paradise with a garden flowing with milk and honey (47:15). Is it that the Jews confused the paradise of the heavenly rivers with the terrestrial one in the promised land and think that was it? If they thought so, it only shows how worldly-minded they were; so material-minded that they thought it impossible that there should be life after death and so expunged the idea of an afterlife from their scriptures.

This is also perhaps why we find that the nearest equivalent of hell among the Jews of old was what they called *Sheol* or the Netherworld - the abode of the dead, like when they describe how the Reubenites Dathan and Abiram with their wives and children were swallowed up by the earth in the days of Moses, so that they went down alive to the netherworld (Numbers 16:32-33). The Jews had, and still, have no clear concept of the afterlife. Maybe that explains why the Jews have throughout history been such a hard-hearted race with no desire for heaven or dread of hell.

Zoroastrianism, which is also in a sense a monotheistic faith, has it that after a great battle between the forces of good and evil in which the good will triumph, there will be a resurrection of the dead in the bodies they had before died, to be followed by a final judgment by an ordeal where molten metal will be made to flow across the earth like a river and all humanity required to wade through that river, which for the righteous will seem to be a river of warm milk, while the wicked will be burned before it flows down to hell, where it will annihilate the devil and the last vestiges of wickedness in the universe. The righteous will become like the angels known as *Amesha Spentas* speaking a single language and forming a single nation without borders, all united in praising the One God.

The ancient Egyptians too believed in an afterlife. At death a person faced judgment by a tribunal of judges. If they had led a righteous life they would be welcomed into the *Two Fields*. If guilty they would be thrown to a "devourer" and would be condemned to the lake of fire. In Greek mythology souls were judged after death and those who received punishment were sent to *Tartarus,* a deep, gloomy place serving as a dungeon of torment and suffering within the realm of *Hades* or the underworld. The Fijians called Paradise *Burotu* where the souls of good people went to live in joy for all time. The ancient Hindus as those of today also believed in a heaven called *Svarga* and a hell called *Naraka* despite believing in the transmigration of souls from one existence to another.

Even Buddhism, in spite of its almost endless cycle of births and rebirths knows of heaven and hell, for did not the Buddha see those made to enter the fiery dwelling, serving as food for hungry long-toothed dogs or preyed upon by brain-devouring birds and drinking the bitterest poisons, their fate yet holding them back from death. Death simply means the passage of a soul to another realm of existence and this belief corrupted over time could have well led to the idea of rebirth in different states of existence common to these oriental faiths of Indian origin.

When comparing what Islam teaches us about the hereafter we find many similarities with these earlier faiths. For example Islam tells us that after the Judgment, people will cross a bridge called *As-Siraat* or '*The Path'*. This bridge is said to be sharper than a sword and thinner than a strand of hair. The blessed will reach Paradise, where angels will greet them while the damned will fall off the bridge into the pit below to suffer torment upon torment in the fire of hell. Such a

description is found also in the teachings of Jesus, for did he not say: "*Enter ye in at the straight gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because straight is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it"*. (Matthew 7:13-15). They said one unto him "*Lord, are there few that be saved?*" And he said unto them "*Strive to enter in at the straight gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able*" (Luke 13:23-24).

Here Jesus is talking about the path to paradise being straight and narrow and this is exactly what Islam tells us. Even though he may be speaking metaphorically, meaning that taking a broad (in other words easy) way by indulging in the delights of the world leads to destruction and taking a narrow (hence restricted and difficult) way leads to salvation, we can interpret his words Straight is the gate, and narrow is the way which leadeth unto life in the sense of the way leading to the gates of paradise as taught in Islam.

Then take the Chinvat Bridge of the Zoroastrians which stretches from the Peak of Alborz to heaven where the pious easily cross a sharp and narrow razor-edge like bridge over hell as it takes the form of a wide walkway while the wicked simply fall into the hell below. It is of this bridge that Zarathustra warned when he sang (Gathas: 11-11):

Priests and princes yoke people under duress to destroy life with their evil actions
But their souls and consciences shall upbraid them when they approach the sorting bridge

In Islam, the resurrection is described in more vivid terms, so that it appeals to even a very scientific mind. Ayisha, the Prophet's wife was once told by the Prophet: "*The people will be gathered barefooted, naked and uncircumcised*". I said: "*O God's Messenger ! Will the men and the women look at each other* ?". He said: "*The situation will be too hard for them to pay attention to that*" (Saheeh Al-Bukhari). What we can infer from this is that humans will be resurrected with all their parts intact and in the same state as they issued out of their mothers' wombs, that is to say, barefooted, naked and uncircumcised.

We are further told that humans will be resurrected from the coccyx, a small triangular bone at the lower part of the spine known in Arabic as the *ajbu'dh-dhanab* 'the root of the tail'. The Prophet said of the resurrection:

God will send water from the sky and then the dead bodies will grow like vegetation grows, There is nothing of the human body that does not decay except one bone; that is the little bone at the end of the coccyx of which the human body will be recreated on the Day of Resurrection
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

Thus everything of the human body will waste away, perish or decay except the last coccyx bone, from which God will resurrect the human body:

All of the son of Adam will (be eaten) by the earth except the coccyx from which he was created and from which he will be resurrected
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

This saying tells us that humans have their origins in the coccyx, that it never decays and indeed all of humanity will be resurrected from it. Today we know that in the early stages of human embryonic development, a part called the primitive streak, a linear band of cells forming a very minute strand, gives the embryo its bilateral symmetry, that head-to-tail, front-to-back orientation, besides pouring out cells onto the embryonic disc that start to divide and acquire their specific characteristics before eventually going on to form the different organs of the body. The primitive streak then becomes redundant to finally disappear in the coccyx, the last vertebra of the spinal cord. Scientists tell us today that the coccyx is the hardest part of the body.

How fascinating indeed is this idea that we would be recreated from a little bone from our dead bodies. Even modern science tells us that humans could be cloned from a tiny cell which contains all its genetic information. However this does n't mean that if the Os sacrum is destroyed, we cannot be recreated. With God, all things are possible. The Prophet once related a story to his companions about a man who feared that God would punish him for his sins and who said to his family: "*If I die, take me and burn my corpse and throw my ashes into the sea on a hot (or windy) day*"' They did so, but God gathered together his particles and asked him: "*What made you do what you did?*" He replied, "*The only thing that made me do it, was that I was afraid of You*". So God forgave him (Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

The idea of a Resurrection could also stand up to modern scientific thinking. You know as I do that Time has a direction, it invariably moves towards the future. You see a tree decaying or people getting older. Can a decaying tree get back its robustness or a man return from the dead ? No! But that might happen if time ran backwards. Who knows, just as time progresses with the ongoing expansion of the universe, it may reverse when the universe begins to contract. Thus all life could be recreated with the reversal of time. This becomes very pertinent in view of a saying of the Prophet about the end times: "*The Last Hour will not come before time contracts, a year being like a month, a month like a week, a week like a day, a day like an hour, and an hour like the kindling of a fire*" (Tirmidhi).

In the Qur'an interestingly, the resurrection is compared to physical processes based on nature like the formation of clouds which gives rise to life giving rain which in turn leads to the growth of plants from dormant seeds.

It is God, Who sends the winds so that they raise up the clouds, and We drive them to a land that is dead and revive the earth with it after its death.
Even so (will be) the Resurrection
(The Originator of Creation:9)

This might suggest that the revival after death is also based on some physical laws. Think about it. Your sleep at night is like a death and your awakening in the morning like a resurrection. The world around you itself sees a sort of resurrection like when you see how the cold grey winters with lifeless trees are succeeded by the bloom of warm springs. All of nature hints at resurrection and we see it not.

The Resurrection is vividly described in the Qur'an as the day on which the heavens shall be rolled up like a scroll and the creation repeated.

The Day that We roll up the heavens like a scroll rolled up for writing.
Even as We produced the first creation, so shall We repeat it,
a promise binding upon Us. Truly, We shall do it
(The Prophets:104)

When the universe contracts, the cosmic play of opposites that ensure balance and harmony in the world could come to an end. This event could easily cause the laws of the universe to reverse. Reversal of gravity for instance could cause cataclysmic events completely transforming the earth. Though gravity is normally an attractive force, it could then become a repulsive force so that it could cause the earth to explode. The earth could expand outwards, throwing out all of its insides, so that it would be like a hollowed out shell. The mountains could fall apart and red-hot lava could be thrown out lighting up the sky like molten copper and making the surface of the earth like a plain.

When the earth is pounded to powder and thy Lord cometh,
and His angels rank upon rank (The Dawn:21-22)

They see the (Day) as a far-off event, but We see it near. The Day that the sky will be like molten brass and the mountains will be like wool
(The Ways of Ascent: 6- 9)

Guard yourselves against a day that will make children hoary-headed,
whereon the sky will be cleft asunder
(The Enfolded One:17-18)

When the sky is cleft asunder; when the stars are scattered; when the oceans are suffered to burst forth, and when the graves are turned upside down
(The Cleaving Asunder:1-4)

One Day the earth and the mountains will be in violent commotion, and the mountains will be as a heap of sand poured out and flowing down
(The Enfolded One:14)

Verily the Doom of thy Lord will come to pass. None there is that can avert it.
On the day when the firmament will be in dreadful commotion,
and the mountains fly, hither and thither
(The Mount:7-10)

They ask thee about the mountains, say: 'My Lord will uproot them and scatter them as dust. He will leave them as plains,so that you will see nothing
crooked or curved in their place
(TaHa: 105-107)

When the Earth is shaken with her (final) earthquake, And Earth throws up her burdens, And man cries: 'What is the matter with it?
That day will it tell its tidings, because your Lord inspires it
(The Earthquake 99:1-5)

And when the earth is spread out and casts out
all that's within it and becomes empty
(The Rending Asunder: 3-4)

When the sight is dazed, and the moon is buried in darkness
and the sun and moon are joined together
(The Resurrection: 7-9)

When the sun is folded up, and the stars fall, losing their lustre, when the mountains vanish, when the she-camels ten months with young are left untended, when the wild beasts are herded together and the oceans boil over with a swell
and the souls are sorted out (being joined like with like)
(The Folding Up: 1-6)

So here we are told that the sun, the source of light in our physical world, will break up, and as if that were not enough, the stars in the firmament which have remained fixed in the heavens for ages will fall. Imagine the stars falling. Nothing can be more fixed than the stars, and yet they will fall. And the sky taking the hue of molten brass and breaking apart as it were; and the mountains which have been rooted in the earth since time immemorial becoming flat and level; And the seas, cool and contained as they are will simply boil and surge, perhaps overwhelming all land; and as if that were not enough even children will go grey in the head as the laws of nature as we know it are reversed.

So here we see our entire physical world breaking up, the world as we know it falling apart. This world, after all is a transitory one and it will perish. This material world we knew, the only one we imagined to be real in our craze for the things of this world in spite of the ravages of never resting time would come crumbling like dust before the presence of the supreme reality manifested in all His Glory and accompanied by His beautiful luminous creations, the angels. But this will not be the end of man.

Rather it will be a new beginning-the birth of a new era, the dawn of a permanent reality so unlike the fleeting worldly life we have known. Man will be resurrected and be brought back to God, nation after nation, to be judged:

One day the earth will be changed to a different Earth, and so will the heavens,
and (men) will be marshaled before God, the One, the Irresistable
(Abraham:48)

They will come forth, their eyes humbled from graves, like locusts scattered abroad
(The Moon:7)

And you will see each nation humbled, each nation called to its record. And it will be said to them: This day you are repaid for what you used to do
(The Kneeling Down:28)

God will Judge us fairly, for who can be a better judge than God. He will reward the good and punish the evil-doers, taking into account all deeds which will be unfolded before their very eyes.

God created the heavens and the earth for just ends, and in order that each soul may find the recompense of what it has earned, and none of them be wronged
(The Kneeling Down:22)

On that Day will men proceed in companies sorted out, to be shown the deeds that they had done. Then shall anyone who has done an atom's weight of good, see it! And anyone who has done an atom's weight of evil shall see it
(The Earthquake: 6–8)

We shall set up scales of justice for the Day of Judgment, so that not a soul will be dealt with unjustly in the least. And if there be (no more than) the weight of a mustard seed, We will bring it into account
(The Prophets: 47)

And verily We shall recount their whole story with knowledge, for We were never absent (at any time or place). The balance that Day will be true (to a nicety). Those whose Scale (of good) is heavy will prosper. Those whose scale will be light, will find their souls in perdition, for they wrongfully treated our Signs
(The Heights:7-9)

And the Book (of records of good and evil deeds faithfully recorded by the angels) will be placed before you. And you will see the sinful in great terror, because of what is recorded therein. They will say, 'Oh, woe to us! What book is this? It leaves out nothing, great or small, but takes account of it.' They will find all that they did, placed before them. And not one will your Lord treat with injustice
(The Cave: 49)

God will judge them in every matter great and small, so that even the killing of a sparrow for sport would be taken into account. The Prophet told us in no uncertain terms: "*There is no man who kills (even) a sparrow or anything smaller, without its deserving it, but God (God) will question him about it (on the Day of Judgment)" (An-Nasai)*. He also said: "*Whoever kills a sparrow or anything bigger than that without a just cause, God will hold him accountable on the Day of Judgment*". The listeners asked, "*O Messenger of God, what is a just cause?*" He replied, "*That he will kill it to eat, not simply to chop off its head and then throw it away*". (Nisai, Hakim).

Once the Divine judgement is made, none can turn it back. He or she might plead, beg, or cry but God's Decision will be final. He will favour those who believed in the unseen, those who believed in Him and His Angels and who faithfully followed the Prophets who came to them and the rest He will overlook just as they had forgotten Him their Creator for the glamour and glitter of this fleeting material life.

The Prophet was once asked: "*O Messenger of God! Will we be able to see our Lord on the Day of Judgement?*". He replied: "*Have you any difficulty seeing the sun at noon on a cloudless day?*". "*No*" they replied. He asked them: "*Do you need to push and shove each other when you want to see the moon on a cloudless night?*". "*No, O Messenger of God*" they replied. Then said he: "*I swear by the One who holds my soul in His Hands that there will be no pushing and shoving when it comes to seeing your Lord, just as when you don't have to push and shove each other to see the sun and the moon. God Most High will ask: "O so and so. Did I not favour you? Did I not make you master of all creation? Did I not give you a wife? Did I not make the horse and the camel subservient to you?". "Yes. O Lord!" the slave will answer. God Most High will then ask: "So did you not think that you would ever meet Me?". The slave will answer: "No, O Lord!". God Most High will then say: "In that case,*

now it is I who is overlooking you, just as you forgot Me in the world" (Saheeh Muslim).

Once judgement is passed, the hordes of men and women would be led on the path to paradise to enjoy supreme bliss or else fall to the pit of hell to suffer torment upon torment. God will come to them and declare: "*I am your Lord*" to which they will reply "*You are our Lord*" and will follow Him.. Then a bridge will be laid over the Fire. The Prophet will be the first to cross it and the invocation of the other prophets that Day will be "*O God, save us, save us!*". The speed at which the blessed ones cross the bridge will depend on their deeds. The Prophet foretold:

People will come to the Fire and they will pass by according to their deeds.
The first group will pass by at the speed of lightning, the second group
like the wind, the next group will pass by as quick as horsemen
and the next will pass by at the speed of a camel rider
(Tirmidhi)

The best will pass the bridge at the speed of light while the worst, hobbling in fear, will find it a bridge too far, its other end leading to the gates of paradise ever so distant, like an island beyond the horizon which they can never hope to reach. And over that bridge there will be hooks Similar to thorns These hooks will snatch the people according to their deeds. Some people will be ruined because of their evil deeds, and some will be cut into pieces and fall down in Hell, but will be saved afterwards, when God has finished His Judgement and intends taking out of the fire whoever He wishes to take out from among those people who testified to His Divinity.

God will order the angels to take them out and the angels will know them by the mark of the traces of prostration (on their foreheads), for as the Prophet said: "*God has banned the fire from consuming the traces of prostration on the body of Adam's son*" So they will take them out, and by then they would have burnt (as coal), and then a water called *Maul Hayat* 'Water of Life' will be poured on them, and they will *spring out like a seed springs out on the bank of a rainwater stream.*

But there will remain one man who will be facing the Fire and he will say "*O Lord! It's vapour has poisoned and smoked me and its flame has burnt me; please turn my face away from the Fire*". God will then turn his face away from the Fire. The man will say: "*O Lord, bring me near the gate of Paradise*"" and will keep on invoking God till He says: "*But if I give you that, you may ask me for something else*". The man will say: "*No, by Your Power. I will not ask for anything else*"" . He will promise God not to ask for anything else. So God will bring him near to the gate of Paradise, and when he sees what is in it, he will be silent. Then he will say "*O Lord! Let me enter Paradise*". God will say: "*Didn't you promise that you would not ask Me for anything other than that? Woe to you, O son of Adam ! How treacherous you are!*"".

On that, the man will say: "*O Lord! Do not make me the most wretched of Your creation*" and will keep on invoking God till God smiles and admits him to Paradise (Saheeh Al-Bukhari).

24th Night

Johnny: Salams Sheikh, I myself felt resurrected when I woke up this morning after listening to what Islam has to say about the resurrection. I never heard of such things, and again it was very reassuring to hear of God's Mercy in those days to come. Now to my next question:

Why is there a heaven and a hell in Islam?

The Janissary: Heaven and hell exist to ensure we earthlings get exactly what we deserve in the hereafter. Those who are godly will be rewarded with paradise and those who are devilish will be penalized with the hellfire. It's that simple really!

But let me dwell a bit on it so that you understand its purpose better. As you know our first parents lived in Paradise as their first abode in a sinless state, but as soon as they were touched by the devil they lost their innocence and were cast down to earth to live and die as mortals, and to propagate their kind for better or worse. So our parents downfall was a test not only for them, but also for us, their descendants, because this earth then became a battleground between good and evil, man in the middle, prompted to do good by the counsel of the angels and seduced to do evil by the whisperings of the devils.

This does not mean that man is led away by one of these or the other. His heart or conscience as it were is a blank slate that essentially knows only God and all that is good, innocent as our first parents before their fall. This is why newborns are said to be in a state of fitra or natural disposition towards God. But man is prone to various temptations in this fleeting earthly life even as our parents were tempted by the arch fiend to eat of the forbidden tree. And just as our parents were cast down to earth, so was this arch fiend who was given a free hand along with his army of devils to lead us astray and take us with them to their fiery abode in the hellfire.

The greatest temptation and the worst of all is idolatry and taking partners with God despite His Oneness and Peerlessness. You may wonder if this is a temptation at all, but look around you and tell me if it's not? Idols of all kinds, made of wood, stone and even gold, found almost all over the world except where Islam reigns supreme. When foolish men want their worldly desires fulfilled, either for victory or material possessions, they are tempted by the evil ones to take others than the One True God as their benefactors, to no avail. However much the angels urge on his conscience he will not return to God, because his heart has been corrupted, seeing black where he should see white.

There are lesser temptations by which the Devil can lead us astray, like the temptations of the flesh. Man has been created weak in the flesh, and his desire for the opposite sex is strong. Such desire is alright so long as it is regulated through marriage, but take it further and give yourself to unbridled lust, and then you degenerate morally, lusting after women who are bonded in marriage to others and rending asunder what God has ordained be joined together. This is why even the good Christian prays to his Lord '*Lead us not unto temptation*'. There are other temptations, like the lust for wealth at another's expense, nay even the temptation to laugh at the folly of our another in a fit of arrogance and to find fault with another in a burst of self-righteousness, not knowing that by doing so, we wrong our own souls and earn God's Wrath.

But just as this world is full of temptation, it is also full of good. For every devil who wishes to lead us astray, there is an angel who counsels us. If you see heartlessness in some, you will see compassion in others. This world is such, a tug between good and evil. But good and evil are defined not as we want it, but as God

ordains it. If He had not willed it as such, we would have certainly gone astray, following our own lusts and desires goaded on by the devil thinking it was for our good, and in the process harming not only ourselves but the larger society, in fact tearing apart our very own souls and the very fabric of society.

So we live and die as God wants it, in submission to Him and Him alone, surrendering our minds and our hearts to Him and using as the Criterion to judge between good and evil His Holy Word, His Final revelation to Mankind, the Qur'an and the Wise Words of His Final Chosen Messenger, the Prophet Muhammad, Peace Be Upon Him.

So God acting though His Prophet is our Guide to the Straight Way which can take us back to His Bosom and to the Paradise of our first Parents. He is our Light in the Darkness and beckons us to His Way. We follow it like a weary traveler in the desert rushes to an oasis or a castaway lost in an empty ocean struggles towards an island in the horizon. If we refuse to follow the straight path, we stumble and stray away from it, fumbling and mumbling all the way till we find ourselves in the pit of hell. Straight is the path to heaven, but many are the paths to hell!

So heaven and hell are earned by exercising our free choice using our conscience. It is the reward for our toil in this world. We reap what we sow. We earn God's good pleasure and He'll certainly reward us with Paradise, but earn His Wrath, His Righteous and Just Wrath, then fear the worst. We earn His Pleasure by acknowledging Him and Him Alone as our God, Our Creator and Cherisher; by doing deeds that bring us close to him like prayer, by helping our fellow men with charitable acts and all that is good that we know to be good, which our conscience knows as such. Why because when we do evil, our conscience pricks us. We all know that well, because God has put it in us.

A man once asked the Prophet: "*What is faith?*" He said: "*When a good deed becomes a source of pleasure for you and an evil deed becomes a source of disgust for you, then you are a believer*." He asked the Prophet: "*What is a sin?*" Whereupon he said: "*When something pricks your conscience, give it up*" (Tirmidhi)**.**

So remember you are the centre of this battleground as far as you are concerned. You are in the middle of it. Your heart is the battlefield between good and evil. Satan may goad you to evil and the angels may urge you to refrain; you will feel the tug of it all, this side and that. But remember you have a mind of your own. Use your God-given conscience and choose your side and choose it well. After all, what you choose will affect you a great deal, certainly more than this world and its fleeting moments and enjoyments.

Not everyone, who says, *Lord, Lord*, will enter the Kingdom of Heaven as Jesus said, and so is it in Islam. Not everyone who testifies to God's Oneness and His Prophet's Mission will enter Paradise with a free ticket. His or her deeds count a good deal. For example desisting from anything that smacks of idolatry or associating partners with Him, even as much as building monuments to honour the dead or taking them as intermediaries between oneself and the divine, because this itself, this lack of direct connection between man and God is an affront to His Divine Majesty. It is He who has the Right to Rule Our Hearts and none else. The proud who think no end of themselves just as Satan does and the tyrants who oppress people will also have no share in paradise because they abused the gifts gone had given them for wrong ends and arrogated to themselves the Pride and the Power that was rightfully God's. Prophet Muhammad captured this well when he told his companions:

The Garden and the Fire quarrelled and the Fire said, 'The tyrants will enter me and the proud will enter me'. The Garden retorted: 'The weak will enter me and the poor will enter me.' God Almighty said to the Garden, 'You are My mercy and I show you to whomever I will.' Then He said to the Fire, 'You are My punishment with which I will punish whomever I will. Each of you will have your fill.'
(Adab Al Mufrad)

Even deeds which some might take to be trivial, like harming an animal for no cause can get us into hell. The Prophet informed his followers:

A woman was punished because of a cat which she had imprisoned till it died. She entered the (Hell) Fire because of it, for she neither gave it food nor water as she had imprisoned it, nor set it free to eat from the vermin of the earth
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

While a good deed, even a minor one could earn us paradise, so long as we fear God. The Prophet told us:

A prostitute was forgiven by God because, passing by a panting dog near a well and seeing that the dog was about to die of thirst, she took off her shoe, and tying it with her head-cover she drew out some water for it. So, God forgave her because of that
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

The morality of it all is this. The woman whom God forgave thought of the dog as much as herself as a humble creature of God and used the mercy put into her heart by God for the good of His creation. The woman who went to hell did not fear God and did not think that just as she could do whatever she wanted to the poor creature, God could do whatever He wanted with her. She did not feel any mercy for the cat that was under her power and as a result God did not show mercy to her who was under His Power.

Indeed small deeds go a long way with God. The Prophet made this clear when he told his followers:

Protect yourselves from the fire, even if with half a date and he who has not got even this, should do so by a good pleasant word
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

At the same time, all hope is not lost even for the sinner to enter paradise, since sincere repentance blots out one's sins:

Except such as repent and believe and do good, these shall enter the Garden, and they shall not be dealt with unjustly in any way
(Mary:60)

As if that were not enough to assure sinners, His Prophet went further to assure them:

God Most High opens up His Hands at night time, in order to accept the repentance of those who commit sins by day. And for those who commit sins by night time, He opens up His Hands during the day. This will continue until the sun rises from the place it sets (that is, until the end times) (Saheeh Muslim)

Indeed, God is so Merciful that he even admits parents to paradise out of compassion for their children: The Prophet said about those who had lost their children when young: "*Their little ones are the little ones of Paradise. When one of them meets his father – or his parents – he takes hold of his garment – or his hand – as I am taking told of the hem of your garment, and he does not let go until God admits him and his father to Paradise*"*(Sahih Muslim)*. A lady companion of the Prophet named named Umm Salim says: "*While I was with the Prophet, may God bless him and grant him peace, he said, 'Umm Salim! There is no God-surrendering couple who have three of their children die without God admitting them to the Garden by virtue of His mercy to them.' I said, 'And if there are two?' He said, 'And if there are two'"*(Adab al Mufrad).

Nay, even little children who die when they are young and hence cannot be judged are assured of a place in heaven unlike some Christian sects that tell us that such children will be in limbo. Al-Absi once felt immense grief over the loss of his son and asked his friend Abu Hurairah: *"Have you heard anything from the Prophet, may God bless him and grant him peace, to cheer us regarding our dead?"* He replied "*I heard the Prophet, may God bless him and grant him peace, say: "Your children are roaming freely in the Garden"* (Saheeh Al-Bukhari).

One day the Prophet narrated a dream where he was in the company of two angels: *"We reached a garden of deep green dense vegetation, having all sorts of spring colours. In the midst of the garden there was a very tall man and I could hardly see his head because of his great height, and around him there were children in such a large number as I have never seen. I said to my companions, Who is this? They replied: "The tall man whom you saw in the garden, is Abraham and the children around him are those children who die with the natural faith (Fitra).* Some Muslims asked the Prophet*, "O God's Messenger! What about the children of pagans?".* The Prophet replied*, "And also the children of pagans"*(Saheeh Al-Bukhari).

God assures us that if we earn his Pleasure He would reward us with Paradise. He says to the Pious Ones:

O reassured soul, return to your Lord, well-pleased and pleasing (to Him), and enter among My (righteous) servants, and enter My Paradise (The Dawn:27-30)

And whoever does righteous good deeds, male or female, and is a true believer in the Oneness of God, such will enter paradise and not the least injustice,even to the size of a speck on the back of a date-stone, will be done to them (The Women.124)

Those for whom the Good from Us has gone before, will be removed (far from hell). Not the slightest sound will they hear of hell. What their souls desired, in that will they dwell. The Great terror will bring them no grief. But the angels will meet them (saying) "This is your Day"
(The Prophets:101-103)

He assures us again:

But those who have faith and work righteousness, they are companions of the Garden: Therein shall they abide (forever)
(The Heifer:82)

And again:

Give glad tidings to those who believe and work righteousness, that their portion is gardens, beneath which rivers flow
(The Heifer:25)

And again:

Those whose lives the angels take in a state of purity, saying (to them), 'Peace be on you, enter you the Garden, because of (the good) which you did (in the world)'
(The Bee:32)

However, those who do most good in this world will have a higher status than those who do less. This is in the fitness of things. The Prophet made this clear when he said: "*The people of Paradise will look at the dwellers of lofty mansions (i.e. a superior place in Paradise) in the same way as one looks at a brilliant star, far away in the East or in the West of the horizon. This is because of their superiority over one another (in reward)*" One of his companions asked, "*O God's Messenger, are these lofty mansions for the Prophets which no one else can reach?*".
The Prophet replied, "*No! By God, in whose Hands is my life, these are for men who believe in God and also believe in the Messenger*" (Saheeh Muslim)

On another occasion he told his followers:

The first group to enter Paradise will look like the moon when it is full; then those who follow them will look like the brightest star in the sky. They will not urinate or defecate, spit or blow their noses. Their combs will be of gold, their sweat will be musk, their incense burners will be of aloes-wood. Their wives will be houris and they will all look alike, like their father Adam, sixty cubits tall
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

The Prophet once had a vision of paradise where he saw Ja'far who had been martyred in a battle against the Byzantines. The man had taken up the banner of the Muslim army and lost both his arms to the swords of the enemy, finally holding it up with the stumps that had once been his strong arms before being martyred. For his sacrifice God granted him two wings and henceforth he was called even by the Prophet as '*the one with the two wings'*. The Prophet said of this vision he saw with his spiritual eye.
I entered Paradise yesterday and looked at it, and saw Ja'far flying with the angels, and I saw Hamza reclining on a couch
(Tabaraani)

However, all will enjoy eternal youth, never aging. As the Prophet himself described them:

The people of Paradise will enter Paradise hairless (in the body), beardless, white coloured, curly haired, with their eyes anointed with kohl, aged thirty three years (Ahmad)

Interestingly the age at which Jesus was taken up to heaven was thirty three years. That this is the prime of life where people reach the peak of physical health and look their best is also confirmed by the latest studies which also link it to happiness, such as the one done by Friends Re-United in the UK which shows people are happiest at the age of 33.

In Islamic terminology, Paradise is simply called The Garden, or in Arabic Jannah. Why, because it is a large and spacious heavenly garden. It is the same as the Eternal Kingdom or Eternal Life spoken of by Jesus, because all its dwellers enjoy verlasting life. It is the life everlasting we inherit for the good deeds we have done in this earthly life:

The Garden of which ye are made heirs for your (good) deeds (in this life) (Gold Adornments:72)

Paradise is what we all yearn for, whether we express it openly or not. The very thought of it delights one's heart and soul. The delights of this world, nay even the fairest fairy tale setting, like you would see in *Alice in Wonderland* or *The Lord of the Rings* pales in comparison to the beauty of paradise. This is why God says:

No soul knows the delights of the eyes which is hidden for them; a reward for what they did (The Prostration:17)

And His Prophet explains:

In Paradise, there are things which no eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no human mind has thought of (Musnad of Ahmad)

The Prophet was once asked: "*Are there horses in Paradise?*" He said, "*If God admits you to Paradise, any time you wish to be carried on a horse of red rubies that will fly with you wherever you want in Paradise, you will do that*." Another man asked him: "*Will there be camels in Paradise?*" and he said, "*If God admits you to Paradise, you will have there whatever your heart desires*"(Tirmidhi).

The Qur'an speaks of Paradise in wondrous terms, of the believers and their families who follow them in faith being joined together in eternal bliss (The Mount:21), in gardens with free flowing springs and fruits of every kind, and dates and pomegranates, and chaste maidens like rubies whom no man or jinn has touched before (The Most Merciful: 46-68). Reclining on raised thrones, they will feel neither the excessive heat of the sun or cold of the moon and the shades of the Garden would come low over them with bunches of fruit hanging low in humility.

Vessels of silver and goblets of crystal will be passed round. There they will be given a cup of wine mixed with ginger and enjoy the bliss of a fountain called

Salsabeel. They will be clad in green garments of fine silk and adorned with silver bracelets (Man:13-21). They will be served goblets and cups filled out of clear flowing fountains and the flesh of fowls of any that they desire (The Inevitable:18-21).
The Qur'an says of that eventful day when the believers would have gained paradise:

You shall see the believing men and the believing women- their light running forward before them and by their right hands. Glad tidings for you this day! Gardens under which rivers flow to dwell therein forever! Truly, this is the supreme success!
(Iron:12)

A salient feature of paradise are the gardens under which rivers flow:

Those who believe and work righteous deeds will be in the luxuriant meads of the Gardens; They shall have, before their Lord, all that they wish for
(The Consultation:22)

Those who believe and do righteous deeds, We shall soon admit to Gardens with rivers flowing beneath – their eternal home; therein shall they have companions pure and holy; We shall admit them to shades, cool and ever deepening
(The Women:57)

God hath promised to the Believers, men and women, gardens under which rivers flow, to dwell therein, and beautiful mansions in gardens of everlasting bliss.
But the greatest bliss is the good pleasure of God
That is the supreme felicity
(The Repentance:72)

(Here is) a Parable of the Garden which the Righteous have been promised. In it are rivers of water, incorruptible; Rivers of milk the taste of which never changes; Rivers of wine, a joy to those who drink, and rivers of honey, pure and clear. For them will be every kind of fruit and Grace from their Lord
(Muhammad:15)

They will have all the joy in the world and dwell in cooling shades:

Verily, the companions of the Garden shall have joy in all that they do. They and their partners will be in groves of (cool) shade, reclining on thrones (of dignity). They will have therein fruits (of all kinds), and whatever they call for. Peace!
A Word from a Lord Most Merciful
(Ya Sin:55-58)

And mansions built up high:

But it is for those who fear their Lord that lofty mansions, one above another, have been built; beneath them flow rivers. (Such is) the Promise of God
(The Crowds:20)

And springs of flowing water:

Verily, the Righteous will be in a place of security, among Gardens and Springs, dressed in fine silk and in rich brocade, facing each other
(The Smoke:51-53)

Seated in thrones of dignity:

Truly the Righteous will be in Bliss; On thrones (of dignity) will they command a sight (of all things). Thou wilt recognize in their faces the beaming brightness of bliss. Their thirst will be slaked with pure wine
(The Dealers in Fraud:22-25)

Having all that they wish for, heavenly provender and wine:

And We shall bestow on them, of fruit and meat, anything they shall desire. They shall there exchange, one with another, a cup free of frivolity
(The Mount 22-23)

Men and women will be equally eligible to enter paradise and even have their spouses and near and dear ones with them:

Gardens of Eden they shall enter there, as well as the righteous among their fathers, spouses and offspring, and angels shall enter unto them from every gate (with the salutation) "Peace Unto You for that you preserved in patience. Excellent indeed in the final Home!'
(The Thunder:23-24)

Enter ye the Garden, ye and your wives in rejoicing. To them will be passed round, dishes and goblets of gold; there will be there all that the souls could desire, all that the eyes could delight in. And ye shall abide therein (for aye)
(Gold Adornments: 70-71)

Women will have a high place in paradise. They will have all that the men have - gardens and mansions and food and drink. For did not the pious Asiyah, the wife of Pharaoh pray to her God: "*O my Lord! Build for me, in nearness to Thee, a mansion in the Garden, and save me from Pharaoh and his doings*" (The Prohibited:11).

They will be young and never aging just like their husbands. One day an old woman came to the Prophet and said: "*O Messenger of God, pray to God that He grants me Paradise!*". The Prophet replied: "*O mother, an old woman cannot enter Paradise*". The woman began crying and left in tears. The Prophet said to his companion: "*Tell the lady that one will not enter in a state of old age, but God will make all women of paradise young and playful*" (Shamail Al Tirmidhi). Of this God Himself assures in the Qur'an:

Verily, We have created for them (maidens) of equal age, and made them virgin-pure, beloved, equal in age
(The Inevitable: 35-37)

The women of Paradise will be content with one husband who will satisfy them immensely so that they need not look for others. The Prophet made this clear when

he said: "*There will be no unmarried person in Paradise*" (Saheeh Muslim). Thus if a woman died before marrying in this world or her husband did not make it to paradise, God will provide her with a husband in the hereafter who will delight her, perhaps from the unmarried men of paradise. If she had a husband in this life, she will also have him in the next, and if she had more than one, she will be for the last. The Prophet said: "*The woman will be for her last husband in Paradise*"(Tabarani).

There was also a follower of the Prophet named Hudhayfah who said to his wife: "*If you want to be with me in Paradise, do not marry anyone after my death. The woman will be for her last husband"*(Sunan of Baihaqi) . However another saying of the Prophet implies she will choose her husband from among those she loves the most. Umm Habibah, once asked the Prophet: "*O Messenger of God, if a woman from amongst us has two husbands in this world and after her death, she and both her husbands enter paradise, with who of the two will she be? The first or the second?"*. The Prophet said: *"She will choose the husband who had the best character with her in this world who will be with her in paradise. O Umm Habibah, the person who has good character will be blessed with the good in this world as well as the hereafter"*(Mujam of Tabarani).

The men of paradise will however be provided with two wives or according to some accounts seventy.The Prophet said of the inhabitants of paradise:

Each man among them shall have two wives, the marrow of each of the two wives' shanks will be seen glimmering under the flesh
(Saheeh Muslim)

And every one of them shall have two wives, each of whom will be so beautiful, pure and transparent that the marrow of the bones of their legs will be seen through the flesh
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

On another occasion he said: "*The servant in Paradise shall be married with seventy wives*" Someone said: "*Messenger of God, can he bear it?*" He replied: "*He will be given strength for a hundred*" (Musnad Al-Bazzar), meaning that he would have the virility to satisfy a hundred women.

However it all becomes clear from another account where he said:

The believer in Paradise shall be married off to seventy-two women, seventy women of the hereafter and two women of the women of this world
(Tarikh Dimashq. Ibn Asakir)

So it would seem that each man will have two wives from this world and seventy women not of the daughters of Eve, but rather heavenly nymphs known as *Houris* especially created by God for the pleasure of the faithful.

Verily, the Righteous will be in a place of security, among Gardens and Springs, dressed in fine silk and in rich brocade, facing each other.Moreover, We shall join them to Houris with big, lustrous eyes
(The Smoke:51-54)

These Houris are said to have intensely black irises and intense whiteness of their eyes. They long for the men to whom they will be joined even before they could lay their hands on them. The Prophet said: "*A woman does not annoy her husband but his spouse from amongst the maidens with wide eyes intensely white and deeply black will say: Do not annoy him, may God ruin you. He is with you as a passing guest. Very soon, he will part with you and come to us*'" (Ibn Majah).

Yet, despite all these joys, the gardens, mansions and pleasures of the flesh, the greatest pleasure we will experience in paradise is seeing the Face of God Himself. Yes, the people of paradise would be given a glimpse of their Creator, the only thing intervening to hinder the people from looking at their Lord being the mantle of Grandeur over His Face in the Garden of Eden. He would lift the veil and nothing it is said would be dearer to them than the sight of their Lord. The Prophet captured that moment in the future when he observed:

When the inmates of Paradise enter Paradise and the inmates of Hellfire will enter Hell, the announcer will say, 'O people of Paradise, verily you have a promise with God and He wishes to fulfill His promise to you.' They will ask, 'What is His promise? Has He not made our balances heavy (with good deed), whitened our faces, admitted us into Paradise, and delivered us from the Hellfire?' Then the screen will be removed and they will look towards Him. By God, He will not give them a thing more beloved to them and more comforting to their eyes, than the gaze of Himself
(Saheeh Muslim)

On the other extreme is hell, a most frightening destination we should pray never to even enter. In Islamic terminology this abode of unrepentant sinners is called *Jahannam*, the same as the *Gehenna* used by Jesus when he pronounced in his pious zeal: "*If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one of your members than to have your whole body thrown into Gehenna. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one of your members, than to have your whole body go into Gehenna*" (Matthew 5:29-30).

Many are the deeds that lead to the hellfire:

But for those who break the Covenant of God, after having plighted their word, and cut asunder those things which God has commanded to be joined, and work mischief in the land – On them is the Curse; for them is the Terrible Home!
(The Thunder:25)

The non-believers are warned by God to take heed of His Signs and submit to Him before it is too late:

To those who reject Our Signs and treat them with arrogance, no opening will there be of the gates of heaven, nor will they enter the Garden, until the camel can pass through the eye of the needle. Such is Our Reward for those in sin. For them there is Hell, as a couch (below) and folds and folds of covering above
(The Heights:40-41)

The Qur'an tells of the people of Pharoah in hellfire beseeching the keepers of hell: "*Pray to your Lord to lighten us the penalty for a day!". But they will say: "Did there not come to you your messengers with clear signs?"* (Forgiver:49).

Since the dwellers of hell did not fall down before God in this world, they will not be able to do so even in the hereafter and so earn His Mercy:

The Day that the shin shall be laid bare, and they shall be summoned to go down prostrate, but they shall not be able- their eyes will be cast down-ignominy will cover them; seeing that they had been summoned aforetime to prostrate while they were whole
(The Pen:42-43)

The Qur'an's description of hell is so livid that one reading it is often seized with dread to go before God without a good record. It is hell as hell can be. We are told that when the evil ones are cast into hellfire, they will hear the terrible drawing in of its breath, even as it blazes forth, almost bursting with fury (The Dominion:7-8). It will throw out sparks like forts looking like a string of yellow camels (Al Mursalat:32-33). But that's not all. The denizens of hell will be in the midst of a fierce blast of fire and in boiling water and in the shades of black smoke, tasting of the tree of Zaqqoom and drinking boiling water on top of it, drinking it like camels raging with thirst (The Inevitable:42-55). The Fire will darken and change their colour (The wrapped Up One:29) and as if that were not enough their roasted skins will be replaced by new ones to undergo further torment (The Women:56).

If you want to know how hellfire is like picture yourself on top of an erupting volcano with lava issuing out of the bowels of the earth and deathly sulfurous fumes stifling your very breath. It's just that hell is as bad or worse:

O ye who believe! Save yourselves and your families from a Fire whose fuel is men and stones, over which are angels stern and severe, who flinch not (from executing) the commands they receive from God
(The Prohibition: 6)

As for those who are rebellious and wicked, their abode will be the Fire. Every time they wish to get away from it, they will be forced into it and it will be said to them: "Taste ye the penalty of the Fire, the which you were wont to reject as false"
(The Prostration:20)

Those who reject Our Signs, We shall soon cast into the Fire; As often as their skins are roasted through, We shall change them for fresh skins, that they may taste the penalty
(The Women:56)

These verses tell us how hellish hell really is. Imagine your skin getting roasted and being replaced by fresh skin. Why, because when one's skin is burnt, it cannot feel any pain as the pain receptors in it are destroyed. No matter, the skin that takes its place will ensure sinners suffer torment after torment. God forbid that we ever taste of it! Such sinners will neither live nor die, and even though they wish for death, it will not be given it:

In front of such a one is Hell, and he is given for drink, boiling fetid water. In gulps will he sip it, but never will he be near swallowing it down his throat. Death will come to him from every quarter, and yet he will not die
(Abraham: 16-17)

As if that were not enough, the dwellers of hell will be given to drink boiling water, and still they will drink of it, like thirsty camels do after traveling for days:

Truly Hell is as a place of ambush for the transgressors. A place of destination. They will dwell therein for ages. Nothing cool shall they taste therein, nor any drink, save a boiling fluid and a fluid, dark, murky, intensely cold
(The Great News:21-25)

For food, they will have nothing but the fruits of an evil tree growing thereabouts:

Is that the better entertainment or the Tree of Zaqqoom? For We have truly made it as a trial for the wrongdoers; For it is a tree that springs out of the bottom of Hellfire; The shoots of its fruit stalks are like the heads of devils. Truly they will eat thereof and fill their bellies with it. Then on top of that they will be given a mixture made of boiling water. Then shall their return be to the Fire
(Those Ranged in Ranks: 62-68)

The Prophet said of this terrible tree:

If a drop from Zaqqum were to land in this world, the people of earth and all their means of sustenance would rot
(Tirmidhi)

Such torment would take place as long as God Wills, maybe an eternity, or almost:

As for those who are wretched, they will be in the Fire, sighing and sobbing. They will dwell therein for all the time that the heavens and the earth endure, except as Your Lord Wills. Verily, your Lord is the Doer of what He Wills
(Hood:106-107
)

As for those who will be saved from the hell-fire by God's Grace, they will come out of it after having received its burning touch, changing their colour. They might get as black as black can be, not necessarily the colour of your usual Negro, maybe darker, perhaps the colour of charcoal.

The wretches would finally enter paradise, but even then, they will not be able to shake off their former state. Why, because they would still be called *Al-Jahannamiyeen* or 'The People of the Fire' by the People of Paradise (Saheeh Al-Bukhari).

25th Night

Johnny: Salams Sheikh, our talk last night gave me a thrill when you spoke of paradise and a chill when you spoke of hell. And to think what we achieve there is all based in this worldly life we live now. So now to my next question:

Islam seems to hold a strong view on predestination. How about free will?

The Janissary: To put it in a nutshell, Islam holds to both predestination and free-will. Both of these have a place in the divine scheme of things. Both these notions, though seemingly contradictory, must of necessity have a place in the heart of the believer, co-existing like the soul in the body. Why, because they both serve a purpose. One drives in man the need to be humble by totally submitting oneself to the Divine Will and accepting one's lot with a sense of resignation while the other gives one a platform through which to exert oneself to do good.

Belief in fate is a human need which is why almost all cultures have some idea of it. It serves as a spiritual cushion, so to say, giving one an inner peace and helping one come to terms with the trials one has to face in the course of life without looking back and regretting one's past actions. There is no need to fret over what you had done or not done like "*If I had not been there, this would not have happened?*" and sink into despair. Nor is there any good living in daily dread of what will or will not happen. Rather what is important is to face life's challenges positively with hope for the future. Why, because this worldly life is such that there can be only one course of action. Say you meet with an accident, you cannot undo it, nor change it into something else. it is fixed in time, or in other words written down. So is everything in this world. And so you accept it saying *Que Sera Sera,* what must be will be!

To resign ourselves to the ways of God was, after all, what all the great prophets taught. In the Bible for instance we have numerous instances of the overriding power of God's Will. In the Old Testament we find God speaking through the Prophet Isaiah:

I am God, there is no other. I am God, there is none like Me.
At the beginning I foretell the outcome; in advance, things not done.
I say that My Plan shall stand. I accomplish My every Purpose
(Isaiah 46:9-10)

Likewise the good Christian says after Jesus in his Lord's Prayer:

"*Your Will be done on Earth as in Heaven*'.

and calls to mind the words Jesus spoke to his disciples:

All of you will have your faith shaken, for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be dispersed'. Peter said to him 'Even though all should have their faith shaken, mine will not be'. Jesus said to him'Amen, I say to you, this very night before the cock crows twice, you will deny me thrice' (and so it came to pass)
(Mark 14:27-30)

Paul, an early church father regarded as the founder of Christianity as we know it today had this to observe about the Irresistible Will of God:

When Rebecca had conceived children by one husband, our father Isaac-before they had been born or done anything, good or bad, in order that God's elective plan might continue, not by works but by His Call- she was told: "The older shall serve the younger". As it is written:"I loved Jacob but hated Esau". What then are we to say? Is there injustice on the part of God? Of course not! For He says to Moses: "I will show mercy to whom I will, I will take pity on whom I will". So it depends not upon a person's will or exertion, but upon God, who shows mercy. For the scripture says to Pharaoh: "This is why I have raised you up, to show My Power through you that My Name may be proclaimed throughout the earth". Consequently, He has mercy upon whom He wills and He hardens whom He wills. You will say to me then: "Why does He still find fault? For whom can oppose His Will? But who indeed are you, a human being, to talk back to God? Will what is made say to its maker: "Why have you created me so?" or does not the Potter have a right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for a noble purpose and one for an ignoble one? What if God, wishing to show His wrath and make known His Power, has endured with much patience the vessels of wrath made for destruction? This was to make known the riches of His Glory to the vessels of Mercy, which He has prepared previously for glory, namely, us, whom He has called, not only from the Jews, but also from the Gentiles" (Romans 9:10-24)

What Paul is saying is that everything happens the way God wills it. He chooses whom to favour and whom to cast away even before they are born and their deeds seen to men; He chooses whom to guide and whom to condemn just as the potter fashions his clay, creating something useful or something useless at his own discretion. He does not stop there. He plainly tells us that it is only those whom God has determined beforehand to show His Mercy will be saved while the rest whom he has destined to be damned will rot in hell.

If we are to go by this view, God is the author and we his magnum opus, His greatest work which He wrote the way He wished from beginning to end; God is the painter and we are his painting, pictured precisely the way he planned, every colour, every shade, every splotch in it, exactly the way He wanted it; He is the Singer and we are His song, sung according to the tune of His liking.

This is of course a rather hard way of looking at fate; it naturally led to some Christian cults adopting it as a cornerstone of their faith, like the Calvinists who taught that only God's Elect whom He had previously chosen for salvation would be saved while the damned whom he had destined to take the wrong path would suffer an eternity of torment. Even strict Catholics who uphold human free-will are wont to hold that God, owing to His infallible prescience of the future, has appointed and ordained from eternity all events occurring in time, including those that directly proceed from the exercise of man's free will.

It is not only the Abrahamic faiths that have a strong view on the divine decree. Almost every belief on the face of the earth has an idea that men's fates are determined by forces beyond their control. The Eastern faiths of Hinduism and Buddhism equally held to the idea, though in a rather grotesque form, holding that the fate of men was predetermined by the deeds committed in a previous life.

The Sinhalese Buddhists of old according to an Englishman named Robert Knox held that man's good or bad fortune was predetermined by God even before he was born for which they had a proverb *Ollua cottaula tiana* (It is written in the head). Likewise the ancient Greeks believed that men's fates were spun by three old hags and even in little children's stories we find that the idea of fate is strongly entrenched even in our fondest fairy tales.

Stars too were thought to determine men's fates, which is why we have astrology even in these enlightened times. Nay, even atheist scientists now claim that man has no freewill. Why, because man is merely a "biochemical puppet". People's thoughts and intentions, they argue, emerge from background causes of which they are unaware and over which they exert no conscious control. Every choice people make is made as a result of preceding causes. These choices they make are determined by those causes, and are therefore not really choices at all, so the argument goes.

So like it or not, the notion of predeterminism serves an important function in human societies, which is why almost all faiths on the face of this earth have some idea of it.

Islam strikes a delicate balance between predestination and free-will. It tells us that whatever happens to man is not the result of an arbitrary blind play of natural forces, but the outcome of God's Conscious and purposeful Will so that it all becomes one integrated whole in keeping with a universal plan. As Einstein said *God does not play dice with the universe*. Yes, God's Creation has a unity of purpose and the sooner we understand this the better. It helps us realise that whatever we do, it will not necessarily be the way we plan it. There exists a Higher Plan to which it must of necessity conform or perish in the process, hence the saying: *Man proposes, God disposes*.

Such a plan is not for man to comprehend, it is one above and beyond human understanding, As Goethe said of the death of his friend Duke Carl August: "*God brings about what he finds good, and nothing remains for us poor mortals but to endure it*". Indeed he felt that such an attitude of submission to the divine will was the greatest strength of Islam When his daughter in law fell dangerously ill, Goethe wrote to a friend "*I can say no more than that, here too, I seek to abide within Islam"*

This is evident everywhere, nothing always goes the way we plan it and when we do we must always bear in mind that it will be so only if God Wills it to be, which is why good Muslims always say *Insha Allah* 'God Willing' when speaking of the future. What's more, if something good happens, say the birth of a child we say *Masha Allah* 'As God has willed'. This is as much a teaching of Islam as it is of Christianity, as we read in James (4:14-15):

Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that"

Such an attitude of resignation before the Divine Will helps us to come to terms with reality and hence with ourselves. We cannot undo the past and hence must come to terms with our fate. Such an attitude helps us understand that whatever comes our way is from God and that it must be for our Good though we cannot understand why. We accept it as such, knowing that whatever trials we go through is just a fraction of a whole to which it must conform just as nature runs its course with its endless cycles of bloom and decay, where the end of one spells the birth of another.

Everything after all ultimately depends on the Will of God. All that was, that is and that will be takes place as He wills. God, after all, is the ultimate cause of all things. What say you explains the difference between a lovely nightingale and an ugly crow, each having natures as distinct from one another as sky is to earth? They are thus because God created them as such. We are thus because God created us as such, ensconced in our bodies in a form we never chose, a colour which we had not the slightest inkling of when we were born. Why, because God willed it so. His Will was

in operation even before we entered the world, so how is it possible that it should end with it?

Thus it is clear that God's Will is Irresistible and Overriding, and must be so. However at the same time, this does not mean that man is not a free agent. Man does have free-will to choose between right and wrong. God gave us free will when He Created Adam, and this free-will all men and women inherited from him. Such free will seems to have originated with Adam who according to the Qur'an was given life by God's breathing into him a spirit or soul from himself - or in the words of the Scripture: *nafakhtu feehi min roohi* (The Rocky Tract: 29). Man, by this means obtained a soul and some measure of free-will which was seen when Adam chose to eat of the forbidden fruit.

In the Qur'an we are told that God offered freewill to the rest of his creation, but only man accepted it. Thus when Adam chose to exercise his free-will he accepted the trust on behalf of his descendants as well. It is called in the language of the Qur'an *Al-Amaanat* 'The Trust':

We offered the trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they Refused to take it, and were afraid of it; but man undertook it
(The Confederates:72)

Thus we may suppose that God created man different from the rest of creation in that He also gave him freewill. However, it may be asked, how could this freewill be exercised in the face of the all-encompassing will of God. To this we may answer that God has created us in such a way that makes it possible for us to do so. He has given man the freedom to think and choose freely between good and evil, which marks him apart from the rest of creation. Thus when we say that everything is dependent on the will of God it may not necessarily mean in the definite sense , for that would be like saying that whatever we do is performed by God. God enables such actions, but does not perform them. To say that God performs our deeds will be nothing but heresy!

Again, suppose everything is predetermined because of God's All-Encompassing Will, why then does He want us to believe in it if our very thoughts are preordained? Why does He want us to freely believe in it using our free-will? What this shows is that our thoughts are not necessarily predetermined by God and that there's a deeper meaning to why God wants us to believe in fate. It seems that He wants man to believe in it, so as to bring man's nature with the free-will He has given him in line with His All-Embracing Will so as to achieve the desired equilibrium with the rest of nature that irresistibly submits to his Will. In other words. it is a call to be angelic by humbly submitting to God like the angels do, and not to be haughty like the devil by rebelling and arrogating to oneself things that are not rightly ours.

By doing so, God knows we will have peace of mind, trusting in His Will and readily resigning Oneself to it. So just as a stream freely moves towards the sea to lose itself in the ocean, so do the minds of men find comfort in submitting to a higher will. As God says in the Qur'an:

Whoever submits his whole self to God and is a doer of good has grasped the most trustworthy handhold, for with God rests the final outcome of all affairs
(Luqman:22)

Why, because at the end of the day, it is God's will that is Supreme, not ours. Because finally everything is dependent on Him. Our very heartbeats obey His Commands. Our very sustenance depends on Him. This is why we need to place our trust in God in every moment of our lives. This is what all the great prophets taught. Did not Jesus tell his disciples:

Notice the ravens. They do not sow or reap; they have neither storehouses nor barn, yet God feeds them. How much more important are you than birds! Can any of you by worrying add a moment to your life-span? If even the smallest things are beyond your control, why are you anxious about the rest? Notice how the flowers grow. They do not toil or spin. But I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of them" (Luke 12:22-27)

And did not Muhammad teach his followers:

If you put your whole trust in God, as you ought, He most certainly will satisfy your needs, as He satisfies those of the birds. They come out hungry in the morning,but return full to their nests.
(Tirmidhi)

Thus though the soul may have free will, the body, as all of nature, is subject to God and though our thoughts be free, our actions depend on God. Thus free will is like a ship in the sea of predestination, a great sea with whose ebb and flow our fates go. It is like tumbleweed driven by the wind hither and thither.It is limited in that it is subject to the Divine Will in each and every affair just as a ship is at the mercy of the sea with its storm tossed waters. But a light can guide it to safer waters and that Light is God. We are guided by that Light when we trust Him in every affair of ours.

God is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The likeness of His Light is as a niche wherein is a lamp, the lamp in a glass, the glass as if it were a brilliant star, lit from a blessed tree, an olive tree, neither of the East, nor of the West, whose oil is very nearly luminous though fire touched it not. Light upon Light.
God guides whom He Wills to His Light
(The Light:35)

This verse clearly drives home the fact that God is the Light and if it were not for His Light we would not be able to find the Path. Ask yourself, what good would our eyes be if there were no light? God gave us light so we can find our way, even in the night. Now think of that light that gives not just eyesight to your world, but insight to God's Work. That light He gives only to those who earn His Grace.

Have you not turned your vision to your Lord? How He prolongs the shadow! If He Willed, He could make it stationary! Then do We make the sun its guide
Then We draw it in towards Ourselves- a contraction by easy stages
(The Criterion:45)

Here we are told how shadows are guided by the sun, and how as the sun rises higher and higher the shadows contract, till when it reaches its zenith at noon when there is no shadow, and when it is in a sense closest to God- the Light of Light. So God is the Light and the rest of creation are but shadows depending on His Light. He guides

everything to its final destination including our lifespan as he does the shadows. Just as plants sense sunlight and grow towards it, so we go along with God with the assurance of a sleepwalker going for a door leading to the light, following the light like a sunflower.

But to understand this idea better, let's look at how Islam views nature. In Islam everything is Muslim in that they all submit to God's Laws, whether willingly or unwillingly, whether knowingly or unknowingly. Take your heartbeat. Does not it function beyond your control. Can you as much as skip a beat or prevent it from stopping when your time is up? The same holds true of animals who are creatures of instinct, eating and mating by an instinct they cannot resist. Nay even non-living things are Muslim because they are all subject to the laws of God. Say you throw a rock in the air. It won't stay put but comes down, drawn by the force of gravity created by God. That too is Muslim. Or take a tree. However much you water it, it will give fruit only in season. So that too is Muslim as it obeys the Laws of God. In short, everything in nature obeys the Law of God, everything in nature is designed to happen in its own good time as willed by the Lord of All Creation.

This is why God asks:

Do they seek for other than the religion of God? While all creatures in the heavens and on earth, have, willingly or unwillingly, bowed to His Will, and to Him shall they all be brought back
(Family Imraan:83)

Thus animals and plants are in a sense natural Muslims as they surrender to God's Will wholly without having a free choice. They express God's Will in every moment of their existence following their God-given instincts.

There is not an animal on the earth, nor a being that flies on its wings, but (are) communities like you. Nothing have We omitted from the Book, and they (all) shall be gathered to their Lord in the end
(The Cattle:38)

Here we are told that everything in the universe is recorded in the Book, in other words, God's archetypal plan.

With Him are the Keys of the Unseen, the treasures that none know but He. He knows whatever there is on the earth and in the sea. Not a leaf falls but with His knowledge. There is not a grain in the darkness of the earth, nor anything fresh or dry, but is (inscribed) in a Record Clear
(The Cattle:59)

Thus everything in life is ordered and regulated by the Almighty according to a plan. Won't you agree that every good thing has to have a plan? When you build a house, you need a plan. When you build a city you need a plan. So it is with predeterminism; It is God's plan for creation, the divine Blueprint so to say. Nothing operates outside it, nay not even the tiniest microbe. Just imagine, if a microbe reproduced out of control with nothing to check it, could it not wreak havoc on the world, even destroy it. There is a check on everything, a controlling mechanism that

ensures the world and the universe operates smoothly. In other words, life as we know it would not be possible if God did not predetermine certain things in life.

Thus man, despite his free will, is subject to God's All-Encompassing Will. This is evident from the creation story of our archetypical parent Adam of whom God told the angels "*I will create a vicegerent on earth*". This was told by God before Adam and Eve's fall to earth from paradise after they had eaten of the forbidden fruit. This idea of divine destination is known by Muslims as *Qadar* or 'Determined' or 'Measured' which is to say that whatever God has ordained must come to pass. The term occurs in the Qur'an in the sense of 'measure' as in the verse:

Verily, all things have We created with measure, and
Our Command is but one, as the twinkling of an eye
(The Moon: 49-50)

It also occurs in the form *taqdeer* in the sense of 'measurement':

Verily ! It is God who causes the seed-grain and the fruit-stone to split and sprout. He brings forth the living from the dead and He it is who brings forth the dead from the living. Such is God, then how are you deluded away from the truth ? (He is the) Cleaver of the Day-break. He has appointed the night for resting, and the sun and the moon for reckoning. Such is the measuring of the All-Mighty, the All-Knowing
(The Cattle: 95-96)

Taqdeer is therefore the law of measure working throughout the whole of creation, governing life and the universe and operating as much in the case of man as in the rest of nature, beginning with his creation and culminating with his final destination. Take a good look at us humans, changing from time to time, from one form to another, from tender infancy to frail senility. We are so mutable if we only have a closer look at ourselves. Thus *taqdeer* could also mean the latent potentialities with which God created man, with this latent freewill unfolding as he passes his days:

Glorify the Name of Your Lord, the Most High, Who has created
and then proportioned; and Who has measured, then guided
(The Most High:1-3)

The word used for 'measured' here is *qaddara,* the past sense of the verb for 'measure'.

Qadar encompasses a good part of human life, determining one's provision, term of life and perhaps even one's ultimate destiny. Whatever befalls man is said to be already written for him by God in a Book known as the *Lauh Al-Mahfooẓ* or 'The Preserved Tablet':

No misfortune befalls on the earth or in yourselves but is inscribed in a Book (i.e. Lauh Al-Mahfooẓ) before We bring it into existence. That is truly easy for God.
In order that you may not despair over matters that pass you by,
Nor exult over favours bestowed upon you
(Iron:22-23)

This includes his lifespan which is determined by God and He alone:

Nor can a soul die, except by God's leave; the term being fixed as by writing
(Family Imraan:145)

It is not just men, but whole nations that are subject to the law of Qadar:

Every nation has its appointed term; when their term is reached,
not an hour can they delay
(The Heights: 34)

This belief in one's *qismat* or the lot God has allotted to one is not such a bad thing really. The belief in the fate that God has willed will come to pass naturally leads one to an attitude of resignation in the face of adversity and inculcates in the believer a spirit of patience and forbearance. Acceptance of one's lot after all is a sign of piety. When Umm Salamah once remarked to the Prophet that the pain of the poisoned mutton given by a Jewess had not ceased to trouble him, he replied:

Nothing affected me therefrom but it was already decreed upon me
and Adam (was created) from his soil
(Ibn Majah)

So you will see that belief in a fate beyond man's control is a human need, a necessity, to accept one's lot with resignation. This is why almost all human cultures have a belief in fate to the point that it is even reflected in little children's tales. Islam came as a palliative to this universal belief, holding that ultimately all that happens takes place in a way such as is allowed by God to happen or is more definitely wrought by Him. We see such an idea expressed in the lines of Qoheleth in the Bible:

There is an appointed time for everything,
And a time for every affair under the heavens;
A time to be born and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to uproot
A time to kill and a time to heal; a time to tear down and a time to build

He adds to it as if expanding on these lines:

"*I have considered the task which God has appointed for men to be busied about. He has made everything appropriate to its time, and has put the timeless into their hearts, without man's ever discovering, from beginning to end, the work which God has done" (Ecclesiastes 3:1-11)*

Thus, what we must always bear in mind is that God's Will has a purpose and is not haphazard. If we can accept whatever God wills for us in humility, He will reward us for it and show us a better way. His Mercy is after all, All-Encompassing, and even encompasses whatever He has willed for us, however bitter it may seem at first sight. And at no point will His Mercy be so apparent as in the hereafter.

As for man's ultimate destiny, the Holy Book has two things to say- firstly, that God determines their fate and secondly, humans choose for themselves and have to answer for it. Thus we are told that faith is written in the hearts of the true believers:

For such He has written faith in their hearts and strengthened them with a spirit from Himself. And He will admit them to gardens beneath which rivers flow to dwell therein. God will be pleased with them, and they with Him. They are the party of God. Truly it is the party of God that will achieve felicity
(She Who Pleads:22)

That God's Will is Supreme is also indicated in other verses of the Qur'an:

Whither go ye? Verily this is no less than a Message to the worlds; to whoever among you wills to go straight. But ye shall not will except as God Wills
(The Folding Up: 26-29)

Verily this is an admonition, So whoever will, let him take a path to his Lord. But you cannot will, unless God wills. Verily, God is Ever All-Knowing, All-Wise
(Man: 29-30)

Whomsoever God wills to guide, He expands their bosom unto the Surrender (Islam), and whomsoever He wills to leave straying, He makes their bosom close and constricted as if they had to climb up to the skies
(The Cattle:125)

Even if We sent unto them angels, and the dead spoke unto them, and We gathered all things before their very eyes, they are not the ones to believe, unless it is in God's Plan
(The Cattle:111)

The import of these verses is profoundly powerful, impressing on man that his very guidance ultimately depends not on himself, but on Divine Grace. Particularly telling in these modern times is the verse that says that *whomsoever He wills to leave straying, He makes their breast close and constricted as if they had to climb up to the skies*. We know today, in this age of aviation that the higher we go up the atmosphere, the less oxygen we can take in, which combined with atmospheric pressure at its upper levels, will make it hard to breath, which is exactly what the Qur'an means when it says that the misguided ones would have *their breasts close and constricted as if they had to climb up to the skies.*

We also have the Chapter of the Flame speaks of *Abu Lahab* literally 'Father of Flame', an uncle of the Prophet who was nicknamed as such due to his fiery temper. When the Prophet gathered his kinsfolk together to listen to his newly commissioned mission, he flared up and burst out in a mix of anger and arrogance inspired by Satan himself, crying out "*Perdition to Thee!*" and broke up the gathering. But as the old saying goes: "*The Causeless Curse will not Come*" and so it was that as Islam shone day by day, Abu Lahab burned inside, and died consumed by his own fiery a week after the decisive Battle of Badr.

Ten years before Abu Lahab actually died, the Prophet was revealed a few verses forming the 111th Chapter of the Qur'an that more or less came in the form of a curse:

Perish the hands of the Father of Flame! Perish he!
No profit to him from all his wealth and all his gains!
Burnt soon will he be in a fire of blazing Flame!
(The Flame:1-3)

The verses affirmed as a fact that Abu Lahab would never become a Muslim and would burn in the hellfire because of his arrogance. For all that time, Abu Lahab had the chance to discredit the Prophet's mission. Here was a man who would have said black whenever the Prophet said white or white whenever the Prophet said black. All that time, all he had to do was simply say: "*I have come to know that Muhammad was sent down some verses from God that I will never change, that I will never become a Muslim, that I will go to hell! Well I want to become a Muslim now, I want to be saved from the Fire. I declare that I am a Muslim! What have you to say!*".

That was all he needed to do to discredit the Prophet. That was what could have been most expected of him, as he always sought to contradict what the Prophet said. He could have simply declared he was a Muslim to discredit the Prophet and throw doubt on the accuracy of the Qur'an. He could have for a while become a nominal Muslim, for had not some of the Prophet's most rabid opponents become devoted Muslims. That was all he needed to do to crush Muhammad's claims, sow doubt in the heart of the believers and extinguish the light of Islam before reverting to the faith of his forefathers. But he didn't!

During the Battle of Badr, the Prophet took a handful of sand from the ground and threw it at the enemy. It struck their eyes and caused so much irritation that it played a major role in their defeat. God revealed about it: "*When thou threwest, it was not thy act, but God's, in order that He might test the believers by a gracious trial*" (The Spoils of War:17). The Prophet was therefore an instrument of Divine action, just as the enemies of Israel, the Babylonians and Romans were, when the Jews had invited God's wrath upon themselves. Though we may not know it, we ourselves could become vehicles to implement God's Will on earth for He has power over all things including our hearts, which is why the Prophet often used to supplicate God as *Muqallibul Quloob* (Changer of Hearts).

In the sayings of the Prophet too we find much stress on predestination, like the one that says that our fates are written, not in ink, but in some unseen code by an angel upon one's life spirit:

Each one of you is put together in the womb of his mother for forty days, and then turns into a clot for an equal period (of forty days) and then turns into piece of flesh for a similar period (of forty days) and then God sends an angel and orders him to write four things, i.e. his provision, his stated term (to die), and whether he will be of the wretched or the blessed. Then the soul is breathed into him. And by God, a person among you may do deeds of the people of the (Hell) fire till there is only a cubit or an arms length distance between him and the fire, but then that writing precedes, and he does the deeds of the people of paradise and enters it; and a man may do the deeds of the people of paradise till there is only a cubit or two between him and paradise, and then that writing precedes and he does the deeds of the people of the fire and enters it" (Saheeh Al-Bukhari).

There is also the saying of the Prophet that when God having extracted from Adam all of his descendants who would be born until the end of the world, He pointed to some of them and said:

"*I have created these people for paradise and they will do the deeds of the people of paradise*".

He then pointed to the rest and said:

"*I have created these people for the hellfire and they will*

do the deeds of the inhabitants of hell"

When one of his companions asked the Prophet what then was the point of doing good deeds, he replied:

Verily, if God created one of His servants for paradise, He helps him do the deeds of the people of paradise until he dies doing one of their deeds, then He places him in paradise because of it. But if He created a man for the hellfire, He helps him to do the deeds of its inhabitants until he dies doing one of their deeds, then He puts him in the fire because of it
(Aboo Dawood)

A similar tradition saying has the Prophet declaring at a funeral in the graveyard of Gharqad:

"*There is not one amongst you whom a seat in paradise or hell has not been allotted and about whom it has not been written down whether he would be an evil person or a blessed person*"

A person, upon hearing this asked:

"*Should we not then depend on our destiny and abandon our deeds*? "

The Prophet replied:

Acts of everyone will be facilitated in that which has been created for him so that whoever belongs to the company of the blessed will have good works made easier for him and whoever belongs to the unfortunate ones will have evil acts made easier for him
(Saheeh Muslim)

It would seem from all the above, both from the passages of the Qur'an and the sayings of the Prophet that man's destiny has already been decided by God, or to put it in religious terms *written down*. However what they all indicate is that the evil-doers will have their evil deeds made easier for them, not that they will be compelled by God to commit them. Further, there are Qur'anic verses that indicate that men do have some measure of free-will:

He causes not to stray, except those who forsake (the path)
(The Heifer:26)

Verily never will God change the condition of a people until they change it themselves
(The Thunder:11)

God will keep firm those who believe, with the Word that stands firm in this world and in the hereafter and God will cause to go astray those who are evil
(Abraham: 27)

No kind of calamity can occur, except by the leave of God. And if anyone believes in God, (God) guides his heart, for God knows all things
(Mutual Loss and Gain:11)

The worst of all beasts in the sight of God are the deaf and the dumb –
Those who understand not. If God had found in them any good,
He would indeed have made them listen. If He had made them listen,
they would but have turned back and declined (faith)
(The Spoils of War:22-23)

What all these verses suggest is that God will guide those who believe in him and do good and that he would lead astray those who are evil, that he will harden the hearts of those whose hearts are hard. As God alone knows what goes on in our minds, it is only He who can best judge who is worthy of being guided to the light and who deserves to be left groping in the dark. Thus He knows fully well beforehand what choices humans are going to make and allows the actualization of those choices so that they reap the consequences of their thoughts, whether good or evil. In other words, when God creates a human, He Knows Well – and indeed how can He not know- even before creating him, how he is going to use his free will. Such prescience or foreknowledge is recorded and registered in the Book of Destiny. So when it is said that something is written, it may merely mean it is fixed and none can alter it.

As for the sayings of the Prophet in this connection, they do not necessarily suggest that man is a mere puppet in the face of destiny. Words such as "*that writing (of destiny) precedes*" may not necessarily mean that man is forcibly misled from the path that he has been already treading, but rather that he is merely pursuing his chosen path known to God even before he was born and which is thus written for him. The moral of this is that nothing can be said of one's ultimate end. A wicked person might enter paradise after sincere repentance and choosing a pious life thereafter while an apparently good person can get into hell by committing a serious sin and taking an evil course at the end of his life.

Thus it is not upto man to decide whether such and such a person would be in hell or heaven. They are all within the ken of God. What this drives home is that that salvation depends ultimately on God's Grace. To assume that just because we do good deeds we will go to paradise is to be arrogant, arrogating to ourselves something that is not ours, but rather God's domain, not to mention the fact that it could also contribute to a 'holier than thou' attitude with regard to others. Likewise we cannot condemn a man to hell just because he is a sinner. That is up to God to judge. Heaven is God's Domain and He admits to it whomsoever He Pleases.

Moreover, descriptions such as God's Creation of a people for paradise or hell or good or evil actions being made easier for them, does not necessarily imply that man has absolutely no free will or choice between good and evil. If that were so, we'd be like some characters in a storybook that begins with a man and woman in a garden, doing everything which the author has them do. If that were indeed so, there would be no point in holding man responsible or accountable for his deeds. The teachings of Islam like the judgement of men's deeds and the reward and punishment to follow would then be meaningless.

It is thus possible that God's creation of a person for paradise or hell is His creation of a person knowing fully well before His creation that he would be among the people of paradise or hell due to his free choice in choosing faith over unbelief and

good over evil or vice versa. That God's Knowledge can comprehend the future and this is clear from the Qur'an:

And He is God in the heavens and on earth.
He knows what you hide and what you reveal
(The Cattle:3)

From God verily nothing is hidden on earth or in the heavens.
He it is who shapes you in the wombs as He pleases
(Family Imraan:5-6)

He knows that which is in front of them, and that which is behind them,
while they encompass out of His Knowledge nothing except what He Wills
(The Heifer:255)

God alone knows all that was, that is and that will be. His knowledge is timeless and limitless and encompasses all things, every event in nature, every sphere of activity from cradle to grave is within His ken. The Prophet was once asked about the destiny of the children of the unbelievers who died before reaching the age of adolescence when they could distinguish right and wrong. He replied "*It is God alone who knows what they would be doing*" (Saheeh Muslim). Could this suggest that God knows not just the real future, but also the potential or possible future of His creatures?

Also relevant to our question is the Qur'anic story of the unnamed Servant of God related in *Soorah Kahf* or the *Chapter of the Cave* whom Moses encounters near *The Junction of the Two Seas*. The Holy Book simply describes him as:"*One of Our servants on whom We had bestowed Mercy from Ourselves and whom We had taught Knowledge from Our Own Presence.* This mystic being is popularly known as *Khidr* or 'The Green One'. One day, Moses and the Mystic proceed together, until they are in a boat. Khidr scuttles it, only to have Moses react: *"Have you scuttled it in order to drown those in it? Truly a strange thing you have done!"*. They proceed again, until they meet a young man whom Khidr slays. Moses says: *"Have you slain an innocent person who had slain none? Truly a foul thing have you done!"* Then they proceed until they came to a town and ask its inhabitants for food, but they refuse them. They find that a wall is about to fall down, but Khidr sets it aright., only to have Moses cry out: *"If you had wished, surely you could have got some recompense for it!"*.

Khidr answers him:*"This is the parting between me and thee. Now will I tell thee the interpretation of (those things) over which thou wast unable to have patience. As for the boat, it belonged to certain men in dire want. They plied on the water, I but wished to render it unserviceable, for there was after them a certain king who seized every boat by force. As for the youth, his parents were people of faith, and we feared that he would grieve them by obstinate rebellion and ingratitude (to God and man). So we desired that their Lord would give them in exchange (offspring) more pure and affectionate. As for the wall, it belonged to two youths, orphans, in the town, there was beneath it a buried treasure, to which they were entitled. Their father had been a righteous man, so thy Lord desired that they should attain their age of full strength and get out their treasure – a mercy from thy Lord"* (The Cave: 60-82).

What all this drives home is that destiny is beyond the realms of human understanding. God alone knows all, with the past, present and future spread out before Him as a single vista so to say. There is no difference in time before God, so

that in a sense everything is in the present tense. Why, because He is not bound by time. It is we of this temporal finite world who are unable to comprehend outside the bounds of time. We are in no position to lift the curtain of time and experience reality outside the bounds of space-time. God's knowledge is timeless. Man's is time bound.

Verily, the knowledge of the hour is with God (alone). It is He who sends down rain, and He who knows what is in the wombs, nor does anyone know what it is that he will earn on the morrow. Nor does anyone know in what land he is to die. Verily, with God is full knowledge and He is acquainted (with all things.)
(Luqman:34)

But then it may be asked, if *God knew what His creation would be doing, why then did He embark on His creation, destining it for Hell?* This is of course a difficult question to answer and as futile as to argue which came first - the egg or the hen? We know that God existed prior to His Creation. He was the Primal Source of Creation. Thus He knew well what He would be creating before He even set about the act of creation. He could have set about a different course, a different creation had He Willed. But His was the Primary Will and all else flowed from that point. If at all man was to have some measure of free-will, then it was He who bestowed it of His own Volition.

There are still more limitations on man's exercise of his free will. It is limited in that it is subject to the All-Encompassing Will of a Higher Being since ultimately there is no power except with God. Thus, man's individual will may be likened to the flame of a candle melting under the light of the sun which is the Divine Will, to ultimately disappear. It may be likened to a ship in storm tossed waters, swaying to and fro or even turning over depending on the ferocity of the waves, which is the Divine Will.

Freewill is also limited by the limitations placed upon man's corporeal existence which makes him susceptible to the influences of the evil hosts who themselves are the creation of the One True Lord. The very nature of man bears this out. All men are not alike. Although all men are created equal, they are different as far as their proclivities and abilities are concerned, which explains why people behave the way they do. Ever stopped to think why people have quirks we cannot rationally explain, like why some are Sadists and others Masochists? What Western atheistic science attributes to 'chaos', Islam attributes to a Higher Design that works in the most mysterious ways.

There are some interesting sayings of the Prophet in this connection:

Acts of everyone will be facilitated in that which has been created for him so that whoever belongs to the company of the blessed will have good works made easier for him and whoever belongs to the unfortunate ones will have evil acts made easier for him
(Saheeh Muslim)

Verily God has fixed the very portion of adultery which a man will indulge in, and which he of necessity must commit. The adultery of the eye is the lustful look, and the adultery of the tongue is the licentious speech, the heart desires and yearns, which the parts may or may not put into effect
(Saheeh Muslim)

This would suggest that the inclination to do good or bad or even something seemingly trivial as sexual lust has been created according to a certain measure and that it is this that determines one's yearnings, which is in a sense beyond one's control. At the same time it depends on the will of the person concerned, whether he would avoid the sin or yield to his lust. Thus we may conclude that man has limited free-will, but that a good part of his life is determined by forces beyond his control.

At the same time, this does not mean that one should adopt a fatalistic view of life, leaving everything to God, like not taking medicine when you have an illness. There is an old Arabian adage: *Trust in God but tie your camel*. This is exactly what is expected of the believer. The moral is something like this - if you were to eat some bad meat, fully aware of its ill effects, that is carelessness; but if you were to meet with an accident in which you had no control, that is fate. That is why God will question you about those matters you could have done something about, not about those things you could do nothing about.

The companions of the Prophet understood this well. It once happened that the Caliph Umar was informed that a plague had broken out in the land of Sham (Syria and thereabouts). This was in the course of a conquest and so he consulted his companions who unanimously agreed that they should not expose themselves to the plague. At this, one of his army commanders Abu Ubaidah said: "*O Umar! Are you running away from the decree of God!*" Pat came Umar's reply: "*O Abu Ubaidah! I wish someone else had said this. Yes, we do run from the decree of God to the decree of God. What if you had a herd of camels and you took them to a valley that had two slopes, one green pasturage and the other dry and barren. Would you not be fulfilling the decree of God if you let your herd graze on the green pasture rather than keeping them on the dry barren land?*" (Saheeh Al-Bukhari).

On another occasion Umar while going around the Kaaba in Mecca was seen weeping and praying: "*O God if you have written me among the blessed ones, then keep me firm with them, but if you have written me among the wretched sinners, then change it o the blessed ones and to whom you bless them with your pardon, as it is you who blots out what you will and with You is the Mother of the Book*" (Tafsir Al Qurtubi). Umar was obviously invoking a verse from the Qur'an: *God blots out what He Wills and confirms (what He Wills). And with Him is the Mother of the Book* (The Thunder: 38) in the understanding that *Everything in life is prewritten, but with prayer it can be rewritten*.

What all this shows is that the early Muslims understood the notion of predestination in a very positive way. They knew that everything happens as God Wills, but did not dispute the fact that they too had free will, even to the extent of exercising their good judgement to safeguard their lives and beseeching the Almighty to change their destiny if it were not in favour of them. This is why Muslims hold that while one's provision is fixed, how one earns it, whether by good or evil means, is determined by man himself who exercises limited free-will in this respect.

Finally, all I can say is that man need not delve too deeply into the ways of God. He simply treads the path ordained for him by God in His Wisdom, leaving everything to Him and to Him Alone while at the same time trusting in His Mercy, that all that He has in store for him is for his own good. In other words, one must surrender oneself to God completely as the rest of creation:

To Him has surrendered whatsoever is in the heavens and the earth, willingly or unwillingly, and to Him shall they all be brought back
(Family Imraan.83)

26th Night

Johnny: Salams Sheikh. Thanks for clearing my mind about this qismet thing last night. At the end of the day what it shows is whatever God Wills must come to pass as we are even taught in church. Now to my next question:

How can you say that Jinns exist?

The Janissary: God's creation is full of unseen wonders. Take micro-organisms which we cannot see with the naked eye, but which play a very important role in cleansing the earth of corpses, sewage and faeces by acting upon them, breaking them down into simpler compounds, decomposing them and reducing them to nutrients that add to the fertility of the soil, helping plants to grow and animal life to thrive on them. Have you ever wondered that all living things are really made up of materials borrowed temporarily from the environment, and when they die, the function of returning these back to the environment is done by these unseen decomposers? Indeed there are scientists today who believe that life forms are scattered all over the universe and that some of it reaches earth through comets and asteroids. They call their theory *panspermia*, a Greek word meaning 'seeds everywhere'. The Qur'an clearly tells us that humans are not the only intelligent beings in the universe and that there are many life forms scattered across space:

> *And among His Signs is the Creation of the heavens and the earth,*
> *and the living things He has scattered through them. And He has power*
> *to gather them together when He Wills*
> *(The Consultation:29)*

One such creation of God are the Jinn, who like men, are sapient creatures having some measure of free will. Although they cannot be perceived by our senses such as sight, they have some influence on our physical world as we can see from their effects on scientifically inexplicable phenomena such as possessions, poltergeists and premonitions. Such influences can only be explained through a belief in the Jinn and Islam explains this best.

Besides, many cultures all over the world know of a belief in strange spirits that influence the world we live in, among them the Abaasy of the Yakuts, Boggarts of the English, Coblynaus of the Welsh, Daemons of the Greeks, Duwendos of the Filipinos, Jumbee of the Carribeans, Kallikantzaros of the Balkans, Lutins of the French, Rabisu of the Babylonians, Shedim of the Hebrews, Spriggans of the Cornish, Wirricows of the Scots and Yokai of the Japanese.

These invisible creatures are known by Muslims by the Arabic term *Jinn*, which literally means 'one hidden from sight', deriving as it does from the Arabic root *jn* used in both the active and passive sense 'to hide' or 'be hidden', a sense that also occurs in such words like *majnoon* 'madman' ('one whose intellect is hidden') and *janeen* 'embryo, foetus' ('hidden inside the womb'). Interestingly the Latin word *genius* meant a sort of spirit like the *jinn* from which its offshoot French derived its *genie*, which some English writers use in place of *Jinn* like in their translations of Arabian tales like Aladin and the Magic Lamp.

The Jinn we are told were created before man, from smokeless fire, perhaps from stellar or interstellar combustions or the hot cores of collapsing star-forming nebulae that took place in the early days of creation following the Big Bang:

We Created man from sounding clay, from mud moulded into shape. And the Jinn race We created before, from the fire of a scorching wind
(The Rocky Tract:26)

He Created man from sounding clay like pottery,
and He Created jinns from fire free of smoke
(The Most Merciful:14-15)

It is interesting that the Holy Book should mention jinn being created before men, and that too from smokeless fire, for we know today that as nebulae collapse, their dense, hot cores form and begin gathering dust which can become planets, asteroids or comets. So the earthly elements as found in clay for instance are decidedly of later origin than the stars we see in the nightly skies, thus agreeing with the Qur'anic story of the creation of jinn from fire taking place before the creation of man from clay. Thus the Jinn may well be pre-biotic organisms having their origin from fire or its heat. The Jinn, like humans exist because God created them to serve Him:

I Created not jinns and humans, except that they should serve Me
(The Scattering Winds:56)

O Assembly of jinns and men! Did there not come to youMessengers from amongst you, relating to you My Signs?
(The Cattle:130)

There are both good and evil jinn. Satan himself or *Iblees* as he is known in the Qur'an is of the jinn. The Holy Book calls evil doers *Hizb-ash-Shaytaan* 'The Party of Satan' and constantly warns man not to be misled by Satan and his cohorts:

O Children of Adam ! Let not Satan deceive you as he got your parents (i.e. Adam and Eve) out of paradise, stripping them of their raiments to show them their private parts. Verily he and his tribe see you from where you cannot see them.
Verily, we made the devils protectors for those who believe not
(The Heights:27)

One day will He gather them all together, (and say): O ye assembly of Jinns! Much (toll) did ye take of men". Their friends among men will say: "Our Lord! We profited from each other but we reached our term which you appointed for us". He will say: "The Fire be your dwelling place. You will dwell therein forever, except as God Wills
(The Cattle:128)

Likewise did we make for every Messenger an enemy – evil ones among men and jinns, inspiring each other with flowery discourses by way of deception
(The Cattle:112)

Thus it is the Jinn led by Satan that prompt men to do evil by whispering evil thoughts into their minds. Such jinns assigned to each person to mislead him or her are known as the *Qareens*. As the Prophet informed us: "*There is not one of you who does not have a jinn appointed to be his constant companion*". The people asked him: "*And you too, O Messenger of God?*" He said: "*Me too, but God has helped me*

and he has submitted, so that he only helps me to do good" (Saheeh Muslim). However, not all Jinn are evil. In the Qur'an we find the Jinn saying of themselves:

There are among us some that are righteous and some the contrary.
We follow divergent paths
(The Jinn:11)

There are various types of jinn. Some, according to the Prophet, have wings and fly through the air (Tabarani). That the jinn could also assume human form is brought out by a narration from the Prophet's companion Abu Hurayrah which tells of a jinn digging into some food given in charity during the holy month of Ramadan (Saheeh Al-Bukhari). In olden times some Jinns were employed to serve men in the cause of God. The Qur'an tells how before Solomon were marshalled his hosts – of Jinns and men and birds, all kept in order and ranks (The Ants:17) and of Jinns who worked for him, making arches, basins and cauldrons (Sheba:12-13).

The unseen realm of the Jinn is vast. They dwell in or under the ground of this earth, in the vault of the sky and in outer space. In the Qur'an we read of God saying of the Jinn: *We have (from of old) adorned the lowest heaven with lamps, and We have made such (lamps) (as) missiles to drive away the evil ones* (The Dominion:5). This shows that Jinns could find their way to outer space. Not just that, many may well live in outer space or in other planets, which may explain why there are many humans today who claim to have encountered extra-terrestrials or looked up to the heavens to see flying saucers.

What best explains how the Dogon people of Mali who until recently lived a primitive lifestyle had myths embedded with advanced astronomical knowledge, knowledge which they could not have acquired by themselves, and which modern astronomy only recently discovered? What explains how they became privy to such lore that speaks of heavenly bodies invisible to the naked eye, of Saturn's rings and Jupiter's four moons and of the far distant star Sirius and its invisible companion, *Po Tolo*, a much smaller, incredibly heavy white star which circles Sirius every fifty years, and which modern-day astronomers have discovered to be true using only the most sophisticated instruments which they call Sirius-B, a white dwarf of very high density, a single cubic metre of which could weigh several thousand tonnes and which tallies with the tribe's claim that it is composed of a super-dense metal heavier than all the iron on Earth. The Dogon say they were taught thus by the Nommo, one of the first groups of spirits created by their Supreme God Amma, awful-looking beings who arrived in a vessel along with fire and thunder. So I ask you, could not these Nommo have been extra-terrestrial Jinns who passed on their knowledge of the heavens to this primitive tribe for some favour?

The terrestrial types of Jinn mostly live in pits or ruins and unclean places like toilets, dunghills, garbage dumps and graveyards. The Prophet prohibited his followers from urinating into a hole, and the reason given by a follower was that they were the habitats of the jinn (Aboo Dawood). Whenever the Prophet went to answer a call of nature he would recite: "*O God, I seek refuge with You from the evil ones, male and female*"(Saheeh Muslim). The words he used for these evil spirits *khubuth* for the males and *khabaa'ith* for the females mean dirty or evil ones among the Jinn. The inexplicable bark of a dog or braying of a donkey at night are also said to indicate the presence of these evil spirits. The Prophet warned his followers: "*Anyone who hears the barking of a dog or the braying of a donkey (at night) should seek*

refuge with God from the Accursed Satan. They see what you do not see" (Adab Al Mufrad).

The jinn eat and drink as men do. Once some believing Jinn asked the Prophet about their food and he said: "*You can have every bone on which the name of God has been mentioned that comes into your possession as meat, and all the droppings as food for your animals*". On another occasion a deputation of jinns came to the Prophet and said: "*O Muhammad, forbid your community from cleansing yourselves (after calls of nat*ure) *with bone or dung or charcoal, for in them has God provided sustenance for us*". So the Prophet forbade his followers to do so (Aboo Dawood). Thus it is quite possible that the action of microbes on dead or decaying matter that break them up is in fact the work of the jinn, using the medium of micro-organisms to consume whatever nutrients they can to nourish themselves. Who knows, maybe these microbes are the very saliva of the jinn transferring matter into energy for the consumption of the Jinn. Who knows, even bacteria whom we cannot see with the naked eye and in this sense answer to the name of *jinn* or 'hidden ones' may well be a diminutive, less advanced class of these creatures. They are after all invisible organisms that feed on rotting bones and dung just as the Prophet said of the Jinn.

As for the proof of their existence which you are so keen to know, you can see this in the effects they have on the world around us- mysteries which even modern science is unable to explain. Why is it that we have clairvoyants and crystal gazers in our midst even in this scientific age. Yes, the jinn are alive and well, resorting to many things to influence our world. One such is divination which some misguided folk resort to, to unveil the future or learn about unknown things like where the dead reside. These are just what the evil jinn look for to trap and sway the minds of men. Palmistry, crystal gazing and tarot cards are some of the media through which these evil jinn express themselves to create mischief in our world and lead us away from God.

The Qur'an gives us an idea of how the Jinn gather information of the fates of things to come so that they could pass it on to their friends among the soothsayers. In Soorah Al Jinn or the Chapter of the Jinn, the Jinn admit:

And we pried into the secrets of heaven, but we found it filled with stern guards and flaming fires. We used indeed to sit there in (hidden) stations, to (steal) a hearing, but any who listens now will find a flaming fire watching him in ambush
(The Jinn: 8-9)

The Prophet went on to add:

They (the Jinn) would pass the information back down until it reaches the lips of a magician or fortune-teller Sometimes a meteor would overtake them before they could pass it on. If they passed it on before being struck,
they would add to it a hundred lies
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

Here we are told that the jinn used to eavesdrop on the conversations of the angels in heaven as regards the fates of men and pass it on to their fortune-telling friends. However the Jinn no longer enjoyed this privilege in gathering heavenly news and passing it onto men without facing chastisement in the form of asteroids or shooting stars.

And We have guarded it (the heavens) from every accursed devil. But any that is able to snatch a hearing is pursued by a brightly burning flame
(The Rocky Tract:17-18)

In the days before the advent of the Prophet fortune-tellers tended to be accurate in their predictions. However with his advent the heavens were intensely guarded intensely by the angels and any Jinn who tried to listen was attacked by meteors or shooting stars.Whatever information they steal they convey to the soothsayers, who mix it with lies to do the devil's bidding and cause mischief. It once happened that some folk asked the Prophet about fortune-tellers. He told them:"*They are nothing*". They said: "*But, Messenger of God, they speak about things which are true!*" The Prophet, responded "*That is a word which Satan steals and then he mumbles it into the ear of his protégé with a sound like the clucking of a chicken. Then they mix a hundred lies with it*"' (Adab Al Mufrad). The Prophet warned us against resorting to such fortune-tellers in no uncertain terms: "*The prayer of one who approaches a fortune-teller and asks him about anything, will not be accepted for forty days or nights*" (Saheeh Muslim).

History bears ample testimony to the influence of men who were in league with the jinn. Take the case of Rasputin who gained such a hold on the Russian Royals through his reputation for working miracles, and which only became stronger when the heir to the throne Prince Alexai took ill and he sent a telegram assuring the Romanovs that *The little one will not die!* Sure enough the little one did not die then and there, but his family and he did when the Communists took over and massacred them all in cold blood a while afterwards. Had it not been for Rasputin the course of history might have been different with the Romanovs still ruling Russia and keeping atheism at bay.

Like palmistry, crystal gazing was another form through which the Jinn expressed themselves, not only in gypsy communities in Europe, but also in the Middle East. A well known Islamic scholar Ibn Taymiyyah who lived in the 13th century has in his treatise on the Friends of God and the Friends of Satan, *Awliya Ar-Rahmaan wa Awliya Ash-Shaytaan* left us a record of some mystics who said that the jinn showed them something shiny like water and glass in which images or pictures of whatever they sought information would appear and they in turn would inform people about it. It is also possible that Fortune-tellers may operate through the *Qareen*, the Jinn companions assigned to each and every one of us who throughout our lives who whisper to us to give in our baser desires and so mislead us from the path of God. Since the Qareen are with humans all their life, they are aware of all that has happened to their assigned person from cradle to the grave. Thus by making contact with the Qareen, the fortune-teller is able to convince his or her client that he knows about the past of that particular person and can easily make out his or her future as well.

Another proof of the existence of the jinn is their ability to take possession of people's bodies. The Bible speaks of many cases of possessed people being brought to Jesus who drove out the evil spirits away from their bodies by a word (Matthew 8:16). We also hear of how some demons who had taken possession of a Gerasene man were driven out by him. When Jesus asked: "*What is your name?*", he replied: "*Legion!*" for many were the demons that had entered him. They eventually entered a herd of swine that then rushed into a lake where they drowned (Luke 8:26-33). When the Pharisees heard that Jesus could drive out demons, they said: "This man drives out demons only by the power of Beelzebul, the prince of demons". But Jesus said to

them: "*Every kingdom divided against itself will be laid waste, and no town or house divided against itself will stand. And if Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then will his kingdom stand?*" (Matthew 12:24-26).

The Arabs of the Prophet's day were also aware of demoniacal possession and in fact thought that insane people were actually possessed, hence the term for madman *majnūn* was taken to mean 'one possessed by the jinn'. Such possession and exorcism to get rid of suchpossession even took place in the Prophet's time. On one occasion he beat an insane and apparently possessed boy while shouting "*Get out, enemy of God! Enemy of God get out!*" after which the boy was cured of the possession (Ahmad).

Ibn Taymiyyah, a leading scholar of Islam once read out a verse from the Qur'an: *Afahasibtum annama khalaqnakum abathan wa'annakum ilayna la turjaoon* (Did you think that We Created you in jest, and that You would not be brought back to Us?) in the ear of a person afflicted with epilepsy. The spirit that possessed him answered by saying "*indeed*" extending her voice (mocking the Qur'an). He then took a stick and beat the sick person with it while the she-devil said "*I love this person*". The Shaykh said "*But he does not love you*". She said "*I want to accompany him to perform the pilgrimage*" whereupon he said "*He does not want to go to pilgrimage with you*". She said "*I will leave him in your honour*" and he said "*No, but as an obedience to God and His Messenger*". She said "*Then I will leave him alone*". The patient then woke up and started looking around, inquiring "*What brought me to the presence of the Shaykh?*". They asked him "*What about the beating you took ?*". He said "*Why would the Shaykh beat me while I have not done anything wrong?*". He had no idea that he had been beaten. To this day, possession of humans by devils take place in many parts of the world, including in the West, a phenomenon reflected in films like *The Exorcist*.

Now, you may wonder why Jinn should take possession of people. It may be that in some instances they form an attachment to people, but in a good number of cases it is done out of malice or to mislead people to believe in others than God. If a person does become possessed by a devil, the name of God and none other has to be used to expel them. What often happens in the West is that exorcists licensed by the churches use the formula *In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost* to rid one of demons, thus invoking the names of others besides God to exorcise the Jinn. When the Jinn leave, they tend to believe that their formula has worked, little realizing that it is a ploy of the Jinn. Why, because it knows that if it listens to the exorcist, then it would have succeeded in making him believe in others other than God, not to mention the family of the victim and all those near and dear to them.

Other scientifically inexplicable activities such as séances and oujia boards used to make contact with the dead, are also little doubt manipulated by the Jinn. Those seeking to make contact with their loved ones may find the Jinn speaking to them, mimicking the voices of those near and dear to them through these séances, misleading them to believe that they are in the realm of spirits or in other words ghosts walking the earth, rather than having a place in the hereafter. Visions of ghosts and even of holy people like Jesus and the Virgin Mary which people have seen over the centuries are such tricks the Jinn resort to in order to fool them and lead them astray. Malicious Jinn may also take possession of uninhabited houses, creating disturbances and leading any humans who occupy them to believe that such houses are haunted by the ghosts of humans and not evil spirits as such.

Yet another means by which Jinn influence people is through the feats of magicians. Since the Jinn can travel long distances in as much as a blink of an eye,

they can help magiciand perform some wondrous tricks. This is seen from the story of Solomon to whom the Jinn were subject though he was a Prophet and no magician. The Qur'an tells of how an Ifrit (a powerful and crafty one) among the Jinns offered to bring Solomon the Queen of Sheba's Throne before he could rise from his Council (The Ant:39). Solomon of course did not accede to the offer of the Jinn who obviously sought to win over Solomon to his side, thereby testing his dependence on God. Of late one finds that Jewish magicians performing some incredible feats like making things appear and disappear or lifting things mysteriously before one's very eyes and other tricks that simply cannot be explained scientifically. Such magicians have unlike wise king Solomon sold their souls to the devil. Why else would they be vested with such magical powers by the Jinn. It is they who form the church of Satan on earth, misleading innocent men and women from the true path

So any time you turn your eyes to the heavens and see them ablaze with shooting stars, you will know what's really going on - the devils being chased away from the heavens by the angels. What else explains why these meteors should move about in such unpredictable fashion and even find their way to earth with such fury. That these heavenly weapons used to ward away the jinn are indeed meteors or shooting stars is suggested by the Qur'an which tells us:

It is We Who have set out the zodiacal signs in the heavens and made them fair-seeming to beholders and moreover we have guarded them from every devil stoned (The Rocky Tract:16-17)

Now, it is well known that these space rocks contain iron as apparent from those that reach earth, which may explain why humans across space and time have held that the Jinn are afraid of iron. To give some examples, the Arabs hold that Jinn have a great dread of iron and that simply exclaiming *Hadeed! Hadeed!* (Iron! Iron!) could defend one from them. People may also say to avert the Jinn *Hadeed ya Meshoom!* (Iron, thou unlucky). Even among the Moors, a Muslim people of Sri Lanka a newly circumcised boy was instructed to carry an iron object with him every time he left to answer a call of nature as a prophylaxis against lurking spirits while a girl who had recently menstruated was never allowed to venture outside her house without carrying an iron object to ward them off.

Even among the majority Sinhalese Buddhists of that country, the Yakku, a class of spirits like the Jinn, were believed to be afraid of iron, which was used to ward away the glances of these malicious spirits.Thus the Islamic view of Jinn been repelled by meteors is supported by folk belief even among non- Muslim peoples, suggesting that it has some factual basis.

Modern science tells us that the collapsing cores of massive stars may become so hot as to support more exotic nuclear reactions that consume helium and produce a variety of heavier elements up to iron. That iron is the last element so produced in such reactions is interesting, making it the ideal weapon for the angels to hurl at the jinn and to cause them harm as they have none of it in them.

27th Night

Johnny: Salams Sheikh, thanks for your long discourse on the Jinn last night, and to think all this while I was under the impression that they were the stuff fairy tales were made of and that only superstitious people believed in them. Now to my next question:

What does Islam have to say about superstitions?

The Janissary: Superstitions have been the bane of nations throughout the ages. They are almost as bad as idolatry as they involve false beliefs in things that have no real power. Although some superstitions seem innocuous, they can also become exceedingly dangerous, especially when put into the minds of ignoramuses who take it as Bible Truth. This is especially so among certain peoples of the East. There superstitious people can do some really terrible things like believing that seeing widows or blind people will bring them bad luck. Some even kill their own offspring if they happen to be born under the 'wrong star'.

Islam prohibits all types of superstitious beliefs, because it attributes to people or things that which is rightly God's. Take for instance astrology which is widespread in many parts of the world and even in the West. It supposes that the stars influence people's future. In some parts of Asia like India, people believe in auspicious times to embark on a venture. Even politicians take astrology very seriously, especially when elections draw near, doing everything within their means to stay in line with the positions of the planets, with which their personal fortunes are believed to ebb and rise.

In the days before Islam, the Arabs believed that the flight of a bird portended the future. Thus when people went out for some purpose like business, they would look around for birds. If a bird flew to their right, they would consider it a good omen and would proceed with their business. If a bird flew to their left, they regarded it as a bad omen and would postpone it. In the Far East, people believe that having a statue of a Laughing Buddha, a hideous bald. pot-bellied image of the Buddha with a wide grin will bring them wealth. In other parts of Asia like Sri Lanka, folk believe that wearing rings with some stones will ward off evil and bring them good fortune. Yet others believe that possessing a large seashell known as valampuri will bring them good luck. Even in the West, you have people believing that some trivial object like a horse shoe will bring them good luck or breaking a mirror will bring seven years of bad luck.

Still worse is the very common belief among them that a particular number -13 – brings bad luck. In some western countries including the US the number 13 is not assigned to a floor in high rise hotels or apartment buildings, so that you will find that after the 12th floor you go up directly to the 14th floor, as if the 13th floor had done a disappearing act. Some have no rooms numbered 13. People even avoid tables where there are 13 people with them. The reason given for the belief is that Judas who betrayed Jesus was the 13th one at the Last Supper. So pervasive is the belief that there is even a special term for the fear of number 13 - triskaidekaphobia. Not only do such people psychologically get disturbed with these silly ideas, but it also affects their personal lives, family lives and even professional lives, not to mention the toll it takes on the economy. This silly fear costs America alone about a billion dollars a year in work absenteeism, travel cancellations and dips in trade on every 13th day of a month.

The absurdity of these beliefs could be seen from the fact that they differ from culture to culture. Not only that, some things that are considered unlucky in one

culture are considered lucky in another. Take the number 13, which was considered a lucky number in ancient Egypt and still holds its ground in modern day Japan. We in this enlightened times also know that many beliefs have evolved over the ages due to reasons that are easily explained. For instance the belief not to ‘Walk under the ladder’ which may well be a throwback to the fear of mediaeval gallows that looked like ladders or simply due to safety concerns. The belief in that breaking a mirror is a sure way to open the door to seven years of bad luck seems to have arisen from a primitive belief that mirrors don't simply reflect your image, but they also hold bits and pieces of your soul and that these are captured every time you peer into it.

Indeed, it is very easy for superstition to creep into one’s mind and then seep into one’s family and even take hold of the larger community. Suppose a man hears a gecko clicking when he comes up with a novel idea. He then sets about working on it, but finds it does not go well, but rather meets with misfortune. He then comes to believe that the creature’s click bodes ill for the future and tells this to all those near and dear to him, who in turn disperse the belief far and wide. All those who live in such an atmosphere of infectious superstition inhale its germs and pass it down from one to another, from generation to generation like a contagious disease that knows no space or time. It’s that easy for superstition to take hold of men’s minds and become the mental stock-in-trade of a people.

But beware, the pitfalls of superstition are many. When one is superstitious, one is always fearful till it finally becomes like a cancer that eats into one’s brain and consume one’s soul. The world becomes a hard place for such people to live in, why because everything they deem unlucky will be a stumbling block for them, preventing them from going out to make a living or gaining knowledge. They become fearful of any and everything. They see a widow early in the morning and think it inauspicious and scuttle their plans for the day. They see a black cat crossing their part and think it unlucky, brooding over it thinking that the entire day will be wretched. Such a mindset naturally leads to a lack of personal responsibility on the part of the person concerned. What’s more, unscrupulous people can easily make use of superstitious folk for their own ends. Witch doctors and others of their ilk thrive on these foolish minds, fleecing them of their earnings and even prodding them to do some mischief to get rid of the evil they think is haunting them.

Not only does one’s mental and physical health suffer, but also one’s spiritual life. Why, because superstitions can open the door to polytheism. Satan preys on the fear of people who always fear for their future. Why, because man’s knowledge is limited. He does not even know what will happen tomorrow. As we are told in the Qur’an:"No soul knows what it will earn tomorrow" (Luqman:34). So Satan has a field day playing around with superstitious folk, making them fear things which need not be feared and keeping them away from striving for the good things in life, and worst of all preventing them from placing their trust in God and God alone.

This is why Islam regards belief in superstitions as a sign of disbelief in God. In fact superstition itself arises out of a lack of faith in God. If he were to fear God, will he fear other things? Certainly not! But if a man fears not God, then he will certainly fear other things. That is the nature of man. Superstition also goes against the Islamic view that knowledge of the future is the preserve of God alone. Not a leaf falls from a tree or a raindrop from the sky but He has full knowledge of it. While the eye of the Muslim is ever on the look out for signs of God’s Grace in the realm of Nature, we do not take these signs themselves as our deities or destinies portending good or evil. As Muslims we hold that whatever befalls us comes from God. That is why we

always say Insha Allah (God Willing) when we express a desire for the future. It is God alone who can bring about good or prevent harm, for He Himself tells us:

And if God touches you with harm, none can remove it but Him, and if He touches you with good, then He is able to do all things
(The Cattle:17)

His Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) also denounced the very idea of a bad omen, describing it as a form of polytheism. He very clearly told his followers:

(Believing in) bad omen is (a form of) polytheism.
(Aboo Dawood)

The term he chose to use for this was *shirk*, which means polytheism or associating others with God - the greatest sin the Sight of God. He did not stop at that but even taught a prayer for those who had unknowingly indulged in it. He once declared: "*Whoever lets omens stop him from doing something has committed an act of polytheism*". He was asked: "*What is the expiation for that?*" and he replied: "Say: *O God, there is no good except Your good, no birds except Yours, and there is no god beside You*". You may wonder why he used the words: *Wa la tayra illa tayruka* 'No birds except yours'. Well, you see in those days of ignorance the Arabs believed that birds portended good or bad omens, so much so that the Arabic term for omen was derived from the Arabic word for bird – *tayr*.

One day a companion of his named Muawiyah ibn Hakam said to him: "*I have only recently abandoned ignorant beliefs, and now God has favoured us with Islam. Some of our people visit fortune-tellers*" The Prophet said," "*Do not visit them".* The man added, "*And some of us associate bad omen with certain things*". The Prophet replied: "*That is something which they find in their breasts. Let them not be deterred from their purpose*" (Saheeh Muslim).

One another occasion, the Prophet saw a man holding an amulet. He asked: "*What is this?*' The man said: "*This is an amulet I hold because I feel some kind of weakness*". Hearing this, the Prophet commanded: "*Take it off for it will not increase you but in weakness, and if you die while wearing it, you will never prosper in the Hereafter*". (Ahmad)

What all this shows is that belief in the One True God as one's Protector suffers when one begins to believe in superstitions. One's heart gets corrupted with ridiculous fears just as an old nail gathers rust when left out to the elements. Is this not very different from other forms of polytheism or associating partners with God, believing that along with Allah, other things too can become our protectors? Thus it is imperative that we stop groping around in the darkness of these ignorant ideas and don the armour of faith to fight them in the light of what God has revealed to us.

Yes, it is the light of Islam that can dispel such darkness. This is why the Prophet prayed: "*O God! Fill my heart with light, and my grave with light; place light in front of me, and light behind me, place light on my right and light on my left; place light above me and light below me; place light in my ears and light in my eyes, and light in my hair and my skin and my flesh and my blood and my bones*" (Tirmidhi).

People are such that if they did not have firm faith in God, they would be endlessly taking omens from created things like birds, cats and even unfortunate humans like widows or orphans or the lame or blind, little knowing that they are the ones who are really blind. In the West serious superstitious beliefs usually do not go beyond the

belief that the number 13 is unlucky. That's bad enough, but in countries like India it goes well beyond. They believe that widows are inauspicious and that inviting a widow to a wedding would bring bad luck to the newly married couple. In its rural backwoods child sacrifices take place for reasons varying from inducing rainfall to ensuring a better harvest to helping childless women conceive. Some children have even been kidnapped and murdered in cold blood at the behest of witch doctors to cure people of infertility or nightmares. In Sri Lanka, there is a belief that sacrificing a child could aid one during a treasure hunt.

However educated people are, they can be superstitious in many ways. Even people who are scientifically inclined can be superstitious. Thus it is not science, but a firm belief in God that can wipe out superstition for good. Islam does it better than any other faith. This is why Sir William Muir observed in his Mohamed and Islam (1895): "*There can be no question but that, with its pure monotheism, and a code founded in the main on justice and humanity, Islam succeeds in raising to a higher level races sunk in idolatry and fetishism*".

28th Night

Johnny: Salams Sheikh. Thanks for your talk on superstitions, and yes I agree, it's very easy for superstitions to take root in our minds. I guess at the end of the day it creates more misery than the happiness people try to achieve by believing in them. So to my next question:

How does Islam ensure happiness?

The Janissary: Islam ensures happiness in many ways. It ensures happiness through its stress on submitting to the Will of the One True God, through its call to be thankful to the Creator for all those countless little mercies He has given us, through the middle path it tells us to take and avoid the extremes of asceticism and over-indulgence, through the direction it gives us as a whole way of life from cradle to grave and through its promise of an afterlife that must surely come.

At the same time, the purpose of our earthly existence is not the pursuit of happiness in itself. Men who have lost sight of this fact live for the moment, grounded in a philosophy of life peculiar to themselves: *Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we shall die.* Others think that the purpose of life is to amass as much fame and fortune as possible, little knowing that they can be doors to pain rather than pleasure as seen from the high number of celebrity suicides. Little do they realize that the true purpose of life is not any of this, but to earn the good pleasure of God. It is to Serve God and to do His Will on earth and vindicate the Trust He has placed in us as his vicegerents on earth.

If it were indeed the pursuit of worldly happiness, that would mean we created ourselves for this purpose, but this is not so. We know this well and what this means is that we were created for another purpose, to earn God's Pleasure by submitting our wills to Him willingly. When we lose sight of the true purpose of life, our existence becomes meaningless, reveling in fleeting moments of joy that have no real meaning.

That's not all, such an attitude creates misery. Why, because when one dines on the banquet of life with gay abandon, one necessarily has to pay the price for the gluttony. Every orgy has its flatulence just as liquor has its intoxication. However sumptuous food you indulge in or music you delight in, the feeling is fleeting. It later turns to boredom or disgust if you have a continuous overdose. But not so prayer. Why, because man was primarily created for the purpose of Divine worship, not worldly enjoyments.

Like it or not, religion is a psychological necessity for human existence and even psychologists are agreed on this. It gives believers a spiritual security the godless do not enjoy. Researchers today tell us that religion gives man a greater sense of what they call 'sustained happiness'than any other social activity such as playing sports or joining a club.

Yes, religion gives us lifelong happiness. It gives us a groundedness in this otherwise confusing life of ours, it gives us meaning in this otherwise empty life of ours. Call it what you will, a beacon of light guiding us to safer ground across storm-tossed seas, a cooling oasis in a hot desert or a warm hearth in a cold, wintry night, wherever one be, whatever the situation, faith in God gives us hope undying. It is the formula for lifelong happiness. It gives us wings in the flight to eternity!

Man needs a God for his innermost soul to speak to, to find solace in a higher power in his moments of solitude and to be thankful in his moments of joy. Even atheists feel a need for a higher power to comfort them in times of despair and despondency. If not, they feel an emptiness so deep and disquieting that they throw their hands in despair, as if not knowing where to look to. That is the nature of man.

His inner self longs for the support of a Higher Being, a God who watches over him and cherishes him.

This is something even the theory of evolution cannot explain. Why, because if we are to believe in evolution, man's trust in God will prove to be counter-productive, leaving one's survival to a higher being who does not exist. What evolutionary theory does is that it kills all hope in man; take this hope away and there is nothing more to look forward to; no God to appeal to for help and no one to cry out for succour; Man is a mere product of evolution in a battlefield where only the fit survive. It must be a cruel world out there for these atheists who cannot even explain how the manifold blessings of civilization could be the gift of this law of the jungle called the "survival of the fittest".

This is where religion comes in, to fill that deep void, that spiritual vacuum the godless encounter in their day to day lives. Why, because man draws strength from the fact that a Higher being is ever watching over him and his needs. This God consciousness, this idea that God is ever watching over him, gives man an inestimable sense of happiness. Who else to look to in times of hopelessness but God, your only handhold, your best of helpers who alone can help you when all else fails, who alone can give you what you have lost and heal your broken heart, who alone understands your feelings like no other and knows of every single teardrop that has fallen down your cheeks.

So by believing and submitting to God, man subsumes his will to that of the Divine and the guidance that comes with it, achieving an equilibrium between his physical nature and spiritual state.

All creation is in a sense Muslim because it submits to God's will:

All creatures in the heavens and on earth have, willing or unwilling, bowed to His Will, and to Him shall they all be brought back
(Family Imraan:83)

But what happens when a person becomes a Muslim is that he or she orders his or her life in accordance with the universal law of submission to God, bringing about an alignment between the natural submission and conscious submission, making such a one higher than the rest of creation. Such a one aligns himself or herself totally with God's natural order and as a result achieves harmony with God and His Creation at its highest level. The peace so achieved percolates to all levels of the human experience, the physical and the spiritual. When one embraces such a God-conscious way of life, his or her purpose extends beyond merely enjoying worldly pleasures. This is the basis on which the concept of true happiness in Islam rests. The Qur'an brought out this truth over a thousand years ago when it told us:

And keep thy soul content with those who call on their Lord morning and evening, seeking His Face, and let not thine eyes pass beyond them, seeking the pomp and glitter of this world
(The Cave:28)

Thus it is through frequent remembrance of God that men find solace, getting the much desired inner peace people long for, a real peace that no money can buy. As the Qur'an says:

Verily, in the remembrance of God do hearts find rest
(The Thunder:28)

The Prophet went on to compare the remembrance of God to life itself:

The likeness of the one who remembers God and the one who does not remember God is like that of the living and the dead
(Saheeh Al Bukhari)

We remember God in a number of ways, and in countless times of the day when reflecting on his mercies and the prayers we offer him, by which means we get closer to Him. He Himself tells us:

I am as My servant presumes me to be, and I am with him when he remembers Me, so if he remembers Me to himself, I remember him to Myself, and if he remembers me amongst a company, I remember him amongst a company (of angels) greater than it, and if he draws near to Me the span of a hand I draw near to him the span of an arm, and if he draws near to Me the span of an arm, I draw near to him the span of two outstretched arms, and if he takes a step towards Me I hastily step towards him
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

When we remember Him as such He comes to love us and hates doing anything that dislikes us. He Himself tells us of those who attain his love through prayer:

And when I love him, I become the ears that he hears with; I become the eyes he sees with, I become the hands that he holds with. I become the feet that he walks with. When he asks anything from me, I immediately grant it to him. When he seeks refuge in Me, I safeguard him. I never hesitate about anything as I do in taking the life of a believing servant. He dislikes death and I do not like anything he dislikes
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

Man needs a purpose to live for and there can be no better purpose than to live for the higher power that made it all possible; to vindicate yourself before God as a humble creature of His and to surrender yourself to that Supreme Will is what your soul really yearns for, that is the ultimate purpose of our earthly existence, making nobles of the meanest of mortals. You may serve your king, and you may serve your country, but to serve your God exceeds all this. Nothing can make you happier than seeking the pleasure of God, which is why the Qur'an calls it the 'supreme success':
God has promised the believers -men and women, – Gardens under which rivers flow to dwell therein forever, and beautiful mansions in Gardens of Eden. But the greatest bliss (happiness) is the Good Pleasure of God. That is the supreme success
(The Repentance:71- 72)

The pleasure you derive from earning the good pleasure of God is boundless, this feeling that your Creator and Cherisher takes cognizance of all that you do, in public and private, and rewards you accordingly. We achieve the Peace of God when we resign ourselves to our lot with humility knowing very well that God has so willed it for us for our good. Who else to look towards in one's moments of despair, even when your whole world seems to fall apart. The good Muslim knows this well as his

Prophet did when he pleaded to God after he was set upon by a mob in the walled town of Taif in the early years of his mission:

If Thou art not angry with me, I care not. Thy Favour is more wide for me. I take refuge in the light of Thy Countenance by which the darkness is illumined, and the things of this world and the next are rightly ordered.

In like manner did David sing when he was in the wilderness of Judah:

O God, You are my God, for You I long! For you my body yearns, for you my soul thirsts. Like a land parched, lifeless and without water. Your love is better than life (Psalm 63:2-4)

This is how the Prophets earned the Peace of God, by being ever so thankful to Him for His Blessings. Similarly, we achieve peace with God and with ourselves when we thank Him for the little mercies He has given us, even as much as seeing a smile on the face of a child, smelling the sweet fragrance of a flower or feeling the tingling sensation of the warmth of the sun on your skin. Yes, man needs somebody to thank for all the blessings he has, and who else to thank but the maker of it all. Who else to thank, but God who is with us at all times, guiding us with His Light and enveloping us with his Mercy.

The Prophets of old did not stop at preaching to their people to believe and worship the One true God, but also reminded them of God's Favours to them. Prophet Muhammad told his followers:

This world is green and beautiful and God has appointed you his stewards over it (Saheeh Muslim)

In the Qur'an we read of the Prophet Hood telling his people, the Aad:

Call in remembrance that He made you inheritors after the people of Noah, and gave you a stature tall among the nations. Call in remembrance the benefits from God, so that ye may prosper (The Heights: 69)

In like manner, the Prophet Saalih told his tribe of Thamood:

And remember how He made you inheritors after the Aad people and gave you habitations in the land. Ye build for yourselves palaces and castles in plains, and carve out homes in the mountains, so bring to remembrance the benefits from God, and refrain from evil and mischief on the earth (The Heights:74)

Yes indeed, God is happy to see his creatures happy and He is most Happy when they who are blessed by Him give thanks to Him and grant that all they have is from Him. Quite naturally one who has been blessed by God as such, but is not grateful to Him will only earn His Wrath:

O Children of Adam! Wear your beautiful apparel at every time and place of prayer; eat and drink, but be not prodigal. He (God) does not like prodigals

(The Heights:31)

O ye who believe! Eat of the good things that We have provided for you,
and be grateful to God, if it is Him you worship.
(The Heifer: 172)

Therefore, remember Me (God) and I will remember you, and be grateful to Me
(for My countless Favours on you) and never be ungrateful to Me
(The Heifer:152)

But bear in mind, wordlly bliss does not necessarily mean Divine Favour. Far from it, it can very well lead us on the path to arrogance and destruction. That is why God reminds us in the Qur'an :

And it is not your wealth, nor your children that bring you nearer to Us, but only
those who believe, and do righteous deeds; for such there will be reward multiplied
for what they did, and reside they will in the dwellings on high
(Sheba:37)

So just as God has blessed us, He will also test us with trials and tribulations. He Himself says so very frankly:

Be sure We shall test you with something of fear and hunger, some loss in goods
or lives or the fruits (of your toil), but give glad tidings to those who
patiently persevere, who say when afflicted with calamity:
"To God we belong and to Him is our return"
(The Heifer:156)

We see this all around us, the pain we go through when a loved one dies or when we are struck with sickness or some other calamity. God may even test us with poverty, or he may test us with wealth, why because wealth can corrupt us and out us on a trajectory to the hellfire. As the Prophet said:

Be happy, and hope for what will please you. By God, I am not afraid that you will
be poor, but I fear that worldly wealth will be bestowed upon you as it was bestowed
upon those who lived before you. So you will compete amongst yourselves for it,
as they competed for it and it will destroy you as it did them
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

On the other hand, when poverty or disease strikes us, we may come to rely on God more than ever before. He becomes our only handhold in these times of trial, fragile as we are, and so we become ever closer to him. This does us good in His Sight. He becomes pleased with us for depending on Him and praying to Him and bearing what he has in store for us with patience till the trial is over or death takes us back to Him. This is why God says:

And it may be that you dislike a thing which is good for you and that you
like a thing which is bad for you. God knows but you know not
(The Heifer:216)

Echoing these sentiments, His Prophet said:

If God wants to do good to somebody, He afflicts him with trials
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

Thus it is well for man to be humble in times of prosperity and patient in times of adversity, knowing very well that it is all a trial from our Creator and Cherisher. Nothing in this universe happens without His leave. No disease afflicts one or misfortune visits one but by his leave. When we are visited by these trials, we must always bear in mind that what God does, He does for our good, for reasons that are at times beyond our comprehension. Whether or not we are able to grasp what is good in it, the good is there and we accept it as such. But always bear in mind that God, in His infinite wisdom and mercy desires only what is best for us, to test us, so as to grant us the eternal bliss of Paradise. To be steadfast in one's belief in God is what ennobles us in His Sight. As the Prophet said:

The example of a believer is that of a fresh tender plant; from whatever direction the wind comes, it bends it, but when the wind becomes quiet, it becomes straight again. Similarly, a believer is afflicted with calamities. And a wicked evil-doer is like a pine tree which keeps hard and straight till God cuts it down when He wishes
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

One has only to look at God's Favourites, His Prophets to whom He has promised the highest stations in paradise. Who suffered from the world's injustices more than they. Take Job who is held out as an epitome of patience in both the Bible and the Qur'an:

And remember Job, when he cried to his Lord: "Verily, distress has seized me, and You are the Most Merciful of all those who show mercy.". We answered his call, and We removed the distress on him, and We restored his family to him, and the like thereof along with them as a Mercy from Ourselves and a Reminder for all those who serve Us.
(The Prophets: 83-84)

But at the same time, God does not test us with unbearable burdens. He tests us only with what we can bear, for He Himself assures us:

On no soul do We place a burden greater than it can bear
(The Believers: 62)

And as if that were not enough, God assures us that whatever trial he tests us with, will clear the path to paradise for us, even something as trivial as a fever. All such adversities contain in it the seeds of blessings, cleansing the soul as the furnace does the dross of iron to purify it. It once happened that the Prophet visited Umm Saib while she was sighing. He asked: "'*What is wrong with you?*" "*The fever*"' she replied, "*May God debase it!*" The Prophet said: "*Gently! Do not curse it. It removes the errors of the believer as the bellows remove the dross of iron*"' (Adab al Mufrad). On another occasion, a companion named Abdullah visited the Prophet when he was suffering from high fever. He said: "*No Muslim is afflicted with any harm but that God removes*

his/her sins as the leaves of a tree fall down"(Saheeh Al-Bukhari). He also said: "*No misfortune or disease befalls a Muslim, no worry or grief or harm or distress – not even a thorn that pricks him – but God will expiate for some of his sins because of that*" (Saheeh Al-Bukhari). Indeed even the death of a loved one is a trial that could enable one to enter paradise, for did not the Prophet tell a group of women: "'*There is no woman among you who has three children die, resigning them to God, who will not enter the Garden*" A woman asked: "*And if it is two?*" He replied: "*And if it is two*'"(Adab al Mufrad).

So always remember, if God closes a window in this material life of ours, He will open us a door to the heavens, to a beautiful garden we can not imagine even in our wildest dreams, to be with our loved ones and enjoy the pleasures this short life could not give us. Thus Islam gives us happiness in times of trial when we most need it to banish the sadness in our lives that overtakes us now and then. Life is after all not a roller coaster ride. We have our ups and downs and no person on this wide world can ever say he truly lived a happy life every single day of his life.

There are so many things in this worldly life that are beyond our control and it is faith that helps us accept it as such. Being born black in a world that favours white people or poor in a world that favours the rich is not at all our choice. The modern world leaves us to the mercy of the elements to take its toll on those so disadvantaged, but not God. He tells us that it was He who created us as such for reasons best known to Him. When we accept it as such, we achieve peace of mind, that perfect inner peace knowing that all those things that are beyond our control are part of God's destiny which he has destined for our own good.

Thus when we look upon this world for what it really is, we become content with our lot and become at ease with the rest of society, even when disease strikes us or death is about to overtake us. When one submerges one's worries and problems into this larger picture of a better world God promises us, it all fades into oblivion.

In a lovely parable God compares the life of this world to a crop that flourishes after rainfall, only to wither over time:

Know ye that the life of this world is but play and amusement, pomp and mutual boasting and multiplying among yourselves riches and children. The similitude here is how the rain and the growth it brings forth delight the tillers, soon it withers and you will see it grow yellow, then it becomes dry and crumbles away. But in the Hereafter is a Penalty severe (for the evil doers) and Forgiveness from God and His Good Pleasure (for the doers of good). And what is the life of this world, but goods and things of deception?
(The Iron: 20)

Man's lifespan on earth, after all, is a very short one. In this life you are born with a death sentence because you must surely die. It hangs over us like a damocles sword with the angel of death ever ready to take our lives at God's bidding. The question is when and how? Indeed, a lifespan of even a hundred years is really not much if you really stop to think about it, given that a year is only 365 days. That's how short life is, and man in his folly craves for power, wealth and other worldly pleasures as if he's going to enjoy them forever. He toils and suffers and even risks his life lusting after these fleeting pleasures, only to ask himself at the end of his days whether it was really worth it after all. The truth is nothing in the world is ever stable or permanent. Its all ebb and flow and that's the way we go. But we humans often get so lost in the allure of the world that we hardly stop to think of the perishable nature

of our existence. God reminds us again and again of the ephemeral nature of our worldly existence in the Qur'an:

What is with you must vanish: what is with God will endure
(The Bee:96)

All on the earth shall pass away, there abides but the Face
of Your Lord resplendent with Majesty
(The Most Merciful:26-27)

Yes, those who make the world their God can never find happiness. How can they find happiness in something so fickle and fleeting as this world? Whether we like it or not impermanance is a fact of this world, so that at the end of the day, it's more like a long phantom play. Which one of us is not subject to inexorable Time that makes our tomorrows our yesterdays, driving every moment of our existence to an end that must surely come. It takes its toll in this worldly life so that in less than three score years one's youthful bloom turns into a hoary head. The bloom that once was turns into a withered stalk and this we see everywhere in the world. Life, after all is fleeting like a whirling wheel; blossoms decay, people die and palaces crumble. Such is the nature of this transitory world. The body will age and rot and decay. Only our soul will survive to move on with its account of deeds. So don't deceive yourself. Death will find you anyway. We all have to go sooner or later. It's not a question of 'if I die', just a question of 'when I die'.

Why, because life on earth is a gift you receive from God so that you could do good in each and every moment of your existence to benefit yourself in the hereafter like an investment yielding far-reaching dividends. The knowledge that you can earn God's Pleasure by choosing good over evil and be rewarded for it in the hereafter with eternal life assures you a place in the heavens unlike this fleeting worldy existence. It gives you wings in the flight to eternity. Thus belief in God and the hereafter He has promised, expands your lifespan while unbelief only cuts it short.

By its promise of an afterlife, Islam transforms the spectre of death into an object of desire much like a young man or woman anxiously awaiting his or her wedding night, only that the night of death is more eagerly anticipated as it is the portal to eternal life. Why abhor death when it is only a tunnel, a passageway to a better life? The more you beautify your life with good deeds, the more the prospect of inevitable death becomes bearable, nay even alluring, in anticipation of the afterlife to come. This world after all is so very fickle. It turns its back on us and leaves us while the faithful afterlife awaits us with open arms.

The peace of mind you get from believing in God and the life to come also makes you happy, and it makes you happy for a lifetime, While in the West you find many people, and especially women losing their natural beauty as they age, weighed down not just by gravity, but by their noxious selfish souls, you will find the opposite true among Muslims who age with grace, who as they age, have a certain beauty about them, an inner peace that even shows in their outer selves. We call it *noor* 'light'.

This belief in the hereafter God has promised gives man hope- hope that a better life awaits him. It opens up vistas which this torturous earthly life just cannot give him, why because the world was created by God only as a foretaste of the things to come. The sooner we realize this the better. We see flowering gardens and we picture how paradise would look like; we see the scorching fire and imagine what hell will be like. God says of that day:

Theirs are Gardens beneath which rivers flow- their eternal home. God is well pleased with them, and they with God. That is the Great salvation
(The Repast:119)

Yes, Islam invites you to life eternal, to exchange your love of this world for the love of the hereafter. Would you not happily exchange life for death, youth for old age, health for sickness, grass for a rose garden or a clay pot for a golden goblet? This is exactly what the hereafter offers you, if only you could earn it.

Religion also gives direction to the individual and no religion does this better than Islam, which is an entire way of life from cradle to grave. It is the Divine Blueprint for living our lives. Why, because God best knows the nature of man as it was He who created him, and so it is in the fitness of things that His Way for us should suit human nature. Islam is that way, the only religion suited to human nature. Yeah, it were as if man had been moulded in accordance with it.

This is seen in the way Islam beautifully blends the temporal and the spiritual into a harmonious whole, combining the best of both to ensure that we humans live happy satisfying lives without losing our inherent spirituality. Islam speaks of a middle path, free from both the extremes of excessive religious zeal to the point of celibacy and excessive indulgence to the point of promiscuity. It strikes that delicate balance so essential for human wellbeing, neither demanding that we live a life of asceticism nor condoning over indulgence. What it requires is that we balance our lives in accordance with the nature God created us with.

For example, Islam does not allow promiscuity as it leads to faithlessness and the collapse of morality in our spiritual life and venereal disease and unwanted pregnancies in our material life. By limiting sexual activity within the bounds of marriage, Islam preserves the family and human continuity. If not for marriage could one bring up good and healthy offspring? Thus sex is not sinful so long as it is within the confines of lawful wedlock, in which case it is considered a blessing and not a sin. Sexual desire entices humans to procreate, ensuring the survival of the human race. Further, sexual pleasure is a foretaste of the delights of paradise which can only be achieved by pleasing God.

At the same time Islam does not approve of celibacy, as it is not suited to human nature. Man ought not to suppress his inherent sexual nature, but rather indulge in it to enjoy life and procreate his species. That it goes against human nature to be celibate is seen from the fact that it leads to an increased incidence of prostrate cancer in men and causes untold frustrations that take some terrible forms. Take the Catholic church's ban on priests from marrying. It attracted pederasts of the worst order. Its ban on nuns from marrying robbed them of their right to sexual fulfillment and deprived humanity of being mothered by some really pious women.

When we compare the peace Islam holds out to those who submit to it, with that single-minded focus on the All encompassing Will and Mercy of God, with notions of human suffering in other faiths, here you will find that difference that truly makes it stand out from the rest. Islam does not say *don't enjoy this world*, it does not call for the suppression of bodily desires to achieve spirituality such as we find in other faiths. Rather God's Blessings are to be enjoyed, though not abused:

Say: who has forbidden the beautiful things God has produced for His Servants, and the things clean and pure, for sustenance?
(The Heights:32).

God asked the Prophet when he decided to abstain from honey in deference to his wives wishes:

Why do you forbid for yourself that which God has made lawful for you?
(Prohibition:1)

He further says after speaking well of the followers of Christ

But We did not command monasticism. Rather they invented it
for themselves to please God with it
(Iron:27)

Our Prophet also made it very clear that celibacy and renunciation of the world can have no place in Islam:

There is no monasticism in Islam
(Aboo Dawood)

Religion is very easy and whoever overburdens himself in his religion will not be able to continue that way. So you should not be extremists
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

This religion is strong and well-established, so enter into it deeply yet do so gently. And do not cause the worship of your Lord to become hateful to you. For the one who traverses it harshly will not reach his goal
(Baihaqi)

It once happened that three men came to the Prophet. The first said, "*I will fast everyday and never eat during the day again*." The second declared "*I will remain celibate to worship God for the rest of my life*" And the third proclaimed, "*I will pray all night every night and never sleep again* "The Prophet was not impressed with their zeal. He told them:

I am the Prophet of God, and I eat and fast, I also marry and sleep at night. Whoever does not follow my path is not one of my followers
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

This attitude is in stark contrast to the punishing other worldliness of other faiths. Take Christianity, which held that due to the original sin of our first parents man's lot is one of endless suffering in this world, that man's body is the playground of Satan and that the material world Adam fell to as a result of his sin is essentially Satanic.

To obtain salvation therefore man has to turn away from worldly happiness, from carnal desires, from the pleasures of the flesh, towards the world of spirit. This idea was neatly captured by St. Augustine when he summed it all up in *The City of God*, when he declared that because of Adam and Eve's transgression in the Garden of Eden, true happiness was "*unattainable in our present life*.".

This naturally brought about a dichotomy between the material and the spiritual, the material as wholly evil and the spiritual as wholly good. This is why you get Christian priests who even consider enjoying a meal a sin, so that what they do is just gobble it all up by shoveling it down their throats in spite of the toll it takes on their health.

The oriental faiths of Hinduism and Buddhism took it still further by holding that your lot in this existence is determined by what you did in a previous life, adding insult to injury. By doing this, it justified the caste system and other inequalities perpetrated by man against man and even came to look upon helpless persons like widows and blind people as those who deserved their lot, suffering because of a sin or sins they had committed in a previous existence.

Atheism made it still worse, for it gave absolutely no hope at all to the deprived and downtrodden, but rather trampled them harder with its harsh law of the jungle it called survival of the fittest borrowed from evolutionary theory. It sought to overthrow God, installing in His place what it called 'Scientific Reason'. In the process it reduced man to the status of an animal, a descendant of the ape. Consider what Charles Darwin had to say about his origins: "*We must acknowledge, as it seems to me, that man, with all his noble qualities, still bears in his bodily frame the indelible stamp of his lowly origin*". So I ask, what good has this 'God' of the New Age done to restore man's dignity? Nay nothing. It has not even been able to help more materially well off humans lead happier lives. Why, because happiness is subjective and cannot be measured in material terms. Is it not a fact that some of the wealthiest people in the West lead utterly miserable lives, so miserable that they end up leaving all their fortunes to their pet pooches?

Tell me, if you're a good man, will not helping your fellow man or woman be happy even with as much as parting with a penny give you greater happiness, than say, sitting comfortably in your plush sofa back home. Yes, seeing that smile on the face of that child you had just fed or that poor widow you had helped will give you more happiness than any worldly pleasure. Why, because God has made it so. This is something that the devil that comes in the form of evolution cannot himself explain because it is beyond him to do so. That's why the Prophet reminded us: "*Do not think little of any good deed, even if it is just greeting your brother with a cheerful smile*" (Saheeh Muslim).

Has not modern science based on atheism proven to be a very fickle master, changing its tune every now and then, denying things it once held to be true and affirming things it once denied; has it not cast off the mantle of morality and promoted the idea that only the fittest survive, showing a callous disregard for the weaker sections of society and the rest of creation. The worshippers of this ever so fickle 'god' are themselves unstable like their master, obsessed only with the material side of life and as such are always in a state of mental flux, contending between this and that to make sense of their world. How indeed, can they have peace of mind when their god is himself so unstable?

Little wonder many people today, especially in the West are a confused lot. Some seek the help of shrinks while others look to the oriental faiths for spiritual enlightenment to enrich their impoverished souls. The reason is simple, man needs God. A purely materialistic people can never find true happiness. Fame or fortune can never bring happiness. If at all, it only adds to one's misery. Take the high number of celebrity suicides in the West, certainly a higher figure than that of the ordinary man or woman on the street.

Yet, there is one teaching of Islam that brings it closer to Christianity than any other, and that is cultivating a sense of detachment from the world. By bringing man closer to God, Islam helps him cultivate a detached attitude to the world. You may indulge, but at the same time stay detached as much as possible from worldly attachments because nothing in this worldly life is really permanent. People die, love is lost and wealth diminishes by the day. That is why the Prophet said:

What has this world to do with me? My relationship to this world is like that of a traveler who travels on a summer day, sleeps under the shadow of a tree, then wakes up and goes his way
(Tirmidhi)

He also enjoined on his followers:

Live in this world as if you were a stranger or traveler!
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

Why, because all is not lost because you lose something in this world. There is another better and brighter world awaiting us out there and that's what really matters. But the godless know of no such life. That is why you will often find them to be such selfish people, clinging on to life like a limpet even in their most advanced years, seeking to derive the maximum pleasure during their short sojourn on earth even at the expense of others. However much of this world they have will not suffice. Why, because the lust for material things is like sea water; the more they drink of it, the more they thirst for it until it sucks them dry to dehydrate and kill them. Control your desires and you master yourself; let loose your passions and you are enslaved by them

When such people become slaves of their passions and possessions you can imagine what the state of his or her mind is and what that kind of mindset bodes for the rest of the world. This world is a good slave but a terrible master and we see this all around us with each one trying to maximize his profit at the expense of the rest of creation, in a world with limited resources. War it is said is the external manifestation of the inner conflict within you. How true, people squabble over possessions and nations fight wars for nothing but to grow at the expense of others and deprive them of what is rightfully theirs. But even if you were to be given all the wealth in this world, you will not be happy, why because there is more to our existence than this fleeting worldly life. Thus it is not attachment to the world that can give you happiness, but rather detachment. Be content with what you have. As the Prophet very wisely observed:

The best richness is the richness of the soul
(Saheeh Al Bukhari)

What he meant by this was that *richness is not the abundance of wealth but rather self-contentment*. To be happy in life is to count your blessings and not wallow in your shortcomings. Thus Islam is liberation, the ultimate liberation. It is liberation from your own self and all that enslaves you, like your lust for life and worldly possessions. By cultivating detachment from material possessions, Islam helps people not only find happiness, but also become more likely to give, giving happiness to others as well. Like you, it also liberates your fellow men and women so that you all think as one. You all work for the common good united in a belief in a common God who only desires what is good for you. When you win the peace of God in this way you tend to become selfless, giving freely of your wealth to deserving people instead of amassing it in a race to outdo others.

As the Prophet said:

The (example of) believers (in their mutual love, care and concern) is like a single person: if his eye complains of pain his whole body complains of pain, and if his head complains of pain his whole body complains of pain
(Saheeh Muslim)

After all was it not Islam that turned worldly warlike tribes like the Turks into some of the noblest and gentlest nations the world had ever seen. Was it not Islam that infused in the survivors of the Mongol invasions that indomitable spirit to conquer the souls of the very conquerors, to such an extent that they would soon be some of its most ardent champions, even going on to conquer India for Islam. How much more violent was the Mongol onslaught against Islamdom than Rome at the hands of the Goths and Huns. And yet Rome fell with her religion, but Islamdom thrived well afterwards, growing from strength to strength by means of the very offspring of those who had oppressed the Muslims, like the Moghuls of India.

Was it not Islam that produced men like the Martyrs of Yarmuk. That was a battle in the early days of Islam where the Muslims lost several godly souls. Hudhaifah, a companion of the Prophet was searching the battlefield for survivors when he saw his cousin Harith in a pool of blood. he rushed to give him some water, but when he was taking the water, he heard the voice of Ikrimah crying out "*Water, a drop of water for the sake of God!*". Harith pointed his eyes to Ikrimah and withdrew his hand from the water, signifying that his cousin should take the water to him. But when he reached him, this time he heard the voice of iyash "*Water, please, water!*". Ikrimah did not accept the water and pointed towards Iyash. Hudhaifa rushed to Iyash, but he did not have time to drink the water before he gave up his life. He then rushed back to take the water to Ikrimah, but he too was dead by that time. He ran back to Harith, but he too had passed away. Here were three warriors, about to become martyrs who gave up the little water they were offered, so that others could drink of it.

In more modern times, we have the example of popular British Singer Cat Stevens who sang such beautiful songs like *Morning has Broken* and who used to earn over 100,000 Dollars a night. Ever since he became Muslim and took on the name of Yusuf Islam, he found true happiness by helping others with the wealth God had bestowed him with.You will find countless examples like this in the Muslim world where people find happiness by doing good to their fellow men and women for the Sake of God.

Who else to think of but God to police your own soul, which is vital not only for your own good, but for the good of society as a whole? This makes for a healthy, law abiding society that brooks no Jekyll and Hyde type characters who are good by day and evil by night. As the Qur'an reminds us again and again:

He knows you well when He brings you out of the earth,
and when ye are hidden in your mother's wombs
(The Star:32)

And He knows what is on the land and in the sea. Not a leaf falls but that He knows it. And no grain is there within the darkness of the earth and no moist or dry (thing) but that is (written) in a clear record
(The Cattle: 59)

The fear of God helps one police one's soul, even in the absence of others. A God conscious man or woman is therefore less likely to sin or commit crimes and even if he or she does, is quick to repent. There have been numerous instances of people desisting from unfair actions due to the fear of God throughout the history of Islam, a few of which have come down to us because of the importance of these characters.

Just to give one example. It happened one night that Caliph Umar as was his practice was strolling from quarter to quarter in disguise to see how his people were faring. While passing by a small house, he heard some whisperings which caught his sharp ear. A mother was telling her daughter that the amount of milk fetched by her for sale that day was very little and that she ought to mix the milk with water. The girl replied: "*You adulterated milk, when you were not a Muslim. Now that we are Muslims, we cannot adulterate milk*." The mother rejoined that Islam did not prohibit adulterating milk. Her daughter replied: "*Have you forgotten the Caliph's order? He orders that milk should not be adulterated*." The mother replied, "*But the Caliph has forgotten us. We are so poor, what else should we do but adulterate milk in order win bread?*" The daughter said "*Such bread would not be lawful, and as a Muslim I would not do anything which is against the orders of the Caliph, and whereby other Muslims are deceived*."

The mother said: "*But there is neither the Caliph nor any of his officers here to see what we do. Daughter you are still a child. Go to bed now and tomorrow I will myself mix the milk with water for you*." The girl refused to have anything to do with her mother's plan saying: "*You may escape the notice of the Caliph and his officers, but how can we escape the notice of God and our own conscience*?"

The Caliph, hearing this resolved that such a girl should be amply rewarded and summoned the daughter and the mother to his court. Turning to the girl the Caliph said, "*Islam needs daughters like you and as a Caliph of Islam it devolves on me to reward you by owning you as a daughter*." He then called his sons, and addressing them said: "*Here is a gem of a girl who will make a great mother. I desire that one of you should take this girl as wife. I know of no better bride than this girl of sterling character. In matters of wedlock, it should be the character and not the stature in life that should count*." The Caliph's third son Asim yet unmarried offered to marry the pretty milkmaid and she and her mother readily consented to the offer after which she was happily married to the Caliph's son.

This is the kind of world Islam seeks to create, so that the happiness of everyone is assured. All are equal before God and have an equal right to pursue happiness as a large extended family living under the shade of God. So the closer we are to God, the closer we are to each other. What more beautiful ideal than this.

You only have to look at the recent past to see the ills that ail the world when men discarded the Divine Law for his own, resulting in selfishness, inequalities and wars that have taken a greater toll than any fought in the name of religion. Take the various godless 'isms' of the modern age such as Communism, Nazism and other petty nationalisms that have created so much misery all over the world, despite their false promises of taking their adherents to a higher standard. They were flawed due to human weaknesses arising out of a lack of belief in God so that one's self becames one's God and maximizing one's pleasure became the sole purpose of life.

Take for example the horror of the French Revolution, that reign of terror with its guillotines that lopped off the heads of tens of thousands of innocents, mostly peasants or the urban poor for whom it was supposed to have been fought, but soon victimized them as well, killing them for trivial things like hoarding or not declaring goods or evading the draft or desertion, not to mention the innocent members of the

upper classes who played no part in the excesses of the old regime and even those poor nuns who were all killed for simply refusing to give up their vows. Take the killing fields of Cambodia where the Khmer Rouge's attempt to turn their country into a classless society resulted in mass slavery with the entire population being forced to work as farmers in agricultural communes, where simple things like picking wild fruit or berries was seen as 'private enterprise' punishable by death, where anybody who happened to be intelligent such as teachers or doctors or even ordinary folk showing stereotypical signs of high intellect like wearing glasses were systematically murdered, where family members could be put to death for communicating with each other, where even unmarried people could be killed for having sex and where those who practiced any form of religion were summarily executed, all in all over a million needlessly killed to make the communist revolution a reality.

Yes, man, without God, is no more than an animal, nay lower, because even animals think of the larger good at times, but Godless man acts according to his whims and fancies, spurred on by the devil, often at the expense of the rest of creation. Thus any man-made theory of human happiness that may at first sight seem 'noble' is bound to fail as a result of this tendency that Satan can easily manipulate in the hearts of the godless. George Orwell brought this out very well in satire on communism 'Animal Farm' when he summed it all up: 'All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others'. The luxurious lifestyles of the communist leaders before the Iron Wall came crumbling down is ample testimony to this tendency of the godless who lived in the lap of luxury while the masses suffered poverty and privation. They proved themselves to be worse than even the despotic emperors of old, indulging in the mass killings like Stalin or Mao or Pol Pot did. Unbridled power in the hands of men without any accountability to God can be frightening and it is only religion that can counter this tendency by calling each and every one of us to account.

It happened one day that some companions of the Prophet returned to Medina from a war. The Prophet told them: "*Now we are going from a small war to a big war!*". His companions asked: "*O Messenger of God! Is there a war harder than the one we just encountered?*". He shot back: "*Now we are returning to the Great War (the war against the nafs or ego)*" (Tarikh Baghdad)

It is only faith that can ensure the happiness of one and all, changing our insides so that it reflects in our outside lives, helping us achieve that inner peace we so desire, so that it finds expression in each and every aspect of our lives and in our relations with the larger world. It is only faith than can truly bond us, one to the other, to move towards that cherished goal of peace with oneself, with one's fellow men, and most of all Peace with God Himself. No faith does this better than Islam.

If it's any measure of happiness, you only have to look at the Muslim's desire to live life come what may till God chooses to take it away; you have only to look at the very low number of suicides in the Muslim world, so low that it hardly counts, compared to the high suicide rates in the West where unhappy souls continue to take their lives at a shocking rate. You have only to look at the tenacity of Muslims when it comes to their faith. Never did they desert it the way Europeans did Christianity after the French revolution when the threat of force was removed. Even in secular Muslim countries you will hardly find a Muslim deserting the faith. He keeps the faith at all costs. Why, because at the end of the day it gives him happiness, it gives him joy, it gives him life. It is bliss incomparable. Ask any Muslim and he'll tell you so!

29th Night

Johnny: Salams Sheikh. Thanks for last night. No doubt you Muslims are a happy people. I have seen this in the faces of your elders and in the keenness of your youth to keep the faith. There must be something in Islam that makes you happy. So now to my next question, which is quite a hard one for me to understand:

Why do Muslims fast for an entire month?

The Janissary: Fasting in the Holy Month of Ramadan is incumbent on every Muslim man and woman, and by this I mean every male and female who has reached the age of puberty. The fast involves keeping away from food, drink and sexual relations from dawn to dusk during the entire lunar month of Ramaḍan. All this at a time when we have all the food and drink in the world and yet we willfully abstain from them for the sake of God. Call it our little sacrifice for God if you will!

The primary purpose of this moon-long fast is to achieve piety or consciousness of God. Why, because God Himself tells us:

O ye who believe, fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you,that you may become pious (The Heifer:183)

So what we understand from this is that fasting, like many other duties in Islam, was universally practiced in the days before Islam. When you read the Bible you will realize that the ancient Hebrews observed an annual fasting on the day of atonement in commemoration of Moses' descent from Mount Sinai after spending forty days of fasting in order to receive revelation. The Jews to this day fast on Yom Kippur or the Day of Atonement from sunset to sundown. Says the Bible of Moses:

And he was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights; he did neither eat bread, nor drink water. And he wrote upon the tables the words of the covenant, the ten commandments (Exodus 34:28)

Likewise Jesus fasted forty days in the desert before he began his mission:

When he (Jesus) had fasted 40 days and 40 nights he was afterward hungered (Matthew 4:2)

That Jesus expected his followers to fast is seen from his saying:

Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly (Matthew 6:16-18)

Jesus is saying to his disciples *when ye fast*. He is not saying *if ye fast.* This is why the traditional Christian churches like the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches observe a sort of fast where one abstains from meat and milk, though this does not come anywhere near the total fasts observed by Jesus which not Christians but Muslims follow to the word.

While folk of other faiths may at their own urge, whim and fancy attempt to achieve spirituality through such self-denial, we Muslims are obliged to observe it as a community without exception, all for a prescribed period in unison so that none can shirk this duty easily. It gets all the more recognition because everybody fasts and all at the same time. Thus fasting exemplifies the unity of the faithful since it is a time when the entire community, male and female, young and old, rich and poor, fasts together. This is both its strength and its beauty.

Thus all Muslims, men and women, are obliged to fast. But there are exceptions and this Islam recognizes. Thus those who are ill or on a journey must make up for the missed number of days while those who are unable to fast are exempted, provided they feed the poor as ransom for every day missed In this manner, elderly and sick persons as well as pregnant and nursing women could seek exemption provided they feed a poor person for every day missed (Aboo Dawood). Menstruous women are not required to fast, but have to make up for the missed days later (Saheeh Muslim).

So what are the benefits of fasting, you may ask. I'll say countless like the stars in the heavens, for the blessings one earns for this little sacrifice to the Almighty is beyond compare. Why, because God Himself says of it:

All the deeds of Adam's sons are for them, except fasting which is for Me,
and I will give the reward for it
(Saheeh Bukhari)

As we read in the Qur'an, the primary purpose of fasting is to make us pious. It earns us God's Grace because we do it for His Sake and for Him alone. It compels us to reflect how helpless we really are in this world we live in, dependent on food and water for our very survival. It kindles in us a feeling of gratitude towards God, for the manifold blessings He has provided us with during this short worldly existence. The great variety of food we have is such a blessing and so often taken for granted that we think little of it in our daily lives. But deprive all of it for a time and contemplate how blessed we indeed are!

But there's more to it. Fasting arouses empathy with the poor. We can now feel how it is like to go hungry without a meal. We see people going hungry and often pay lip service to their plight, little realizing what it's really like. Fasting obliges you to undergo that experience and live it to really understand it.

Fasting also teaches us self-control, to master our nafs or selfish soul for the greater good of ourselves and the larger community. It enables us to cultivate a strong will and not succumb to our base desires so easily. The animal desire for food, drink and sex is strong in man and to control it for a while helps us establish a balance with our godly nature. When man exercises such self control, he also reaches a higher spiritual state, so distinct from other creatures that are endlessly occupied with food and drink from birth to death. While food nourishes the body, fasting nourishes the soul. By emptying our stomachs of material things, we fill our souls with love, piety and compassion.

Fasting also teaches us to make sacrifices for the larger good. Suppose you have a meal for yourself and you see a hungry man coming your way. You are faced with this predicament of not having a full meal, and yet your God-given conscience tells you cannot let the poor man starve. So what you do is share your meal with him. This is the kind of control and selflessness fasting teaches. Through it we learn to master the yearnings of our selves and not become slaves to our animal passions.

Control, after all, is the first impulse of civilization, the very foundation of human culture and the wellspring of all that is good and noble in man. By controlling oneself through fasting, one also controls the devil that flows through our veins, for as the Prophet said Satan circulates *like blood through the son of Adam*. Why, because when one eats and drinks without restraint, one becomes bouncy and haughty, thinking that worldly food alone suffices to sustain one, ignoring the spiritual food so vital for our souls. What fasting does is it starves the ego and feeds the soul. Since the blood through which devilish thoughts flow have their origins in food and drink, depriving oneself of these, narrows the passage of the flow, thus controlling the arrogance building up in man that this material world is enough for him and he needs no more. In this sense, fasting controls the devil in us!

It was in similar vein that the Prophet Isaiah declared:

"Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke?" (Isaiah 58:6)

Yes, fasting purifies the soul as the furnace does iron ore by taking away its dross. Fasting imbues one with piety, overcoming one's carnal pleasures for a more pristine blissful love of God. It gives one a clear conscience as there is no worldly authority to impose it since one can if he or she so desires keep his or her fast in public but break it in secret. Thus one keeps it as one keeps the faith, to please God, very well aware that God is ever watching over you. Can there be a better way to cultivate God consciousness than this?

Fasting is also good for your health and is even better than dieting as any good scientist will tell you. Our stomachs, like everything else in our body, needs a rest. Take your eyes, don't they need a rest after watching a long movie or some heavy reading. The same holds true of our other organs, not the least our stomachs and digestive system which is continually engaged in the task of breaking up the food we consume. The role of fasting in reducing weight is obvious. When one fasts, one naturally takes less sugars, and this results in the level of sugar in the blood falling. The body then comes to rely on getting its calories by burning sugar stored in the body. This includes glycogen which is stored in the liver as well as fats in tissues, which are decomposed and turned into the much energy needed by the body, resulting in reduced body fat while at the same time protecting muscle mass. Cholesterol levels in the blood also fall when one fasts, helping reduce the chances of heart disease or stroke.

But there's more to it. Researchers today have found evidence that prolonged fasting is beneficial to the body as it helps fight the negative effects of aging to the immune system. As you know, white blood cells protect the body from harmful disease-causing microbes, engulfing them and swallowing them whole. But as we age, these cells decline, weakening the body's immune system and making it hard for older people to fight off infection, putting them at risk even to common diseases. Fasting reverses these ill effects as it reboots the immune system by a wonderful mechanism that was only recently discovered by some researchers from California.

They found that fasting for even a couple of days drives the human body into 'survival mode' causing it to use up stored fat and sugar while at the same time prompting it to break down old, weak and damaged cells. While fasting initially lowers the body's white blood cell count, the body soon begins producing white

blood cells in greater number once feeding is resumed, in the process regenerating the body's immune system. Thus fasting cycles could literally generate a new immune system by kick-starting stem cells into producing new white blood cells, so necessary for fighting off infection. It was also found that long periods of fasting reduces the level of a hormone known as IGF-1 which is associated with aging and cancer risks. In Islam, since all Muslims are obliged to fast for a month, the entire community benefits from its health benefits, which, coupled with the spurt in activity in the post-fasting days, leads to a rejuvenation of the community as a whole.

Just as Islam requires fasting, it also permits us to enjoy our God-given provender at other times unlike some Christian monks who feel that even enjoying food is a sin and so swallow it whole without as much as chewing it in spite of the ill effects it could have on their health. This is illustrated in an interesting incident that took place in the lifetime of the Prophet. Once three men went to see him and wished to express their devotion to God. The first man said, "*I will fast everyday and never eat during the day again*." The second one said, "*I will remain celibate to worship God for the rest of my life*" And the third one proclaimed, "*I will pray all night every night and never sleep again* "The Prophet was not impressed with their zeal. He told them, "*I am the Prophet of God, and I eat and fast, I also marry and sleep at night. Whoever does not follow my path is not of my followers*" (Saheeh Al-Bukhari).

To enjoy our food and thank God for it is after all the sign of a believer. This is why you will find that in Muslim countries the month of Ramadan is a month of joy and thanksgiving, especially after the fast is broken at sundown when everyone partakes of the cheer of the season. You will see large happy families gathered together in their homes or picnicking in parks to break their fast. You will see merrymaking with happy faces everywhere and streets and shops and every nook and corner gaily adorned with brightly lit lanterns and golden and silver tinsel decorations of stars and crescents like a fairytale coming to life.

The festival that follows the moon-long fast is still grander with people in festive mood gathering in the evenings to enjoy communal meals with cookies for little children filled with nuts and coated with sugar, musical shows and other forms of entertainment including a few fireworks every now and then. And none are so happy as the little children who would be gifted special gift bags of toys and candy and money to spend time at amusement parks. In fact the children here have it better than the kids in the West celebrating Christmas.

Unlike in the West where Christmas is seen more as a guilty pleasure - which is why Oliver Cromwell and his roundheads in their puritanical fervour banned Christmas celebrations in England –Islam allows you ample scope to get into festive mood without feeling guilty about it. It happened that one day, when an over-zealous companion found some little girls singing in the Prophet's house and cried out: "*Musical instruments of Satan in the house of the Messenger of God!*", the Prophet rebuked him "*Leave them alone, Abu Bakr, every nation has a festival, and this is our festival*" (Saheeh Al-Bukhari).

What all this teaches us is that there needs to be a balance in everything we do. You need not cause harm to yourself by depriving yourself of food because you need it to live, stay well and serve God better, but at the same time, you need not indulge in it too much so that it eats into your piety and consumes your spirituality. You fast and you feast, each in its own time. This is the kind of balance Islam aims at; the golden mean through which we enjoy our best relationship with God, indulging in, and being thankful to the bounties He has blessed us with while at the same time being mindful of our obligations to He who sustains us in every moment of our lives.

30th Night

Johnny: Salams Sheikh, thanks for last night's talk. And to think that all this while I was thinking your God must be a very stern God, demanding his devotees fast an entire month, but I see now there is so much wisdom in it. Now to my next question:

Why an alms tax and what kind of relief does it give the poor?

The Janissary:

In Islam wealth is only a trust given to us during our short term on earth. The real owner of all we own is God, which makes each and every one of us only a trustee or custodian. One day we all have to account for how we spent our wealth to the real master of our possessions – God Almighty Himself. As the Qur'an says:

Believe in God and His Messenger and spend of that whereof
He has made you trustees
(Iron:7)

Since God is the Real Master of all that we own, it is only right that we spend it the way He would have us spend it. Although He gives us the freedom to use our possessions for our wellbeing and enjoyment, he demands that we reserve a portion of it as alms for the poor. Thus when we give in charity, we give to God. Charity is in a sense our sacrifice to God, not burnt offerings as was demanded of the Hebrews of old. Why because we do it for God and God alone. When we help the poor we serve God. It's simple as that!

The Holy Book stresses on the importance of charity again and again, so much so that one feels that a day ought not to pass without engaging in some form of charity:

It is not righteousness that you turn your faces towards the east or west; but it is righteousness to believe in God and the Last Day, and the Angels, and the Book and the Messengers; to spend of your substance, out of love for Him, for your kin, for orphans, for the needy, for the wayfarer, for those who ask, and for the ransom of slaves
(The Heifer:177)

Truly man was created impatient-fretful when evil touches him, and niggardly when good reaches him. Not so those devoted to prayer; those who remain steadfast in their prayer; and those in whose wealth is a recognized right for the (needy) who asks and him who is prevented (for some reason from asking)
(The Ways of Ascent:19-25)

Fear God as much as you can, listen and obey, and spend on charity for the benefit of your own souls. And those saved from the covetousness of their own souls - they are the ones that achieve prosperity
(Mutual Loss and Gain:16)

The Qur'an severely admonishes those who fail to take care of the poor, equating this act to the denial of religion itself: "*Have you not seen him who denies the faith? It is he who repulses the orphan and encourages not the feeding of the poor*" (The Neighbourly Assistance:1-3). It does not stop at this, but threatens Divine retribution

for those who hoard up wealth while assuring those who help others with their wealth of the supreme bliss of Paradise, like when it describes the Devotees of God as those who feed, for the love of God, the indigent, the orphan and the captive (saying) *"We feed you for the sake of God alone. No reward do we desire from you, nor thanks. We only fear a Day of distressful wrath from the Side of our Lord*" assuring them "*God will deliver them from the evil of that Day, and shed over them a Light of Beauty and Blissful Joy*" (Man:8-11). On the other hand, we are told that the Fire of Hell would pluck out (the evildoers) right to the skull, *inviting (all) such as turn their backs and faces (from the Right) and collect (wealth) and hide it (from use)* (The Ways of Ascent:15-18).

When we give in charity we have always to bear in mind that we give for the sake of God and He alone. A tradition related by the Prophet to his companions has it that the best charity given is that which is given in secret, so that none knows of it except God:

The angels asked, "O God! Is there anything of Thy creation stronger than rocks?" God said, "Yes; iron is stronger than rocks, for it breaketh them." The angels said, "O Lord! Is there anything of Thy creation stronger than iron?" God said, "Yes; fire is stronger than iron, for it melteth it." And the angels said, O defender! Is there anything of Thy creation stronger than fire?" God said, "Yes; water overcometh fire; it killeth it and maketh it cold." Then the angels said, "O Lord! Is there anything of Thy creation stronger than water?" God said, "Yes; wind overcometh water: it agitateth it and putteth it in motion." They said, "O our cherisher! Is there anything in Thy creation stronger than wind?" God said, "Yes, the children of Adam, giving alms; that is, those who give with their right hands and conceal if from their left, they overcome all"
(Tirmidhi)

However Islam goes further. It declares that a certain portion of one's wealth is due to the poor not as charity, but as an obligation to the poor, in other words an alms tax:

Those in whose wealth is a recognized right for the (needy) who asks and him who is prevented (for some reason from asking)
(The Ways of Ascent: 24-25)

This due share the Qur'an speaks about is the payment of the Zakat or Alms Tax which it obliges every Muslim man and woman to pay as a duty towards their less fortunate brethren. Indeed in Islam, the *Zakat* occupies a place only second in importance to the *Salat* or Prayer Service:

This is the Book whereof there is no doubt, a guidance to those who are pious, who believe in the unseen and keep up prayer and spend out of what we have bestowed upon them
(The Heifer:2-3)

The believers, both men and women, are guardians one of another; they enjoin good and forbid evil, keep up prayer, pay the Alms Tax and obey God and His Messenger
(The Repentance:71)

The Qur'an lays down that such alms are due to the poor, those in debt, for the wayfarer and for God's cause, to free captives and to win the hearts of those who have recently embraced Islam:

Alms are for the poor and the needy, and those employed in its administration, and for those whose hearts have (recently) been reconciled to the truth, for those in bondage and in debt; in the cause of God, and for the wayfarer
(The Repentence:60)

In the early days of Islam, the *Zakat* was paid to *the Baitul Maal* or Public Treasury whence it was disbursed to deserving persons and communities to uplift their lot. It was also used for the benefit of wayfarers and to free captives taken in Holy War as ordained in the Qur'an. Depending on the need, the Zakat could also be chanelled into social services like free medical treatment for the poor and welfare measures to meet the needs of weak or sick people.

In this sense, the Zakat differed from the other taxes of the time in that it was meant to tax the rich for the benefit of the poor. This was so unlike the Europe of the Middle ages where levying taxes was the prerogative of the rich who mercilessly taxed the poor, keeping them in a perpetual state of penury.

On the other hand, Islam proclaimed that the Zakat was a tax on the well-to-do for the benefit of the less fortunate sections of society. The Qur'an envisions a society where there is a continuous circulation of wealth rather than accumulation, in other words a redistribution of wealth:

What God has bestowed on His Messenger from the people of the townships, belongs to God, to His Messenger and to the kindred and the orphans, the needy and the wayfarer; in order that it may not make a circuit between the wealthy among you
(The Mustering:7)

Once the Prophet was asked by a companion: "*Has God ordered you to take Zakat from our rich people and distribute it among our poor people?*". He replied: "By *God, yes*" (Saheeh Al-Bukhari). On another occasion he said: "*When you pay your alms, you pay the rights of what you owe to the poor in your wealth*" (Tirmidhi).

In Islamdom unlike in mediaeval Europe there was no need for folk heroes like Robin Hood to emerge to champion the rights of the masses against the robber barons. Why, because the Islamic rulers were obliged to take from the rich to give the poor, not in an illegal fashion, but in a totally acceptable divinely sanctioned manner. Poverty was a fact of life in most parts of the world in those benighted times, but Islamdom made all possible efforts to alleviate or eliminate it altogether to realize the Islamic ideal of economic justice for all. It shone like a light in those days when Europe was still in a feudal state where the serfs toiled on their masters' lands only to be paid just enough to meet their daily needs, and often not even that, making them a little better than the slaves of the Roman Empire.

Let me give you just one example from the early days of Islam. One night the Caliph Umar on his usual nightly rounds in Medina to see how his people were faring, came across a woman and some children in a house. The children were crying and he espied a pot on the fireplace. When he asked the woman why the children were crying, she replied: "*Out of hunger*". Umar's eyes welled with tears when he found out that it was not soup the woman was boiling, but water with stones, so that the children would go to sleep thinking that they were going to have a meal. He

rushed to the stores where the charity was kept, personally filling a large sack with provisions and carried it upon his shoulders to the family. When his companion Aslam offered to shoulder the sack, he refused saying: "*I will carry it. I will be asked about these children in the hereafter*". He did not stop at that. He went to the house and did the cooking, blowing the fire and stirring the soup at the same time so that the smoke kissed his beard. He then personally dished out the soup to the children and stayed there until the children started to laugh and play.

Indeed, even those of other faiths were given monies for their upkeep if they could not fend for themselves. Once Umar was passing along a street when he saw an old blind beggar. "*To which community do you belong?*" asked the concerned Caliph, to which the man replied: "*I am a Jew*". Umar asked: "*And what has constrained you to the condition I see you in?*". The Jew replied: "*I have to pay the poll tax (imposed on Non-Muslims) and I am poor and old*". Hearing this, the shocked Caliph took the man by his hand and led him to his house to give him something from his own savings. He then sent word to the public treasury: "*Look after him and people like him. By God, we would never be doing justice if we eat out of his youth and desert him in his old age*" (Kitab Al Kharaj). On another occasion, while returning from Damascus, he saw some Christian lepers and ordered they be given charity and stipends to sustain themselves from the public treasury (Futuh Al Buldan, Al Baladhuri).

So you will find that the ideal welfare states emerged not in Europe or Asia, but in the Middle East, in the days of the Islamic Caliphs. For example in the reign of the Umayyad Caliph Umar Bin Abdulaziz his governors could not find enough poor folk to distribute the alms due. Why? Because there were very few poor people around. So perturbed were the governors that they asked the Caliph what was to be done with the funds the state had collected from the rich. Contrast this attitude with the Catholic Church that accumulated so much wealth through tithes collected from the ordinary public and the patronage of an oppressive royalty that it was looked upon not as a benefactor but as an exploiter of the poor as in the days of the French Revolution. It's still very much the case. Little is it known that while mother Theresa was ministering to the dying in Calcutta, the Church she served was the largest multi-national corporation in the world, holding billions of dollars, but nay, they would not even part with a little portion of it to save the people dying of starvation in front of the good lady's eyes while at the same time portraying her as some sort of saint, as if her only duty was to care for the dying, not save them, as if they were children of a 'lesser god'.

Even in the modern world, if the Zakat is collected properly and dispensed accordingly, either directly or as welfare services it could serve as the ideal tool for uplifting the poor. Zakat after all is not a small sum. It amounts to as much as one fortieth of one's capital saved and invested over a given year. This includes monetary currency in any form, precious metals, trade goods, food crops and livestock, but excludes land, houses, vehicles, furniture, clothing and machinery used by a person.

Although 2.5 percent of one's savings or invested wealth may at first impression seem a small sum, you must remember that it has to be calculated yearly and given accordingly, gradually depleting the wealth of those who do not put it to productive uses. It may thus be viewed as a mechanism against the accumulation of wealth, prompting those who possess it to put it to good use in productive ventures that are likely to create more wealth.

Zakat helps build a bond between the rich and the poor, bridging the gap between them in a manner acceptable to both. One of the biggest conflicts in human societies

throughout history has been the conflict between rich and poor which we call by the name of class struggle. Wealth has a tendency to accumulate and once acquired by some tends to work to the detriment of others unless it is checked by some social mechanism. In most societies, the rich wish to maintain the status quo and tend to look down on the poor. The poor in turn may grudge and envy the rich, especially in a situation where they cannot get out of their poverty however hard they try and hence lead miserable lives day after day. This is what is called the poverty trap, where everything seems to go against the poor, from the laws of the land to lending practices to marriage preferences. Do you find the rich marrying into the poor? Nay, hardly ever. That's the stuff fairy tales are made up of. In such a context, it is alms that bridges the gap between rich and poor, bonding one to the other like no other.

Since Zakat is an obligatory duty and given for the sake of God, the giver cannot regard his act as a favour he does for his less fortunate brethren nor is the receiver under obligation to the giver. He receives his Zakat as a right. Zakat bridges the gap between the haves and the have-nots, that is to say it mitigates the inequalities arising out of free enterprise so that the needy reach a level of sufficiency so essential for maintaining social harmony.

Besides the obligatory payment of Zakat, the Qur'an encourages believers to freely give in charity to their less fortunate fellows and warns those who hoard wealth of a terrible doom:

Spend of what We have bestowed upon you before death comes to any of you and he should say: "O my Lord! Why didst Thou not give me respite for a little while? I should then have given in charity, and I should have been among the doers of good". But to no soul will God grant respite when the time appointed has come
(The Hypocrites:10-11)

They who hoard up gold and silver and spend it not in the way of God, unto them give tidings of a grievous penalty. On the Day when it will (all) be heated in the Fire of Hell, and their foreheads and their flanks and their backs will be branded therewith (and it will be said to them): "Here is that which ye hoarded for yourselves. Now taste of what ye used to hoard"
(The Repentence: 34- 35)

The Prophet also stressed so much on the importance of charity, like when he declared:

Generosity is a tree in Paradise whose branches extend to the world. Whoever catches a branch of it, it takes him to Paradise. Miserliness, on the other hand, is a tree in Hell, whose branches are in the world. Whoever grabs it, it takes him to Hell
(Baihaqi)

He often adviced his beloved wife Ayisha:

Show compassion to the poor! Keep them near to you so that God keeps you near to Him on the Day of Judgement

Never turn away a beggar empty-handed from your door. Protect yourself from the hellfire even with half a date
(Baihaqi)

On another occasion, he remarked that there were even angels especially sent to bless those who gave alms and curse those who withheld it from the needy:

There is never a day wherein the servants (of God) get up at morn, but are visited by two angels. One of them says: "O God, give him more who spends" and the other says: "O God, bring destruction to the one who withholds"
(Saheeh Muslim)

Money not well spent becomes a curse to its owner, just as bread stored for a long time becomes mouldy and grain is devoured by vermin, so does accumulated wealth decrease in blessing. Like unused iron that gathers rust it becomes a curse to its holder. Love of wealth is like a thief- a thief who steals the rights of the poor over your wealth and in fact steals your very salvation. Love of wealth is an addiction, a craving which is hard to move away from, because the more you have, the more you want, until you don't even know why you want so much. It's like a thirsty sailor drinking seawater, the more he drinks, the more he thirsts, till the salt in it kills him. Love of wealth is a disease, a rot that eats into your eye so that you are blind to the plight of people around you who suffer due to poverty. It is a cancer that blackens your heart, for when one gives money a place in one's heart rather than its due place in the wallet and charity, it becomes a poison that corrupts the heart to its core so that nothing good is left in it. Charity prevents all this with one stroke.

As in everything, Islam seeks a balance. The Jews you know had an excessive craving for wealth which is why even today you will find people saying that Jews are good at making money by hook or by crook. Shakespeare's Shylock epitomizes this type of person. They left no stone unturned in finding ways to make money, even resorting to a religious license to charge usury from non-Jews despite being prohibited from doing so from their own kind: *Unto a stranger thou mayest lend upon usury, but unto thy brother thou shalt not lend upon usury* (Deuteronomy 23:20). Jesus who was sent to reform the Jews was on the other hand, so other worldly that he preached against worldly possessions in very strong terms, such as when he once told a rich man who came to him to give up all his wealth, upon hearing which the man's face changed and he went away. Jesus then told his followers: "*It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God*". When those who heard it asked: "*Then who can be saved?*" he replied: "*What is impossible for men is possible for God*" (Matthew 19:24 -26). The great teacher he was, all Jesus wanted to do was impress on his fellows the need to control one's love for wealth, but of course even the most zealous of his followers find it hard to part with all their wealth.

Islam takes a middle path which is more in keeping with prudence and human nature. It does not require that we give up all our wealth for the sake of God, but just a portion of our superfluous wealth after all our needs have been met. In the days of the Islamic Caliphate, charity was so common that not only the wealthy classes, but even the rulers who could not touch the public funds for their own use, engaged in it. For instance in the early days of the Ottoman Empire, Sultan Mohamed, the Conqueror of Constantinople handed over a hundred shops that he had earned through the sweat of his brow to a charitable foundation and in its charter laid down that the poor folk of the city who could not make it to the soup kitchen for some reason or other, should have their food taken to their homes in closed containers after it is dark, so that they will not be humiliated for receiving charity.

His subjects likewise did all in their power to protect the honour of the poor. They put their alms in envelopes into what were known as charity stones – stones with holes on their top somewhat like a pillar box. These were placed in mosques and the poor would resort to these to get some money whenever they needed. It was a completely anonymous affair where the rich knew not who the recipients were and the poor knew not who their beneficiaries were. That only God knew!

While Islam encourages the giving of charity, it also seeks to minimise dependence on it by able-bodied beneficiaries so that its benefits flow to the really destitute sections of society, in other words, persons who are not in a position to fend for themselves. A man of the Ansar once came to the Prophet and begged from him. The Prophet asked: "*Have you nothing in your house?*'. The man replied: "*Yes, a piece of cloth, which we wear, or which we spread (on the ground), and a wooden bowl from which we drink water*". The Prophet said: "*Bring them to me*". The man brought these articles to the Prophet and he took them in his hands and asked the assembly of people: "*Who will buy these?*". A man said: "*I shall buy them for one dirham*". He asked twice or thrice "*Who will offer more than one dirham?*". Another man said: "*I shall buy them for two dirhams*". The Prophet gave these to him and took the two dirhams, and giving them to the man of the Ansar said: "*Buy food with one of them and hand it to your family, and buy an axe and bring it to me*". The man brought him the axe and the Prophet with his own hands fixed a handle on to it and giving it to the man said: "*Go, gather firewood and sell it, and do not let me see you for a fortnight*". The man went away and gathered firewood and sold it. When he had earned ten dirhams, he came to him and bought a garment with some of it and food with the others. The Prophet then told him: "*This is better for you than that begging should come as a spot on your face on the Day of Judgement. Begging is right only for three people; one who is in grinding poverty, one who is seriously in debt, or one who is responsible for compensation and finds it difficult to pay*" (Aboo Dawood).

Islam lays down a comprehensive moral framework for attaining its goal of a welfare state, from condemning wasteful spending so that society can benefit more from charity and productive spending, to prohibiting usury or charging of interest so that its aims are not undermined. Although God enjoins upon man to spend out of his wealth for the benefit of his fellow creatures instead of hoarding it to the point of miserliness, it also condemns wasteful spending in no uncertain terms:

And render to the kindred their due rights, as to those in want, and to the wayfarer. But squander not in the manner of a spendthrift. Verily spendthrifts are the brothers of the devils and Satan is to His Lord (Ever) Ungrateful
(The Nocturnal Journey: 26-27)

Wealth is after all a trust from God and has to be discharged in a manner that is acceptable to Him. Likewise earning wealth is subject to certain restrictions for the good of man himself, to prevent him from exploiting his fellow man. Foremost among these restrictions is the charging of interest or usury. Although today's dictionaries define usury as exorbitantly high interest, usury in its original sense meant interest whether less or more and I stick to this definition. Even Church Law in Europe defined interest whether high or low as usury and its modern application is the handiwork of Jewish bankers who wanted to take Christendom down to the path of usury, despite it being prohibited in the Bible:

You shall not demand interest from your countrymen on a loan of money or of food or of anything else on which interest is usually demanded" (Deuteronomy 23:20).

In Ezekiel we read that the one who oppresses the poor and needy and lends at interest and exacts usury shall not live, and that he shall surely die (Ezekiel 18:12-13). Likewise other faiths also condemned usury in very strong terms. The Zend Avesta, the scripture of the ancient Persians called usury the '*worst sin'*. Why because it has throughout been a tool for oppression and exploitation of man by man.

Likewise Islam prohibits usury and condemns it in the severest terms. God says in the Qur'an:

Those who devour usury will not stand (before God) except like one whom Satan has driven to madness by his touch. Because they say: "Trade is like usury". Whereas God has permitted trade and forbidden usury. He that receives admonition from his Lord and mends his ways shall not be punished for the past. His case is for God (to judge); but he that pays no heed shall be among the People of the Fire and shall abide in it. God will deprive usury of all blessing but will bestow increase for charity. He bears no love for the ungrateful sinner
(The Heifer:275-276)

O ye who believe! fear God and give up what remains of your demand for usury if ye are indeed believers. If you do it not, take notice of war from God and his Messenger: but if ye turn back ye shall have your capital sums; deal not unjustly and ye shall not be dealt with unjustly
(The Heifer:278-279)

The Prophet went even further, classing those who receive, pay, record and witness interest payment as being all alike when he cursed all involved in it. Why because one needs to exist for the other to thrive:

The one who consumes interest, the one who gives it to others,the one who writes it down and the one who witnesses it.They are all the same
(Saheeh Muslim)

Usury leads to accumulation of wealth by a few privileged people, so that the poor masses are deprived of even the little wealth they have and in a sense become enslaved by the rich and powerful. Being indebted is bad enough, but to pay an extra payment on top of that is worse and it becomes all the more worse when these moneylenders work as a team calling themselves by the name of a bank. Then it becomes organized like a cartel, giving them a hold over the rest of society, to thrive at their expense and to suck their life-blood away drop by drop so that they have nothing left.

When we consider the ill effects of interest on human society, we can only agree with the Divine wisdom behind its prohibition. Needless to say, taking interest is ethically and morally wrong. It leads to a situation where the one who possesses wealth, instead of working or putting his monies to productive use by his own mental and physical exertion, chooses to live a life without labour by drawing on the sweat of others to increase his wealth, in other words "to suck the blood" of his less fortunate fellows.

One must also bear in mind that those who seek monies from others usually do so for a good reason, such as to meet the basic needs of themselves or their families in times of hardship, or if they have reached a higher level of subsistence, for some productive venture that could contribute to the good of society as a whole. As such, demanding a payment on top of the capital lent, increasing day by day due to one's inability to repay, is nothing but a sledgehammer against the less fortunate sections of society, a tool for exploitation of the already downtrodden. Adding to this exploitative nature of interest must be mentioned its cumulative effects over time. Usury is an abuse of money itself, because money is intended to be used in exchange, as a medium of exchange instead of resorting to barter, like say, trading a sheep for wheat, not to be used to generate more money. It goes against the nature of things. It also amounts to selling time, which is God's alone, which makes it all the more reprehensible.

Although the West with its highly sophisticated banking system likes to hide the fact, interest is nothing but an oppressive tool that seeks to make the rich richer at the expense of the poor, in the process widening the gap between the haves and have-nots, leading to social conflict that can take a heavy toll on society as a whole.

There is also reason to believe that interest contributes to inflation unlike the seasonal inflation that depends on the scarcity of goods at given times. This is because borrowers of capital who have borrowed on interest have to adjust their accounting books for increased liability, resulting in increased prices of saleable assets, whether goods or services. In an economy running on this basis, prices will increase with each cycle of lending, leading to a continuous trend of increase in prices which in turn reduces the purchasing power of ordinary people.

Needless to say, it is mostly the poor and needy who are affected by rising prices. Such inflation is also a form of exploitation as it eats into the little money the poor have, *daylight robbery* if I may say so. The ultimate beneficiaries of this entire exercise are the bankers and lenders and depositors of money and nobody else. Can there be a greater injustice than this, I ask you?

So you might wonder, what the solution is? Simple, proper collection and distribution of Zakat monies so that all levels of society attain a level of self-sufficiency to engage in productive undertakings so that the need for borrowing for one's basic needs does not arise. As for those who seek access to credit to embark on some business or industrial venture, Islam provides viable alternatives to interest-based loans including outright loans without any interest component whose repayment the state will guarantee:

And loan to God a beautiful loan, and whatever good you send forth for your souls, you shall find it in God's Presence- Yea, better and greater in reward
(The Enfolded One:20)

And if this is not sophisticated enough to meet today's financial needs for capital, an entire banking system based on Islamic values has recently emerged to fulfill the need sans of course the interest component. Rather it is based on the principle of profit and loss-sharing where the investors reap whatever profit they get from their venture while sharing the risk in proportion to their investment. What better, more equitable business proposition than this?

It ensures that those who have the money also take a risk which they can bear, as should actually be the case, rather than vesting their monies for a fixed rate of interest in a banking concern which will make a profit on top of it by lending at a

higher rate of interest to cash-strapped entrepreneurs who in turn will take all the risk while passing on the interest component to unsuspecting consumers who will have to bear the brunt of it all by having to pay a higher price for their goods.

Even the West is now coming to realize its benefits, which is why the Vatican had this to say in its newspaper L'Ossevatore Romano: *The ethical principles on which Islamic Finance is based may bring banks closer to their clients and to the true spirit which should mark every financial service.*

31st Night

Johnny: Salams Sheikh, thanks for last night's very revealing talk. In fact after listening to you I couldn't help but wonder whether that Islam was more Socialist than the most zealous of communists. This sort of thing should be told in our college campuses and I'm sure you'll have a large flock following you shouting *Islam's the Solution!* Now to my next question:

What does Islam teach about the equality of mankind?

The Janissary: There is no faith on the face of the earth that has preached so much about the equality of humanity as Islam. Islam did not stop at just preaching about equality, it made it a requirement of every true believer, so that it had to be practiced in deed as well. So just as Muslims are required to believe in the One True God, they are required to believe in the oneness of mankind as the children of Adam and Eve. Since they all share a common parentage they have to be equal.

God Almighty made this very clear in the Qur'an when he declared:

O mankind, reverence your Guardian Lord, who created you from a single person, created of like nature, his mate, and from the twain scattered (like seeds) countless men and women (The Women:1)

O mankind, We have created you from male and female, and have made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. Indeed the most honourable of you in the sight of God is the most righteous
(The Chambers:13)

Mankind was one single nation, and God sent messengers
with glad tidings and warnings, and with them
He sent the Book in truth
(The Heifer:213)

His Prophet expounded on this ideal when he preached in his Final Sermon on the Mount:

O People, Your Lord is One and your father is one. You all descended from Adam, and Adam was created from earth. He is most honored among you in the sight of God who is most upright. There is no superiority of the Arab over the non-Arab, or of the non-Arab over the Arab, or of the red (fair person) over the black, or of the black over the red - except with regard to piety
(Musnad of Ahmad)

What all this shows is that that in Islam, no race is superior to another. They are all equal before God. Since God is their Sole Creator and all humans are the creatures of this One True God, they are all equal in His Sight. It is after all, the self-same God who created all of creation, including man. In this sense, all creatures are God's family and He is their Head as the Prophet put it: "*All God's Creatures are His Family, and He is the Most Beloved of God who does the greatest good to God's Creatures*". Thus ideas like the Jews being 'The Chosen People' as preached by the Zionists or Germans being the 'Master Race' as held by the Nazis can have no place

in Islam. Man's worth is determined by the good he does, not how he looks. It is at the very root of the faith.

Thus in Islam all humans are to be treated alike whatever their differences. They are all creatures of a God who regards all as equally beautiful in their own way and accords each and every one of them with honour as the Children of Adam:

We have honoured the Children of Adam
(The Night Journey:70)

We created Man in the Best of Moulds
(The Fig: 4)

Indeed to be racist is the way of the devil who refused to prostrate before Adam only because he was made of fire and Adam of clay. Satan was therefore the first racist or supremacist when he dissented with God for ordering him to bow before Adam, arguing:

I am better than he. You created me from fire and him from clay
(The Heights:12)

This alone should suffice to drive home the moral - to be racist is to be Satanic. So if you're racist I'd advise you to cast it off lest you be in the league of the devil!

Islam also teaches us that racial differences are not to be scorned, but rather considered as Signs of God, thus bestowing sanctity to these differences rather than treating them as blights of nature:

And among His Signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the difference of your languages and colours. Verily, in that are indeed signs for those who know
(The Romans: 22)

See how beautifully God expresses this variety in man. Differences in our physical forms is not something to be looked at with ridicule. Rather, they are to be considered the Wondrous Works of the One True God. Diversity in peoples and languages and cultures is the result of God's Will and Wisdom and is therefore Sacred and sacrosanct. Such diversity is not a reason to hate one's fellow men, but rather to love, knowing that these have been bestowed on each one of us by our Creator Himself. Besides it adds beauty to the world. As the old saying goes *Variety is the spice of life*. Just imagine how monotonous the world would be if we had just one race and one culture, with all speaking the same language.

Thus, Islam made it a cornerstone of the faith to recognize and acknowledge the diversity in man and his culture. It alone of all faiths gave it divine sanction, it alone possessed that vitality to blend all peoples and cultures into a composite whole while allowing them to retain their languages and other cultural features, like a patchwork of different fabrics, all held together by the common thread of Islam.

It is this understanding of man taught by Islam that helped weld nations as distinct as Arab, Turk, Persian and Caucasian in the early days of Islam into one composite whole bound by the bond of faith, in spite of their possessing different languages and cultural traditions. It is this understanding that prevented Muslim nations from fighting one another on the basis of nationalism as the West did until very recently, killing several millions as we saw in the two great wars fought between the European

powers in the last century. True, Ottomon Turkey took part in the Great War of 1914-1918 on the side of the Allied Powers of Germany and Austria-Hungary, But this was prompted not by nationalistic considerations, but rather by strategic interests to safeguard itself against its old foe Russia and stall the colonialist ambitions of the British and French who were making inroads into its dominions.

By recognizing that all men were equal, having similar roles, rights and responsibilities, Islam abolished for once and for all time all prejudice, patriotism and persecutions based on a false sense of national pride. This had other implications as well because it meant that there could be no conflict or war based on one's race or nation. This idea abolished for all time the basis for national struggles and wars as we know them today. Pax Islamica brought peace to all. Why, because there could be no national pride, no grounds for discrimination and no need to fight for one's rights as the history of Islam has proved. Thus struggles like that of Blacks against White Supremacists in the American South or that of the low caste Dalits against the high castes in India need not arise in Islamdom.

Since Islam is meant for all humanity, there can really be only one nation- the Nation of Islam. This is not to say that Islam abolishes tribal or national identity, but rather subsumes such identity under the common fealty of Islam. Thus whatever differences one Muslim has with another, whether it be physical or cultural, is submerged in the sea of faith. One's loyalty ultimately lies with one's brethren in faith and not with one's race, tribe or clan. When the early Muslims swore allegiance to the Prophet by placing their hands over his, God revealed:

Verily those who plight their fealty to thee, do no less than plight their fealty to God,
The Hand of God is over their hands
(The Victory:10)

Thus all those who pledged loyalty to God became one in faith, in other words *One nation under God*. Islam unlike other faiths has from its very inception sought to weld together people of different races and cultures into one brotherhood. It transformed the individual's sense of belonging to his family, clan or race into that of membership in a larger community with a higher mission on earth.

Indeed, the very first Islamic state in the city of Medina was founded upon an alliance between the *Muhajiroon* or 'emigrants' formed of Muhammad's Quraysh tribe from Mecca and the *Ansar* or 'helpers' formed of the tribes of Aws and Khazraj who occupied Medina. Each Ansar took as his brother a Muhajir whom he treated as his brother and with whom he shared his property.

And remember with gratitude God's favour on you. You were enemies and He united your hearts so that by His Grace, you became brethren, and you were on the brink of the pit of fire, and He saved you from it
(Family Imraan:103)

Among the Prophet's closest companions who embraced Islam were non-Arabs like Bilal the Abyssinian Negro, Shuayb the Roman and Salman the Persian. The Prophet also encouraged marriage with other peoples by himself marrying the Coptic girl Mariya through whom he had a son named Ibrahim. He even married a Jewish girl named Safiyah and loved her as such despite her being the daughter of his old enemy Huyay. When his Arab wife Ayisha brushed her aside saying one Jewess was much

like another, he replied: "*Don't say that, for she has entered Islam and has made good her surrender*!".

Prophet Muhammad and his Arabian companions were fair-skinned men having probably the same light, sun-tanned complexion Jesus and his disciples had, but look at his followers now- fair-skinned Turks, brown-skinned Indians and black-skinned Africans, all recognizing one another as brothers and sisters, as the offspring of our first parents Adam and Eve. All this Islam achieved of men who had previously been hopelessly divided on tribal and racial considerations. Islam made them one.

As God says:

Verily this community of yours is a single community
and I am your Lord; Therefore serve Me
(The Prophets: 92)

Islam sounded the death knell of every kind of nationalism. This was no better expressed than by the Prophet himself when he railed against *Asabiyah* (tribal partisanship), in other words nationalism, which he equated to non-belief:

He is not one of us who calls for Asabiyah or who fights for Asabiyah
or who dies for Asabiyah
(Abu Daawud)

When the Prophet took Mecca from the Quraysh in the close of his ministry he told this tribe who so boasted of their blue blood, and that too in the very house built by their ancestor Ishmael which they considered the holy of holies:
"*O Quraysh, God has taken from you the haughtiness of Paganism and its veneration of ancestors. Man springs from Adam and Adam sprang from dust*" (Seerah Ibn Ishaq).

It once happened that a companion of the Prophet, Abu Dharr got angry with Bilal, a freed Negro slave and insulted him by calling him "*Son of a black woman*" this saddened Bilal so much that he reported the incident to the Prophet in tears. The Prophet told Abu Dharr: "*Do you still have a sign of Jahilliyyah in you* ?". The word the Prophet used to express Aby Dharr's transgression was a very serious one, because *Jahilliyyah* meant the Pre-Islamic Age of Ignorance with its idolatry and tribal arrogance. Abu Dharr became so repentant that he lay on the ground and said: "*I won't raise my head unless Bilal puts his foot on it to pass over it*". Bilal rushed to forgive him and they were soon friends (Saheeh Al-Bukhari).

Bilal, a black Ethiopian slave freed by the Muslims was given a very high place in Islam. He was Islamdom's first Muezzin, the one who calls his fellow Muslims to prayer from the Mosque or its turret known as the Minaret. Upon the conquest of Mecca, the Prophet commanded Bilal to climb on to the top of the Ka'aba, the holiest mosque in Islam and summon the faithful to prayer. Before Islam the Ka'aba, was a place of honour meant only for pure-blooded Arabs of a white complexion and now a black man was atop it to summon these once proud Arabs to their prayers. In like manner, the slave girl Sumayya became the first martyr in Islam when her evil master Abu Jahl killed her with a spear simply because she refused to abandon her Islamic faith.

It was also on the advice of a Persian Companion named Salman Al Farsi that the Prophet ordered a deep trench to be dug around medina to prevent the confederate forces of the Meccans and allied clans from invading the city. When they camped in

sight of it, there came a gale from the West which blew for three days and nights so that not a tent could be kept standing, nor a fire lit or pot boiled, prompting the enemy to withdraw.

I can give you countless examples of how the early Muslims treated Non-Arabs and especially negroes who were looked down upon as slaves in the Arab society of a previous age. For instance when the Muslim army left to conquer Egypt, the Egyptian ruler, Al Muqawqis requested a delegation from them to be sent to him. Amr ibn Al Aas, the leader of the Muslim army quickly dispatched a delegation of ten men and appointed Ubadah as its leader. Now, Ubadah was a tall black man. Al Muqawqis who set his eyes on him became afraid due to his blackness and cried out: "*Keep this black man away from me and let someone else speak to me!*"

The men in the delegation said: "*This black man is the best among us in wisdom*" "*How can you be pleased that this black man is the best among you; rather he should be the least among you*" replied Al Muqawqis. "*Not at all!*" said the Muslims. "*Even though he is black as you can see, he is one of the highest in position among us; he is one of the earliest Muslims, and one of the best in wisdom and knowledge. Blackness is not something that is despised among us*." Al Muqawqis looked at Ubadah and said: "*Come forward, O black man, and speak to me kindly, for I am afraid of your blackness and if you speak harshly you will make me even more afraid*" Ubadah, seeing that he had scared al Muqawqis said to him, using his fear as a bargaining chip: "*Among our army are a thousand black men who are even more black than I am*".

The Muslims were, after all a nation to whom their Prophet had addressed:

Hear and obey, although your leader be a black slave with a head like a raisin, so long as he enforces God's Law among you
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

Thus in Islamdom every race that came under its pale contributed to its growth. This will be evident when you study the history of Islam where Arabs, Persians, Turks, Berbers, Mongols and Negroes all contributed to its growth and spread throughout the ages since its very inception 1400 years ago. No other faith can boast of such a multinational contribution. When the Turks embraced Islam and went on to conquer Constantinople, they took upon themselves the Caliphate or leadership of the Islamic world which they fulfilled for four hundred years from their capital of Istanbul on the European side of modern-day Turkey. Yes, Islamdom was ruled for all those centuries from Europe by a non-Arab people who had been blessed with Islam and had become the most ardent champions of the faith.

Islam also abolished for all time the notion of nobility by lineage which entitled one to special treatment. The Prophet made this very clear when he said: "*Humans are equal like the teeth of a comb with the exception of piety, where they differ*" (Musnad Al Shihab). He further said: "*There are indeed people who boast of their dead ancestors; but in the sight of God, they are more contemptible than the black beetle that rolls a piece of dung with its nose. Behold God has removed from you the arrogance of the Time of Jahiliyyah with its boast of ancestral glories. Man is but a God-fearing believer or an unfortunate sinner. All people are the children of Adam, and Adam was created out of dust*" (Tirmidhi).

Take the case of Julaybib, a dwarf of ugly appearance and unknown lineage in a society where bloodlines were treasured. Because he was scoffed at in the company of men, the poor fellow took pleasure in the company of women. The Prophet took

upon himself the task of finding a partner for Julaybib and went to one of the Ansar seeking the hand of his daughter. "*How wonderful and blessed, O Messenger of God and what a delight to the eye*" replied the man. "*I do not want her for myself*," said the Prophet. "*Then for whom, O Messenger of God?*" asked the man. "*For Julaybib*" answered the Prophet. The Ansari who was too shocked to give his views said: "*I will consult with her mother*." and went to his wife. "*The Messenger of God, may God bless him and grant him peace, wants to have your daughter married*" he said to her. She was thrilled. When he told it was to Julaybib, she cried out: "*To Julaybib! No, never to Julaybib! No, by the living God, we shall not marry (her) to him*." The daughter who had heard her mother asked: "*Who has asked you to marry me?*". When told of it she said: "*Do you refuse the request of the Messenger of God? Send me to him for he shall certainly not bring ruin to me. I am satisfied and submit myself to whatever the Messenger of God deems good for me*". The Prophet heard of her reaction and prayed for her: "*O Lord, bestow good on her in abundance and make not her life one of toil and trouble*."and the Prophet himself married her to the dwarf and they lived happily until he was martyred. When the Prophet noticed that Julaybib was missing in battle, he cried out: "*I have lost Julaybib. Search for him in the battlefield"* They searched and found him beside seven enemies whom he had struck before meeting his end. The Prophet stood up and went to the spot where Julaybib lay. He stood over him and said: "*He killed seven and then was killed? This (man) is of me and I am of him*." He then took him in his arms, dug for him a grave and himself placed him in it.

Then take the case of Jabala, a ruler of the Ghassanid Arabs who became a Muslim during the caliphate of Umar, but afterwards turned Christian and went to live in the Byzantine Empire. The occasion of his apostatizing from Islam was this: Once in passing through the bazaar of Damascus, he let his horse tread upon one of the bystanders who sprang up and struck Jabala a blow on the face. The Ghassanids seized the fellow and brought him before Abu Ubaydah, a well known companion of the Prophet, who answered: "*If he has struck you, you will strike him a blow in return*". Jabala asked "*And shall not he be slain ?*". "*No*" replied Abu Ubaydah. "*Shall not his hand be cut off ?*" "*No*" said Abu Ubaydah "*God has ordained retaliation only – blow for blow*". Jabala then betook himself to Roman territory and became a Christian.

That such equal treatment extended to non-Muslims is seen from an incident that took place in the lifetime of the Caliph Umar. That was when Amr Ibn Al Aas ruled as Governor of Egypt after having conquered it for Islam. And whom do we have as his accuser - a Copt, a Christian native of Egypt. One day this Copt came to the Caliph and complained: "*Commander of the Faithful, I come to you as a refugee*"' Umar asked him what he had to say and he answered "*Amr had a custom of letting his horses run free in Egypt. One day, I came by riding my mare. When I passed by a group of people, they looked at me. Muhammad, the son of Amr got up and came to me, saying, 'I swear by the Lord of the Kaaba, this is my mare!' I responded, 'I swear by the Lord of the Kaaba, the mare is mine!' He came up to me and began beating me with a whip, saying, "You may take her, because I am the son of a nobleman (meaning I am more generous than you"' The incident got to Amr, who feared that I might come to you, so he put me in jail. I escaped, and here I am before you.*" Umar wrote a letter to Amr summoning him and his son to Medina. When they arrived, Umar looked around for the son, and noticed him standing behind his father to appear less conspicuous. Umar asked "*Where is the Egyptian?*" and he responded, "*Here I am!*" Umar told him "*Here is the whip. Take it and beat the son of the*

nobleman". So he took it and beat him vigorously, while Umar said over and over "Beat the son of the nobleman" and did not let him stop until he had beaten him enough. Umar said: "*'Now you must take it and hit me on my bald head. This all happened to you because of my power over you'*" The Copt said: "*I am satisfied and my anger has cooled*". Umar told him: "*If you had beaten me, I would not have stopped you until you had wished to. And you, Amr, since when have you made the people your slaves? They were born free*" Umar then said turning to the Egyptian: "*You may go, and be guided. If anything untoward happens to you, write to me*."

Indeed in Islam, the ruler has no special privilege above the rest of his subjects. He is bound by the law as they are and has no more right to the public exchequer than they. The example was set by our Prophet himself who did not dress in any way that differed from his companions. Although a ruler he wore no crown, had no throne and interacted with his followers as if he were one of them, so much so that the casual visitor could not make him out, like the day a Bedouin came to see him and could not make him out in the mosque, only to have a companion pointing to the Prophet as "*This white man*".

The Prophet sought to abolish every possible means of showing undue respect or veneration to men, like when he declared: "*Whoever likes to have the slaves of God stand up out of respect for him should take his place in the Fire*"'(Adab al Mufrad). Such was the contempt he had for reverence paid even to the head of state. Needless to say, this means Muslims cannot even stand up for their ruler as a mark of respect, let alone bow down to him as we still find in Western monarchies.Since God is the ultimate sovereign of the universe, no true Muslim can render the obeisance due to God to any worldly sovereign, however powerful he be. How indeed I ask can he bow his head to another when there is God above ruling supreme? The greatest respect one can do a ruler is salute him with a salutation of peace *Salaam!*

On another occasion the Prophet warned: "*Let no one make another arise from where they are sitting and sit down in his place. Enlarge the circle and make room so that God will give you increase*"(Saheeh Muslim). When the Prophet said to widen the circle, you may picture the companions of the circle like you do King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. But not Knights of noble blood they were, even a pauper could come sit in the Prophet's Circle.

Islam gives us numerous examples of this attitude of rulers, who in God's Sight were equal as any of us. Take Abu Bakr, the first Caliph of Islam who had this to say in his very first address to the community shortly after the Prophet's demise: "*Cooperate with me when I am right but correct me when I commit error; obey me so long as I follow the commandments of Allah and His Prophet; but turn away from me when I deviate*." Then take Umar, the second Caliph who had this to say: "*I have no greater right on your money (the public treasury) than the guardian of an orphan has on his property. If I am wealthy I shall not take anything. If I am needy I shall take enough for my maintenance. Ye have rights over me, which you should demand of me. One such right is that I shall neither collect revenues unlawfully or spend those that come to my possession unlawfully; that I shall increase your stipends and protect the frontiers, and that I shall not cast you into unnecessary perils*" .

He also made it clear that there could be no partiality in meting out justice. The Caliph once had a dispute with an ordinary citizen named Ubay Ibn Kab who lodged a complaint in the court against Umar. The Caliph of course appeared in person before the court as a defendant. When Zaid Ibn Thabit who was serving as the judge made a gesture that the Caliph felt was meant to honour him. He promptly told him "*This is your first injustice!*" and took his seat by the side of Ubay. When the judge

requested the complainant to waive off the need for Umar to swear under oath on the grounds that the Caliph was the Head of the State, he promptly shot back: "*If Umar and any other man are not equal in your eyes, you are not fit for the post of judge"*.

This same Umar who had conquered for Islam Persia and Syria could later be seen riding to Jerusalem to accept its surrender on a camel or donkey which carried besides his person, a bag of provisions like dates and a leather bottle of water. He wore a coarse woolen shirt and was accompanied by a servant who took turns riding the animal. After guaranteeing the Christians of the holy city their rights, he set his attention to the ruins of the Temple of Solomon destroyed by the Romans centuries ago and started on the task of building a mosque on the site by himself taking the dirt in his vest to remove it, whereupon his army assisted him, some filling their vests, others their bucklers and yet others baskets, so that in a short time they had cleared the site of the debris.

Even in later times, Muslim rulers followed such teachings to the letter. Take Sultan Alp Arslan, the Turkish ruler who donned pure white habit as his shroud in case he were martyred and told his soldiers before the great Battle of Malazgirt in 1071: "*Those of you who choose to follow me, let them do so. Those who choose to leave, let them go. There are no commanding Sultans giving orders here, nor are there any soldiers needing to obey. Today I am one of you. I am a soldier going to war alongside you. Those who follow me and become martyrs having devoted their souls to God Almighty. To heaven you go!*".

By making the ruler and the ruled equal, Islam achieved something even communism with all its talk of egalitarianism could not. You have only to read George Orwell's 'Animal Farm' that great satire on communism to understand that '*Although all animals are equal, some are more equal than others'*. You only have to look at the luxurious lifestyles of so-called Socialist leaders in contrast to the poverty endured by the masses to realize the truth of this. Whether it was Chairman Mao of China a couple of decades ago or Deng of South Korea in our times, you can see how true this is. Here are hypocrites who claim to serve the people but live like kings in opulent palaces at the expense of their people who serve them and their families like slaves.

Equality is embedded in the very fabric of Islam, in all aspects of life from the prayers to the pilgrimage it demands of its followers. Any believer could pray directly to God, summon people to prayer and even lead the prayers, perform sacrifices or solemnize marriages. There need be no intermediary between God and man. Thus in Islam there could be no hereditary Levite priests as the Jews have or Brahmin priests as the Hindus have. Nay there could not be any priesthood, whether hereditary or not, that partakes of God's Glory like the Popes and Priests of the Catholics who have arrogated to themselves the right to forgive sinners as if they were God's shadow on earth.

Indeed mosques are the most egalitarian places of worship found anywhere in the world. Synagogues are restricted to ethnic Jews, Hindu temples to high-caste Hindus and some Christians in the US have special black churches because white people would not have them in theirs. But in Islam, the mosques, are open to all who profess the faith, be they black or white. Wherever you go you will find Muslims of all races standing shoulder to shoulder in prayer as equals, bowing their heads together to the One God who created them all.

The famous poetess of India, Sarojini Naidu was so impressed with this trait which was in striking contrast to the practices of her caste conscious Hindu countrymen that she wrote in Ideals of Islam in 1918:

"*It was the first religion that preached and practiced democracy; for, in the mosque, when the call for prayer is sounded and worshippers are gathered together, the democracy of Islam is embodied five times a day when the peasant and king kneel side by side and proclaim: 'God Alone is Great'. I have been struck over and over again by this indivisible unity of Islam that makes man instinctively a brother*."

Another great equalizer was the pilgrimage to Mecca where all Muslims, white or black, rich or poor don the same simple white habit to earn their Lord's Favour:

T.W.Arnold was so impressed with this great ritual that he remarked in his Preaching of Islam:
"*Above all- and herein is its supreme importance in the missionary history of Islam- it ordains a yearly gathering of believers, of all nations and languages, brought together from all parts of the world, to pray in that sacred place towards which their faces are set in every hour of private worship in their distant homes. No stretch of religious genius could have conceived a better expedient for impressing on the minds of the faithful a sense of their common life and of brotherhood in the bonds of faith. Here, in a supreme act of common worship, the Negro of the West Coast of Africa meets the Chinaman from the distant East; the country and polished Ottoman recognizes his brother Muslim in the wild islander from the farthest end of the Malayan Sea*".

Yes, Islam equalized man like no other society did before it, well before the French revolutionaries cried out *Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite!* or Thomas Jefferson wrote in his Declaration of American Independence in 1776: "*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness*".

Islam came at a time when humanity was sunk in the poison of racial and class superiority and leveled it to the ground. What communism failed to achieve in the modern age in Europe, Islam achieved fourteen centuries ago. Did you know that in mediaeval Europe you actually had racism of a sort, where the nobility formed a class of their own, making laws at their whims and fancies and ruling their subjects with an iron fist. Did you know that the peasantry over whom they ruled were serfs bound to the land of their lords and obliged to work on it till their dying day. They were poor as poor could be and oppressed and exploited to the hilt, not much different from the slaves who worked in the plantations in the Americas.

In countries like Russia they were legally bound to their masters' lands and even fleeing away from such lands was deemed a criminal offence. The landowner could simply transfer a serf to another landowner while keeping his personal property and family for himself. And to think it was only in 1861 with the *Emancipation Manifesto* that over 20 million serfs gained the right to own property of their own, to do business and marry without the consent of their landowners. And to think they were once free men.

In India it was still worse. The native peoples enslaved by the Aryans were formed into a fourth caste, the Shudras whose only duty was to serve the higher castes from generation to generation in perpetuity as held in the Laws of Manu. The Hindu scriptures like the Aitareya Brahmana even declared that a Shudra was one who could be killed or beaten at will. Did you know that King Rama, who is regarded as a deity by Hindus, killed a low caste man just because he practiced meditation? Why because the low castes were not supposed to meditate like the high caste Brahmins

did, but rather serve them. The Law of Manu even went to the extent of exempting high caste Brahmans from punishment however serious their crimes:

Let (the king) never slay a Brahmana, though he has committed all kinds of crimes; let him banish such an offender, leaving all his property and keeping him unhurt. No greater crime is known on earth than slaying a Brahmana; a king, therefore, must not even entertain the thought of killing a Brahmana

In like manner the Jews of old looked down upon other peoples as *goyim* or gentiles. They slaughtered them indiscriminately in their wars and in times of peace practiced usury on them, depriving them of what little they had. They kept to themselves and did not marry outside following Ezra their Chief Priest who had led them back from the Babylonian captivity. In the Bible, we read that Ezra, hearing that the Israelites had taken wives from the peoples of the land, thus desecrating the 'holy race', tore his cloak, plucked hair from his head and beard and cried out: "*Your unfaithfulness in taking foreign women as wives has added to Israel's guilt. Give praise to the Lord, the God of your fathers, and do His Will. Separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from these foreign women*".

Such racist ideas led to the Jews fabricating some very unfair laws, like the one that laid down that a Jewish man was not to be executed if he committed adultery with a Gentile woman. But the Gentile woman was to be executed. As the Talmud says:

He who has carnal knowledge of the wife of a Gentile is not liable to the death penalty. If a Jew has coitus with a Gentile woman, whether she be a child of three or an adult, whether married or unmarried, and even if he is a minor aged only nine years and one day - because he had wilful coitus with her she must be killed, as is the case with a beast, because through her a Jew got into trouble.

Even Christianity which we of the modern age look at as a liberating faith could not divest itself completely from its Jewish racist heritage. Paul, the founding father of the church, in spite of reaching out to the gentiles, was not altogether free of his Jewish sense of pride like when he proclaimed:

It is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the freeborn woman. The son of the slave woman was born naturally, the son of the freeborn through a promise. Now this is an allegory. These women represent two covenants. One was from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; this is Hagar. Hagar represents Sinai, a mountain in Arabia; it corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery along with her children (Jerusalem was at the time under the Romans) but the Jerusalem above is freeborn, and she is our mother. Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of the promise, but just as the child of the flesh persecuted the child of the spirit, it is the same now. But what does the scripture say? "Drive out the slave woman and her son! For the son of the slave woman shall not share the inheritance with the son of the freeborn". Therefore, brothers, we are children not of the slave woman, but of the freeborn woman" (Galatians 4:21-31)

Paul is here appealing to the Biblical story of Abraham and his spouses to equate the Mosaic law with slavery and of the promise of God with freedom, but the basis on which he relies, Sarah's supposed words, which he takes to be scripture, has

clearly racist overtones. The man talks of freedom but appeals to scripture to declare the half-brothers of the Jews, the Ishmaelites as born slaves, despite their too being the children of Abraham.

Indeed, one may suppose that much of the racial bigotry of the West stems from misreadings of the Bible, especially the Old Testament which portray the Jews as a superior race, the 'Chosen People'. The non-Jewish Christians who inherited the scripture arrogated to themselves this idea of chosen people employing tools like imperialism and colonialism towards this end.

Take Christopher Columbus whom many of you in the West regard as some sort of hero- the man who discovered the Americas and opened up the New World for western colonization. Did you know that when he landed in the Bahamas in 1492, he observed that the natives were a very friendly people, so much so that when the Santa Maria was shipwrecked, these Arawaks worked for hours to save him and his crew and shared whatever they had with the newcomers. But rather than reciprocate their kindness he took it for weakness. Impressed with the hard work of these gentle folk, he immediately claimed their land for Spain and enslaved them, putting them to work in his gold mines. Within two years, half of the population had been killed off through his brutal policies, many of them by being overworked. In case a worker did not deliver his full quota of gold dust by his deadline, his soldiers would cut off the man's hands and tie them around his neck to send a message. At one time as many as hundred of them committed mass suicide because the conditions were so very intolerable. If natives resisted their lot, he would cut off a nose or if they tried to escape he had them burned alive. He also had dogs which he let loose on the natives and they would tear off the limbs of the screaming wretches while they were still alive. If his soldiers ran short of meat to feed the dogs, Arawak babies were simply killed for dog food. Hard to swallow isn't it, but this was the bitter truth of the West's inhumanity to their fellow men.

If you can take more, I'll tell you how dirty King Leopold of Belgium ruled the Congo like a personal estate teeming with slaves out of free men he had enslaved. To get more rubber and inflate the coffers of his little country, he had his army force the people tap rubber from the trees growing wild. Anybody who resisted had his wife killed. Whole Villages that resisted slavery were destroyed. Such was the legacy of colonialism the West left in contrast to Islam which even if it came with arms was welcomed as a liberating force.

Even Western historians have acknowledged this contribution of Islam, like H.G.Wells who noted in his Outline of History (1931):

If the reader entertains any delusions about a fine civilization, either Persian, Roman, Hellenic or Egyptian, being submerged by this flood, the sooner he dismisses these ideas the better. Islam prevailed because it was the best social and political order the times had to offer. It prevailed because everywhere it found politically apathetic peoples, robbed, oppressed, bullied, uneducated and unorganized, and it found selfish and unsound governments out of touch with any people at all. It was the broadest, freshest and cleanest political idea that had yet come into actual activity in the world, and it offered better terms than any other to the mass of mankind.

Likewise we have S.P Scott writing in glowing terms of the Muslim treatment of the non-Muslims of Spain in his work History of the Moorish Empire in Europe (1904):

By its example of equity, toleration and mercy, the new government rapidly gained the attachment of its subjects; the Jew prospered, the Christian forgot his bigotry, and the slave eagerly repeated the formula which released him from bondage and placed him on an equality with kings.

And now I'm sure you're going to ask me about slavery. Did Islam recognize it? Yes it did, though this was more a question about tolerating it rather than recognizing it as such. It did because the social conditions of the times were such. But at the same time, it laid down limitations on enslaving people, confining it only to prisoners of war; it gave them their due rights by placing them on a footing of equality with their masters, so that a master who as much as struck his slave was obliged to free him. If that were not enough it gave slaves the right to demand their freedom from their masters by settling them a reasonable payment. It was Islam, and not the West that set slavery on the trajectory towards abolition.

To begin with, let's consider the nature of human society at that time. Slavery was an accepted institution of those times in almost every part of the world, whether in Rome, Persia or India. Arabia was no exception. You have only to look at the civil war in the US a couple of centuries ago to realize how deeply rooted slavery was even in the so-called civilized world. It led to the division of the US into two camps and immense bloodshed and even then it was not until the 1960s that the descendants of the liberated slaves were given their basic civil rights.

It was not possible to root out this evil because it had become so entrenched in human societies throughout the ages, mainly as a result of war, where the defeated people were taken as slaves to labour for their victors. Thus rather than abolishing it outright, Islam came up with a careful plan that set it on the course towards enfranchisement. For one thing it laid down that no Muslim or offspring of a Muslim could be enslaved, guaranteeing for all time that slavery can have no place in a purely Islamic society. Slaves could only be made of those captives of war who had refused to embrace Islam when the choice had been given to them either to embrace the faith, or to become protected citizens of the state by paying a poll tax or to go to war. In case they lost the war, the survivors would be taken captive and considered as slaves. Thus slaves could only be taken in a legitimate Jihad or Holy War after the choice had been given to them and they reject it.

Surely you will agree with me that taking such captives and enslaving them was a far better option than killing them as often happened in the course of war in those benighted times in Europe and elsewhere in the world, like when the Roman Emperor Marius did when he put to death all his prisoners of war purely for economic considerations as looking after them would have taxed the state.

Islam on the other hand clearly prohibited the killing of captives. At the same time it could not let these captives loose on society. Some would have still borne hostility to their victors and even run amok. Others would have been bereft of a livelihood in the wake of the new state of affairs and could have even resorted to an evil course of life. By deeming captives as slaves and allocating them to the charge of the state or to lot of its soldiers, Islam ensured they were provided with a guardian who could enjoy the fruits of their labour while at the same time taking care of them as their own brethren. Thus you will find that Islam tolerated the existence of slavery only because it had no other alternative at the time. Enslaving prisoners of war was the only merciful and practical recourse at that time.

At the same time Islam ensured the status of slaves, guaranteeing them all their basic rights and putting them on an almost equal footing with the rest of the

community. Even to call a man a slave or a woman a slave girl was disapproved by the Prophet who advised his followers:

None of you shall say, this is my slave and this is my slave-girl. Rather he should say: "This is my man and this is my maiden".

He would also warn them:

Your slaves are your brethren. So if any of you happens to have a slave, let him give the same food that he himself eats, and the same clothing that he himself wears. And do not give them such work as is beyond their power to perform, and if you ever happen to give them such work, you should help them in doing it
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

He assured them of Divine Retribution for those who abused their slaves:

Those who abuse their slaves cannot enter paradise
(Tirmidhi)

And worldly retribution for those who killed or grievously harmed them:

He who kills his slave, we shall kill him; who mutilates his nose, we shall cut his nose; and who gelds our slave, we shall get him gelded in return
(Saheeh Al Bukhari)

Islam also prohibited masters from forcing their slave girls into prostitution and letting them fall victim to unwanted pregnancies and venereal diseases. Only their masters could have access to them sexually, gratifying one another's sexual needs in a moral manner. Master and maid were thus bonded in a peculiar relationship and no sooner she gave birth she was free, and so was her child. In fact Islam encouraged its followers to marry slave girls with the sweeping statement:

You are sprung the one from the other
(The Women: 25)

"*If*" said the Prophet "*a man has a slave girl in his possession and he instructs her in polite accomplishments and gives her a good education without inflicting any chastisement upon her, and then frees and marries her, he shall have a double reward*" (Saheeh Muslim).

The Prophet also commanded his followers to:

Hear and obey, even if an Abyssinian slave with is placed in authority over you
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

This shows that slavery was not even a bar to leadership of the community. The Prophet even appointed his one-time slave Zayd and his son Usama as commanders of the Muslim forces leading an army that comprised some of the noblest men of the Quraysh. A powerful Islamic dynasty, the Mamelukes who ruled Egypt and other Arab lands were enfranchised military slaves. Such was the status slaves enjoyed in

Islamdom in contrast to the West which treated them as sub-humans and exploited them to the hilt.

Hand in hand with this fair treatment of slaves went their right to enfranchisement. Islam looked at every possible opportunity to give slaves their liberty. The Prophet himself set an example by freeing the slaves he had. His freedman Zaid in spite of being freed always stood by his side. The Prophet's close friend and first Caliph Abu Bakr spent much of his wealth buying slaves from the pagan chiefs of Mecca to set them free.

The Qur'an also ordered that atonement for certain offences like unintentionally killing believers was the freeing of slaves:

And whoever kills a believer by mistake, he should free a believing slave,
and blood-money should be paid to his people
(The Women: 92)

So in a sense, a freed slave was to take the place of a free man who had been mistakenly killed by his fellows, giving in his stead another free human being to serve the community.

Islam also made the freeing of slaves a charitable act that would earn God's Pleasure:

It is not righteous that ye turn your faces towards east or west; but it is righteous- to believe in God and the Last Day, and the Angels, and the Book and the Messengers; to spend your substance out of love for Him, for your kin, for orphans, for the needy, for wayfarer, for those who ask, and for ransom of slaves
(The Heifer:177)

But that's not all. It laid down a rule that anybody who abused his slave was to set him or her free based on the Prophet's command:

The expiation for someone who slaps his slave or beats him
more than he deserves is to set him free
(Adab Al Mufrad)

A companion of the Prophet tells us:

I was beating my servant (boy) with a whip. Seeing this, the Prophet approached me and warned 'O Abu Masud! God has more authority over you than you have got on this boy. You had better give up your right over him for this crime. Otherwise you will go to hell"

Another companion of his relates:

We, the sons of Muqarrin, were seven, and we had one servant. Then one of us slapped her and that was mentioned to the Messenger of God, may God bless him and grant him peace. He said, 'Order them to set her free.' The Prophet, may God bless him and grant him peace, was told "'She is the only servant they have" He said, "Then let them hire her and when they no longer need her, let her go on her way" (Adab al Mufrad)

Nay, Islam went further, giving slaves the right to purchase their freedom from their masters or mistresses by settling them a mutually agreed sum.

And if any of your slaves ask for a deed in writing (to enable them to earn their freedom for a certain sum) give them such a deed if ye know any good in them; yea, give them something yourselves out of the means which God has given to you
(The Light:33)

The master could not refuse the plea of such a slave who was prepared to ransom himself. If he did not, the slave could even resort to the law to have him enfranchised. Such a wonderful thing was nowhere heard of in those days, even in the West until a little over a century ago when the emancipation movement gained momentum. Even as late as 1857 we hear of a black slave named Dredd Scott, who having failed to purchase his freedom, sued for his freedom, only to have the Supreme Court of the United States declaring that he could not do so because he was not a person, but private property.

Contrast this attitude to the early days of Islam when we hear of a slave named Sirin asking Anas bin Malik for a contract of emancipation. When anas refused, he complained to the Caliph Umar who told Anas "*Write it for him*". Still he refused. So Umar hit him with his whip and recited the Quranic verse concerning it, and then he wrote the deed of emancipation (Tafsir Ibn Kathir). This instrument allowed all those slaves who desired their freedom to be free. If they did not have the means, the state would intervene, ensuring that the man or woman would henceforth be called upon to work for his or her master or mistress in return for a fixed fee. Else, it would give him the opportunity to work for another until such time he was able to collect the funds necessary for winning his freedom.

As if that were not enough, the state could, and would, purchase their freedom out of the public exchequer. There were occasions when slaves were purchased from public funds and set free such as happened in the days of Caliph Umar Ibn Abdul Aziz. The Qur'an after all clearly laid down that slaves or captives were to be ransomed out of the obligatory alms tax taken from the believers and so this came to be an accepted practice. Thus you will see how Islam set slavery on the trajectory towards abolition, so that all could live as free men and women.

Contrast this generous Islamic attitude with the harsh forms of slavery that prevailed in the West until very recent times. Why, because Christianity did absolutely nothing to uplift the conditions of slaves. It probably only made their lot worse with the founding father of the Church Paul himself preaching:

"*Slaves, be obedient to your human masters with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ, not only when being watched, as currying favour, but as slaves of Christ, doing the Will of God from the heart*" (Ephesians 6:5-6)

"*Slaves are to be under the control of their masters in all respects, giving them satisfaction, not talking back to them or stealing from them*" (Titus 2:9-10)

In the Roman Empire, even after it had become Christian, the slave was deemed a mere chattel who did not have any rights. He could be put to any task by his master or slain at will. These wretches were overworked, underfed and compelled to fight one another to death in the arenas so that the free citizens of the empire could let their greedy eyes feast on the gore. The gladiators whom you may have heard of in

your history books were really slaves forced to fight one another. They would be trained in close combat by overseers and then led to the arena with deadly weapons like swords and lances and fall on each other, slicing and hacking one another under the dictum 'kill or be killed' while the maddening crowd cheered. In other words they were treated even worse than cattle. If ever one could say there was exploitation of man by man, it was this!

But slavery did not end with the Romans. It continued in the West as late as the 1850s when Negro slaves were compelled to do back-breaking labour in plantations in the American south. Did you know that George Washington, the Founding Father of the United States was a slave owner? When Washington was just twelve years old, he inherited ten slaves and by the time of his death he owned over a hundred slaves. His slaves in his plantations worked from dawn to dusk toiling for their master and could be whipped for the slightest infraction. At least at the end of his life he took the bold step of freeing his slaves in his last will, but he was an exception, being the only slave-holding Founding Father to do so.

Thomas Jefferson, the principal author of the Declaration of Independence, America's. second Vice President and third President, was a worse master. He looked upon them as mere commodities such as when he calculated that the births of slave children produced capital at the rate of 4 percent per year: '*I allow nothing for losses by death, but, on the contrary, shall presently take credit four per cent. per annum, for their increase over and above keeping up their own numbers*.' This very man who penned the memorable lines *"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness*" had no qualms about hiring overseers who even whipped slave children to keep them at their tasks.

32nd Night

Johnny: Salams Sheikh, until last night I never had an inkling that Islam stressed so much on our common humanity. I always thought of Muslims as a clannish bunch like the Jews of old. Perhaps our founding fathers were inspired by your faith when they penned that all humans were equal, in spite of their lacking the spirit to follow it to the letter. So here's my next question which also has a bearing on the question of equality:

What are the rights Islam gives women?

The Janissary: Would you believe it if I were to tell you that in Islam a woman opens the gates of paradise to her father, fulfills half the faith of her husband and has the paradise of her son under her feet.

Yes, because the Prophet said of daughters:

Whoever has three daughters, gives them shelter, meets all their needs and shows them kindness will certainly find his abode in paradise.
(Adab al Mufrad)

He said of wives:

When a man marries he has fulfilled half of his religion
(Baihaqi)

And he said of mothers:

Paradise lies at the feet of your mother
(Nasai)

But hold on, in Islam women are not judged in relation to men. I started off with this just to impress on you with how much regard Muslim men are to hold their women in. But there's more to this. Islam recognizes a woman as a human in her own right. Unlike other faiths or cultures which treated her like a minor having no rights whatsoever, Islam gave her many rights including the right to marry a mate of her choice, to divorce him if she found him unsuitable, to stipulate conditions in her marriage contract, to own, inherit and dispose property on her own accord and the right to fair and equal treatment as much as her male counterpart. Most importantly she is regarded as the spiritual equal of the male in the Sight of God, eligible to enter paradise if she does good or fall into the pit of hell if she does evil.

Yes, Islam was the first faith to truly recognize the humanity of women in those dark ages. That such a message should have emerged from the deserts of Arabia when there were glorious civilizations in many parts of the world is indeed surprising. But as a wise man once said, we can judge the attainments of a civilization not by its material progress but by the treatment of its women. So let's see how far this is true.

So let's start with the spiritual equality of women, because all faiths are concerned with the spiritual more than the mundane. God Almighty is very clear in the Qur'an that men and women are spiritually equal and that He will reward them accordingly for their deeds in this world:

Never will I suffer to be lost the work of any of you, be he male or female: ye proceed one from another
(Family Imraan:195)

If any do deeds of righteousness, - be they male or female- and have faith, they will enter Heaven, and not the least injustice will be done to them
(The Women: 124).

God hath promised to believers, men and women, garden under which rivers flow, to dwell therein, and beautiful mansions in gardens of everlasting stay but the greatest of bliss is the good pleasure of God: That is the supreme triumph
(The Repentance: 72)

The day shalt thou see the believing men and the believing women – how their light runs forward before them and by their right hands: (Their greetings will be): "Good News for you this day! Garden beneath which flows rivers! To dwell therein for aye! This is indeed the highest triumph
(Iron: 12)

In the Qur'an we read how Asiyah, the Pharoah's wife beseeched her Lord:

"*O my Lord, build for me in nearness to Thee, a mansion in the Garden, and save me from Pharoah, and his doings*"
(The Prohibition:11)

The Prophet's wife Ayisha said of Khadija, his first wife who stood with him through thick and thin:

His Lord commanded to give her the good news of a house of pearls in the Garden (Paradise). If he sacrificed a sheep, he would give some of it to her friends
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

This was a far cry from the other faiths of the time, including early Christianity. That was a time when the church fathers were wrangling among themselves whether women had souls at all, with many concluding that they had none. Much of it had to do with the ridiculous idea that Eve was responsible for Adam's downfall which it borrowed from Judaism. In the Bible we read the Jewish Sage Joshua Ben Sera saying: "*Woman is the origin of sin, and it is through her that we all die. Do not leave a leaky cistern to drip or allow a bad wife to say what she likes. If she does not accept your control, divorce her and send her away*" (Ecclesiasticus 25:25).

Saint Paul, the true founder of Christianity as we know it today and a Jew himself, saw woman as the arch temptress, the very instrument of Satan in hastening Adam's fall from Grace, the arch sinner responsible not only for her sin, but also that of her husband and indeed of all humanity. He did not mince his words when he said: "*Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in transgression*" (Timothy 2:11-14).

As if that were not enough, he went on to say: "*For the man is not of the woman, but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman, but the woman for the man*" (Corinthians 11:8-10). How misogynist can you get?

He was not alone. Almost all the early church fathers held a similar view. St John the Damascene said: "*Woman is a daughter of falsehood, a sentinel of hell, the enemy of peace, through her Adam lost paradise*". St.Cyprian said: "*Woman is the instrument the devil uses to gain possession of our souls*". St.Gregory said: "*Woman has the poison of an asp, the malice of a dragon*". Tertullian said: "*Do you know that you are each an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. You are the devil's gateway: you are the unsealer of that forbidden tree; you are the first deserter of the divine law; you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of your desert - that is death - even the Son of God had to die*".

In contrast, Islam held woman to be man's equal, not only in the great fall, but also in this world through all its trials and tribulations. It gave women such a place that they even thought it worth dying for. The first martyr in Islam was not a man, but a woman, the slave girl Sumayya who her evil master Abu Jahl killed with a spear when she refused to give up her Islam. Could any other faith boast of such fervour? This is why you will find that for every male who converts to Islam today, there are three females. Of all converts to Islam, three out of four or approximately 75 percent are women. So ask yourself: *Would you embrace a faith that oppresses you?*

The fact is that Islam has always considered women as the twin halves of men, playing mutually complementary roles so that humanity could prosper. The Prophet was once asked about a man who found some wetness (on his clothes) but did not have an erotic dream, and he said, "*He should have a bath*." Umm Salamah asked: "*O Messenger of God, if a woman sees that, does she have to have a bath?*" He said, "*Yes, for women are the twin halves of men.*" (Tirmidhi).

Unlike other scriptures, you will find many passages in the Qur'an addressing women on a footing of equality:

O mankind! Fear your guardian Lord, who created you from a single person, created, of like nature, his mate, and from the twain scattered (like seeds) countless men and women; - fear God, through whom ye demand your mutual (rights), and be heedful of the wombs (that bear you): for God ever watches over you
(The Women:1)

The believers, men and women, are protectors, one of another: They enjoin what is just, and forbid what is evil: they observe regular prayers, pay the alms tax and obey God and His Messenger. On them will God pour his mercy
(The Repentance: 71)

For Muslim men and women, for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in Charity, for men and women who fast (and deny themselves), for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in God's praise- for them has God prepared forgiveness and great reward
(The Confederates:35)

Here, you will find the Qur'an enunciating the ideal of mutual guardianship of men and women. They are protectors, one of another. No other faith ever propounded such a revolutionary idea. In the early Islamic era, women not only freely spoke to the Prophet, but even argued with him over matters that concerned themselves or the larger community, urging a break away from pagan customs even faster than he would have liked. In fact there is a Qur'anic chapter titled *Al Mujadila* or 'She who pleads' which was revealed after a Muslim woman named Khawla protested against the pagan custom of divorcing one's wife by comparing her to one's mother. The Prophet told her to be patient, but nay, she would have none of it and argued with him passionately about it. God, the All Seeing and All hearing, then sent a revelation abolishing the practice once and for all time:

God hath heard the saying of her that disputes with thee (Muhammad) concerning her husband, and complains to God. And God hears your colloquy. Lo! God is Hearer, Knower. Such of you as put away your wives (by saying they are as their mothers) - They are not their mothers; none are their mothers except those who gave them birth - they indeed utter an ill word and a lie.

Indeed, women were so regarded that nobody in the early Muslim community thought it odd to entrust the first copy of the completed Qur'an, which served as the standard for all copies of the scripture in future, to a woman. Yes, the first physical copy of the completed Word of God was kept, not in the custody of an organized male priesthood, but in the safekeeping of a single woman in Medina, Hafsa, the widow of the Prophet and the daughter of the Caliph Umar. It was from this copy lent by Hafsa to Umar's successor Uthman that seven other copies were made and sent to the various parts of Arabia, thus preserving the Holy Book for all time. All this while Jewish Rabbis were teaching: "*Let the words of the Torah rather be destroyed by fire than imparted to women*" and the early Christians proclaiming after Paul: "*It is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church*" (Corinthians 14:34).

At a time when women's participation in religious life was looked down upon in almost every part of the world, Islam made it obligatory, Prayer, Fasting, Giving Alms and Performing the Pilgrimage for example. It moreover allowed women into the mosques, the houses of God. The Prophet made this clear when he said "*Do not prevent God's maid-servants from going to the mosque*" (Muslim). In fact, women could even lead their household in prayer. The Prophet himself appointed Umm Waraqah to lead her household in prayer (Aboo Dawood).

The prayer of the women was also to be the same as that of the men. There could be no difference as in the Jewish prayer where the men recite in their daily morning prayer "*Blessed be God, King of the universe that Thou has not made me a woman*" and the women simply thank God for "*making me according to Thy will*". To differentiate between man and woman in the eyes of God is nothing but heresy in Islam.

Nay, women were even held up as examples to the believers, both men and women, in the very Word of God itself:

And God sets forth as an example to those who believe, the wife of Pharaoh, when she said, "My Lord, build for me near to Thee a mansion in the Garden (of paradise) and save me from Pharaoh and his doings and save me from those that do wrong." And Mary, the daughter of Imran, who guarded her chastity. We blew into her of Our Spirit, and she believed in the words of her Lord"(The Prohibition11-12)

Thus spiritually women are men's equal in every respect. If they are both equal in God's Eyes, how can they not be in the eyes of men? To regard woman as man's inferior thus cannot be a trait of the godly, but rather the way of the devil. So now let us get on with the mundane, the rights and respect Islam gives women in this worldly life. The first is the right to life. The female as much as the male has a right to life. Although we might take this as a given, remember that to this day in some cultures, the killing of female newborns is not uncommon, India and China for example where female infanticide or foetecide is often winked at.

In Pre-Islamic Arabia too female infanticide was common. Newborn girls were buried alive as they were thought as an economic liability. In fact many looked at bringing up daughters as a shame to their manliness. God Almighty made it clear in the Qur'an that the barbaric practice must stop:

And they assign daughters for God- Glory be to Him! And for themselves (sons) they desire! When news is brought to one of them, of (the birth of) a female, his face darkens, and he is filled with grief. With shame does he hide himself from his people because of the bad news he has had! Shall he retain it on contempt, or bury it in the dust? Ah! What an evil (choice) they decide on
(The Bee:57-59)

In fact, the burying alive of girls would later come to be regarded in the community as a distinctive trait of the *Jahiliyyah* or era of ignorance when idolatry reigned supreme and God had all but been forgotten. That is why female infanticide is never heard of in Islamic societies. Islam preached that daughters are as much a Godsend as sons. In fact the gift of a daughter finds mention in the Qur'an even before that of a son:

To God belongs the Kingdom of the Heavens and the Earth. He creates what He Wills. He gives female offspring to whom He Wills and male offspring to whom He Wills
(The Consultation:49)

The Prophet not only preached against the killing of one's daughters, but also promised that bringing them up would earn one God's Grace, in itself enough to admit one to paradise.

Whoever has three daughters, gives them shelter, meets all their needs and shows them kindness will certainly find his abode in paradise. A man asked: "If only two daughters?". He said: "Two also"
(Adab al Mufrad)

Besides the right to a proper upbringing, Islam also gave women the right to a happily married life based on love and mercy:

And among His Signs is this: that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that you may dwell in tranquility with them, and He has put love and mercy between your hearts. Verily in that are signs for those who reflect
(The Romans:21)

God says of this relationship between husbands and wives:

They are your garments and you are their garments
(The Heifer:187)

Why, because spouses are there for mutual love, warmth and comfort, fitting into one another as a garments fits the body. A garment, needless to say, is also for beauty on the one hand and concealment on the other, which is why the Holy Book uses the word *libaas* or garment to address this intimate and beautiful relationship.

Needless to say, marriage is for the common good of the partners concerned. Both men and women depend on one another for their emotional needs and to meet their sexual urges. The very perpetuation of the human race is possible only with the union of both sexes, which again shows how important the sexes are for one another. One simply cannot do without the other. More than the man, marriage is meant to protect the woman as it is she who benefits most from such an arrangement. This is why you will find that even in Western societies, it is women more than men, who desire marriage. Even if they were not proposed to, they would only be too glad to make the first move and propose to the one they have set their affections on if not for their shy nature, not to mention the fact that *it is not the done thing*, even in the *enlightened West*.

Unlike in the other cultures of the day, Islam never regarded a wife as a husband's property. All it required of wives was to guard their chastity, to reserve their private parts for their husbands alone, and to assure their husbands their children were theirs.

Islam never said that a man owned his wife unlike some cultures in the West such as Spain and Portugal where even peasants are still known to sing: *esta mulher e minha da cabeça ate as unhas* (This woman is mine from her head to her toenails). Rather throughout the Qur'an we see a stress on mutual consultation as the basis of married life, as in the following:

If they both decide on weaning, by mutual consent, and after due consultation.
There is no blame on them. If ye decide on a foster-mother
for your offspring, there is no blame on you
(The Heifer:233)

This is a far cry from the Christian world which to this day holds that a wife is bound to obey her husband based on the marriage vow she gives at the time of her wedding. Was it not Paul, the founding father of the church who said: "*Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is head of his wife just as Christ is head of the Church*" (Ephesians 5:22-23). The Jews were no better, regarding women merely as the property of men. This is why you will read in the Bible that a woman's vow (which may even be something personal between her and God) is abrogated if her father does not approve it if she be a virgin or her husband does not approve it if she be married (Numbers 30:2-15). This is why you will read in the Talmud: *How can a woman have anything; whatever is hers belongs to her husband? What is his is his and what is hers is also his... Her earnings and what she may find in the streets are also his. The household articles, even the crumbs of bread on the table, are his. Should she invite a guest to her house and feed him, she would be stealing from her husband* (San. 71a, Git. 62a).

In contrast you will see that in Islam, marriage is a relationship between equals. A man once came to the Prophet and said: "*Messenger of God, I have an orphan girl*

under my custody. Two men have proposed to her. One is wealthy and the other poor. We like the wealthy whereas she likes the poor". Upon hearing this the Prophet said: "*Nothing is better for those who love one another than marriage*" (Ibn Majah).

To cement this beautiful relationship the Prophet even advised his followers to look at the spouses they hoped to marry. A companion of the Prophet Mughirah tells us that when he sought a woman in marriage, the Prophet asked him: "*Have you seen her?*". "*No*" he said. The Prophet said "*Then look at her, because it is more proper that love should be cemented between you*". When Mughirah went to the girl's parents and told them about the Prophet's advice, they did not like it. The girl who was in her room, overheard the conversation and called out: "*If the Prophet has told you to look at me, then look*". Mughirah says: "*I saw her and married her*" (Tirmidhi). To think that even in much later Victorian times in England and elsewhere maidens were expected to drop their gaze on the floor at the slightest mention of men or marriage. And here we have the Prophet telling his followers to have a look at their prospective partners so that love would be cemented between them.

To this end, not only is the bride required to consent to her marriage, but has also been given the right to contract a marriage of her choice, even without the consent of her father or any other guardian if needs be. That the woman's consent is essential for marriage, a sine qua non for the validity of her marriage, is seen from both the Qur'an and the sayings of the Prophet. Although the Qur'an does not directly address the question of consent of either party, it implies that consent is necessary as it describes marriage as a *mithaq* or covenant between husband and wife:

And how could ye take it when ye have gone in unto each other,
and they have taken from you a solemn covenant
(The Women: 21)

The sayings of the Prophet are however very clear on the matter:

No woman who has been previously married should be remarried until she gives her permission; similarly a virgin should not be married until her consent has been obtained
(Ibn Majah)

A grown up girl shall be asked permission about herself. If she is silent, it is her permission; and if she declines, there shall be no compulsion on her
(Tirmidhi, Aboo Dawood, Nisai)

As for the minor girl given in marriage without her consent, the Prophet made it clear that she could, upon attaining majority, abrogate such a marriage on her own accord if she thought it unfit. This was made clear when the Prophet himself married Umama, the minor daughter of Hamza to the son of Abu Salama and stated that they had the option of repudiating the marriage upon attaining puberty.

A woman has also been given the right to contract a marriage at her own discretion, even without the consent of her father or other agnate. This is very clear from both the Qur'an and the sayings and actions of the Prophet. The Qur'an which we Muslims regard as the Word of God clearly implies that women have free choice in contracting their marriages:

O ye who believe! Ye are forbidden to inherit women against their will

(The Women: 19)

This refers to the practice of inheriting women that existed in pre-Islamic times where the widows of deceased men passed on to the latter's relatives. Although the practice, with or without their consent is illegal in Islam, the verse shows that the right to dispose of their persons has been given to the women themselves and not their guardians. If their guardians had any right over them, the right to decide would have been given to them.

The Qur'an further says of divorced women:

If he has divorced her, then she is not lawful to him until she marries another man
(The Heifer: 230)

Here the act of marrying is described with the verb *tankiha* in the feminine singular mode. It is specific to the woman and not a guardian, nor even conjoined with that of her guardian. This is also reflected in certain incidents that took place in the Prophet's lifetime, like when Fatima bint Qais was told by the Prophet about her suitors who had proposed to her. "*So far as Muawiya is concerned, he is penniless, so far as Abu Jahm is concerned, he is a great beater of women, but Usama bin Zaid…*" giving her time to consider. She pointed with her hand, indicating that she did not like the idea of marrying Usama. The Prophet told her: *Obedience to God and obedience to His Messenger is better for thee*. She says: *So I married him, and I became an object of envy* (Saheeh Muslim). So it was she who married Usama and not that she was married off. She made her choice and she chose well.

The Qur'an goes on:

When ye divorce women, and they fulfill the waiting term, do not prevent them from marrying their (former) husbands, if they mutually agree on equitable terms
(The Heifer: 232)

In the above verse we find the Qur'an expressly prohibting divorcees being prevented from remarrying their former husbands if they chose to. It goes on to say of widowed women:

If any of you die and leave widows behind, they shall wait concerning themselves four months and ten days: when they have fulfilled their term, there is no blame on you if they dispose of themselves in a just and reasonable manner,
and God is well acquainted with what ye do
(The Heifer:234)

God here tells us that widows could dispose of themselves in a just and reasonable manner, implying that they could enter into a marriage contract at their own discretion. In the following verse we are told:

There is no blame on you if ye make an offer of betrothal or hold it in your hearts. God knows that ye cherish them in your hearts: But do not make a secret contract with them except in terms honourable, nor resolve on the tie of marriage till the term prescribed is fulfilled
(The Heifer: 235)

The Quran, after specifying the forbidden degrees of marriage, whether due to consanguinity, fosterage or marital status, states:

Thus hath God ordained (prohibitions) against you: Except for these, all others are lawful, provided ye seek (them in marriage) with gifts from your property, desiring chastity, not lust
(The Women: 24)

In the following verse we read:

If any of you have not the means wherewith to wed free believing women, they may wed believing girls from among those whom your right hands possess: And God hath full knowledge about your faith. Ye are one from another: wed them with the leave of their owners, and give them their dowers, according to what is reasonable
(The Women:25)

Here the Qur'an lays down the rule that slave girls should be wedded with the consent of their masters, clearly distinguishing them from free, believing women in whose case no such requirement is made. This shows that there was a difference in the capacities of free women, and slave women to contract marriage, in that the latter had to be wedded with the consent of their masters. No such conditions have been attached to free women, whether previously married or virgin, showing that free women, like free men could contract mariages sans the consent of their guardians.

The practice of the Prophet, itself a basis for Islamic law second only to the Qur'an clearly gives women the right to contract their own marriages. It once happened that a young woman, Khansa bint Khidam, came to the Prophet and complained to him about her father marrying her off without consulting her. Let me put it in her own words:

My father married me to his nephew and I did not like this match. So I complained to the Messenger of God. He said to me "Accept what your father has arranged". I said" I do not wish to accept what my father has arranged". He said: "Then this marriage is invalid, go and marry whomsoever you wish". I said: I have accepted what my father has arranged, but I wanted women to know that fathers have no right in their daughters' matters.
(Fath Al Bari)

What this shows is that not only is the legality of a marriage dependent on the approval of the female party, but also that fathers have no authority over their daughters' affairs including the power to approve or disapprove their marriages.

Also very telling is the incident concerning Subai'a al-Aslamiyya. Two men asked to marry her. One was young and the other was old. She preferred the young man. The old man said: "*You are not free yet (to marry)"*. Her family was away, and he hoped that when they would come, they may prefer him over the other man. She went to the Prophet and he said: "*You are free to marry, so marry whomever you wish*" (Muwatta, Malik).

Despite all this, some scholars, misled by a few spurious sayings attributed to the Prophet have held that the consent of the woman's guardian, like her father or brother, is essential for a valid marriage.

One such is a saying where the Prophet is alleged to have said that the marriage of a female who gets married without the permission of her guardian is void (Ibn Hanbal, Musnad), but all the evidence suggests that this is a fabricated saying. AI-Zuhri, who figures in the chain of transmitters disclaimed any knowledge of it (Musnad). Ibn Juraij said regarding this *"I met Zuhri and asked him about this saying and he did not know this. Then I said to him: "Sulaiman narrates this to us from you". He said: "I fear he had an illusion about me*". Further, Zuhri himself considered such a marriage as valid. Ma 'mar relates: "*I asked Zuhri about a woman marrying without a guardian and he said: "If they are suitable it is permitted*" (Musannaf Ibn Abi Shayba).

Indeed, Ayisha, the Prophet's wife who is claimed to have first related the saying: "*If any woman marries without the consent of her guardian, then her marriage is void, her marriage is void, her marriage is void*" (Tirmidhi) herself does not seem to have stuck to it as she solemnized her niece Hafsa's marriage to Munzar Ibn Zubayr when her father Abdur-Rahman was away in Syria and without his approval (Sharh Ma 'ani Al-Athar. Al Tahawi). So both the original narrator Ayisha and another important narrator Al-Zuhri both acted contrary to what was attributed to them, showing that it is no doubt a dubious or spurious narration.

There is another saying: "*There is no marriage without a guardian"* (Aboo Dawood, Tirmidhi, Bayhaqi). The word used for guardian here, *wali*, is preceded not by a definite, but an indefinite article. Now I ask if indeed an agnatic guardianship were recognised, would there have been any need to denote it by an indefinite article? Certainly not!

Rather what it implies is that the guardianship it refers to does not not necessarily have to be confined to agnates and that it is employed in the sense of agent. Had the Prophet meant an agnate he could have said "the wali' (*al-wali*) which could have referred to the woman's father, brother or other male relative. The saying does not refer to the consent of the wali at all. Rather it implies that his is a function, in this case acting as an agent to contract a marriage on behalf of a woman. If taken in the sense of an agnatic guardianship, it will also contradict the Qur'an, which is implicitly in accord with the capacity of women to contract marriage at their own discretion, as well as the actions of the Prophet himself.

In the Qur'an the term *wali* or its plural *awliya* means something like 'close friend', 'ally. `protector'. God uses it to refer to Himself:

God is the Protector (Wali) of those who have faith.
(The Heifer: 257)

It is also used to indicate closeness between the believers:

The believers, men and women are protectors (awliya) one of another,
They enjoin what is just, and forbid what is evil
(The Repentance: 71)

It is significant that the Holy Book states that the believing men and women are *awliya* (guardians or protectors) of one another. It refers to the Islamic community as a whole and not to any specific relatives, unless otherwise implied as in:

And if anyone is slain wrongfully, we have given his heir (wali)
authority (to demand retaliation or to forgive)

Now, let's go a bit deeper and find out what it really meant in the mouth of the Prophet. The term occurs in the plural, as *awliya* where Umm Salamah gives as one of her reasons for refusing the Prophet's proposal of marriage, the fact that none of her *awliya* were present (Tabaqat al-Kabir, Ibn Sa'd). By employing the plural it seems she is referring to members of her clan, who would have constituted her friends and protectors; and not to any specific relative who had the right to sanction her marriage. The other reasons she gives are her jealousy and the fact that she had children, showing clearly that her hesitation due to the absence of any of her *awliya* was her personal idea.

We also learn from Maymunah bint al-Harith's marriage to the Prophet that Al-Abbas was entrusted with arranging his sister-in-law Maymunah's marriage to the Prophet - the verb *waliya* being used to express the function. Another narration states that she entrusted her affairs *(ja 'ala amraha*) to al-'Abbas. According to another narration, though Maymunah entrusted her affairs to the Prophet, he asked her hand in marriage from Al Abbas. What it all suggests is that arranging the marriage was a function al-Abbas acquired by being so appointed by Maymunah as her agent or representative. Why, because this guardianship if thought of as an agnatic one, could not have devolved upon al-'Abbas as he was Maymunah's brother-in-law, her sister Umm Fadl's husband.

There is also the case of Sawdah bint Zama'ah, who, following the Prophet's proposal of marriage, said "*My affair is in your hands*". The Prophet then appointed a third party to represent her (Tabaqat al-Kabir, Ibn Sa'd). Also illustrative is the story of the Prophet's marriage to Umm Habibah, a Muslim widow who had migrated to Abyssinia. Although her father Abu Sufyan lived in Mecca, he did not as much as consult him when he sent a companion named Amr Ibn Umayyah to the Negus, the Christian ruler of Abyssinia with a message to serve as his agent to contract the marriage on his behalf if the lady was agreeable. One day Abrahah, the maid-servant of the Negus came to Umm Habibah and said: "*The Negus sends his greetings and says to you that Muhammad, the Messenger of God, wants you to marry him and that he has sent a letter in which he has appointed him as his agent to contract the marriage between you and him. If you agree, you are to appoint an agent to act on your behalf*." Umm Habibah cried to herself: "*God has given you glad tidings*", took off her jewelry and gifting them to Abrahah said: "*I appoint Khalid ibn Said ibn al-Aas to act as agent on my behalf for he is the closest person to me*."

In the presence of some Muslim witnesses, the Negus addressed the gathering: "*The Messenger of God, peace be on him, has requested me to conclude the marriage contract between him and Umm Habibah the daughter of Abu Sufyan. I agreed to do what he requested and on his behalf I give her a dower of four hundred gold dinars*." He handed over the amount to Khalid ibn Said who said: *I have accepted the proposal of the Prophet (Peace and blessings be upon him) and married Umm Habibah bint Abu Sufyan to him. May God bless this marriage* (Ibn Sa'd, Tabaqat).

Then there's the companion of the Prophet Al-Mughirah who asked for the hand of a lady in marriage and he was the nearest relative to her, he asked another man to marry her to him (Saheeh Al-Bukhari). Abd ar-Rahman bin `Awf asked Umm Hakim, Qariz's daughter "*Do you entrust the question of your marriage to me?*". She said "*yes"*. He said to her "*I have married you*". (Bukhari). More telling is the incident where a woman presented herself to the Prophet for marriage. A man said:

"*O God's Messenger! Marry her to me*" and the Prophet married her to him (Bukhari). What all this shows is that a woman ought not to give herself in marriage, but that she could appoint a third party as an agent to represent her and so contract a marriage of her choice.

All this makes perfect sense when read in conjunction with the Prophet's statement:

No woman shall give a woman in marriage,
nor a woman shall give herself in marriage
(Ibn Majah)

The first part stating that *no woman shall give a woman in marriage* implies that a fixed guardianship confined to agnates was not recognised. If it were, there would have been no point in the Prophet's saying that a woman may not give another in marriage. This suggests that the Prophet recognised a guardian appointed by a woman much like an agency as distinct from an agnatic one. The other part of the statement stating that *no woman shall give herself in marriage* refers to the practice in the Prophet's day when women gave themselves in marriage sans an agent or go-between who represented the woman, such as happened in the case of Umm Sharik's marriage to the Prophet (Ibn Sa'd) or Khawla bint Hakim's (Bukhari).

This practice appears to have been made lawful only for the Prophet and is specifically mentioned in the Qur'an which states that any believing woman who offers herself to the and if the Prophet wishes to wed her, has been made lawful for him - a privilege for him only, and not for the rest of the believers (The Confederates: 50). That the Prophet disapproved of women marrying by themselves without an agent to represent them is seen in another statement of his that *the fornicatresses are those who marry by themselves without witnesses* (Tirmidhi).

What is condemned here is women marrying by themselves and without witnesses and not their marrying sans the consent of their guardians. You might wonder why the Prophet said so? All I can say was it was to ensure propriety in the marriage contract. Even today in the advanced West, it is established practice for the father of the bride to lead her to the groom and in a sense *give her in marriage*. While Islam preserved it as a matter of custom rather than law to ensure modesty, Christians saw and continue to see in this sacrament that the bride doesn't present herself; rather she is presented to her husband just as Eve was presented to Adam by God in the Garden of Eden. So just as God presented the first woman to her husband, so also the father of the bride who raised her on behalf of God, presents the woman to her husband, saying in effect "*I guarded her, O Lord, and protected her as a father would. Now I'm presenting her as a chaste virgin solemnly handing her over to be protected and cared for by this man*."

It's also a safeguard for a woman liable to make a hasty move by giving herself to some man without some sort of intervention. Such a marriage, without witnesses, could also lead to much intrigue. It was for a similar reason, to overcome the possibility of unmarried men and women cohabiting, falsely claiming to have married clandestinely, or carrying on with bigamous relationships that the Fourth Lateran Council in the early thirteenth century introduced the principle that couples must publish marriage banns prior to the ceremony, and that the celebration of marriages be carried out in public, in the presence of a priest.

The idea here is that there should be some order in contracting a marriage without at all prejudicing a woman's free choice. It was in this spirit that Caliph Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law strongly discouraged marriage without the approval of a

woman's guardian, though considering such a marriage valid nevertheless (Kanz Al-Ummal).

In requiring the consent of the bride and granting her full capacity to enter into a marriage of her own choice, Islam was a long way ahead of other cultures where the bride had virtually no say in so important a matter as this. In the Mosaic Law followed by the Jews, a woman was simply betrothed by her father by to her husband by the payment of a bride price. As the Law said:

When a man seduces a virgin who is not betrothed, and lies with her, he shall pay her marriage price and marry her. If her father refuses to give her to him, he must still pay him the customary marriage price for virgins
(Exodus 22:15-16)

Although Christianity, inspired by Roman Law, recognized the bride's consent to her marriage quite early, there were times the church fathers sought to place restrictions on her capacity to contract a marriage of her choice, like in the Council of Trent in the 16th century which ruled that the consent of parents was required for the soundness of matrimony, arguing that "*in the Old Law children were always given in marriage by their fathers; and that the will of the parent is always to have very great influence on the choice of the child, is clear from these words of the Apostle "He that giveth his virgin in marriage doth well; and he that giveth her not, doth better*". And who is this Apostle it cites. It's none other than Paul in Corinthians 7:38.

In fact, Christian communities in Europe that had just emerged from paganism were themselves deliberating whether a girl could marry without her father's consent, the bishops themselves rejecting the principle that mutual consent of bride and groom was in itself sufficient to establish the validity of marriage. In fact sixth century Merovingian law laid so much stress on paternal consent that even if a Frank girl eloped to church with her lover she was to be returned to her father, fully backed by the church authority. There was even this Bishop, Bertram of Bordeaux, who went so far as to argue that his sister's marriage was invalid because it was not approved by her relatives.

As much as Islam recognizes the woman's right to decide about her marriage, it also concedes her right to seek an end for an unsuccessful marriage. Divorce on the part of either husband or wife is strongly condemned in Islam. The Prophet said: "*With God the most detestable of all things (permitted) is divorce*" (Aboo Dawood). He also said "*Marry but do not divorce. For God does not like men and women who desire only a taste of marriage*" (Tabarani). He went further to say: "*God created nothing on the face of the earth more dear to Him than emancipation (of slaves) and God created nothing on the face of the earth more disliking to Him than divorce*" (Daraqutni).

Yet still it is permitted. Why, because it is better to separate a married couple who dislike or are unwilling to live with one another than bind them permanently in a perpetually unhappy union from which they want to get away, especially where the objectives of marriage like love and compassion between the partners are absent. Thus divorce though strong disapproved, is allowed as a last resort when all means of reconciliation between the partners have proven to be futile. Since marriage in Islam is a civil contract contracted between consenting parties it could be terminated if needs be, which is a far more practical option than the indissoluble sacrament it is in faiths like Christianity or Hinduism.

What is better, I ask you, compelling two people averse to each other and so different in taste and temperament to live together at the expense of domestic peace, or release them from the marriage so that they could find the desired peace in another mate more suited to their liking? Suppose we compel such couples to live with one another until as the Christian dictum goes *till death do us part*, what impact would it have on their psychological state when endless bickerings become the order of the day. Could it not prompt them to seek partners outside of wedlock, making their marriage a folly? Could it not make psychological wrecks of their children? The notion that such couples should be forced to live together for the sake of their children falls apart when you think of the tense, hateful environment the little innocents are compelled to grow up in, knowing when the next brawl between their quarrelsome parents would burst out.

Thus although Islam frowns upon it, it nevertheless recognizes divorce. Divorce at the instance of the husband is called *Talaq*. It involves the husband making a verbal pronouncement that the marriage is dissolved by saying *talaq* 'divorce' three times over three consecutive menstrual periods during which no sexual intercourse has taken place. The divorce becomes irrevocable once the third pronouncement is made. As such, the divorce is revocable and reconciliation possible any time before the third pronouncement is made. This rule is based on the statement in the Qur'an:

Divorced women shall wait concerning themselves for three monthly periods, nor is it lawful for them to hide what God has created in their wombs, if they have faith in God and the Last Day. And their husbands have the better right to take them back in that period, if they wish for reconciliation
(The Heifer:228)

Just as men have been given the right to divorce, so are women. Such divorce at the instance of the wife is known as *Khul*. It may be resorted to if the parties fear that they would not be able to keep the limits ordained by God. For this the Qur'an prescribes a settlement, namely that the wife agree to give a consideration from her dower to her husband for her release from the marriage bond

It is not lawful for you (men) to take back any of your gifts (from your wives) except when both parties fear that they would be unable to keep the limits ordained by God. There is no blame on either of them if she give something for her freedom
(The Heifer:229)

This could be done by mutual agreement between the estranged parties or by order of court. That the husband should consent to the arrangement is suggested by an incident that took place in the days of the Prophet when the wife of Thabit Bin Qais came to the Prophet and said: "*O Messenger of God! I do not blame Thabit for defects in his character or his religion, but I, being a Muslim dislike to behave in an unislamic manner (if I remain with him)"*. On that the Prophet said: "*Will you give back the garden which your husband has given you (as dower)*?". She said "*yes*". Then the Prophet said to Thabit "*O Thabit ! Accept your garden and divorce her once*" (Saheeh Al- Bukhari).

However, there is another way by which wives could secure their rights to divorce at their own discretion and that is to demand a pre-nuptial contract before the marriage takes place. This is commonly done to this day in many parts of the Muslim world. Since marriage as a civil contract and not a sacrament both parties may

subject it to various conditions. Such pre-nuptial stipulations are binding, for the Prophet said:

The conditions most entitled to be abided by are those with which you are given the right to enjoy the (women's) private parts (Stipulations of the marriage contract) (Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

In the days of Caliph Umar, a man married a woman on condition that he would live in her house, but later changed his mind and asked her to move into his house. She refused, and the two of them appealed to the Caliph. Umar stood by the lady. "*Her condition should be fulfilled*" he declared "*Rights may not exceed the agreement*" (Fath Al Bari).

A Muslim woman is therefore able to stipulate various conditions in her marriage contract and secure for herself certain rights and privileges. This includes the right to divorce her husband if she so desires, especially in case of breach of the marriage contract. Thus a wife could stipulate that her husband shall not marry another wife or move her out of her home and if he were to do so, she shall be divorced. Besides such stipulations, the wife could resort to a device called *isma*, where she could repudiate the marriage herself by stipulating it as a condition in the pre-nuptial agreement. This of course involves the husband delegating to her what is known as *tamlik*, the authority to divorce herself. Although this is dependent on the consent of the prospective husband, the bride could insist on it or simply decide not to proceed with the marriage in case he refuses. In countries like India it has become common practice among the Muslims to incorporate the device into the *nikahnamah* or marriage contract.

Muslim women have throughout the ages made use of this device to empower themselves, often at the expense of their husbands. Take Sakinah bint Husayn, the granddaughter of Caliph Ali and Fatima and a great granddaughter of the Prophet who stipulated various conditions into her marriage contract including a condition that her husband will have no right to take another wife during their marriage. We also know that the wife of the future Abbasid Caliph Abu Ja 'far Al-Mansur, Umm Musa stipulated in her marriage contract that "*he should not take unto him another spouse besides her, nor yet a concubine, and this she wrote down in writ unto him. And he was afflicted thereby during ten whole years of his rule while she held him to his pledge unto her, until such a night that she bestowed unto him as a gift hundred maidens*".

Again, Islam was far ahead other cultures in giving women this right. In Mosaic Law divorce was a privilege of the husband only, why because she was deemed the man's property and his right to divorce her followed as a matter of course. A Jewish woman could not divorce her husband without his consent on any ground whatsoever including desertion, nor could such a deserted wife marry another. To this day in orthodox Jewish communities such a woman is called *agunah* 'chained', because that's what she is, chained to her husband. Jesus sought to bring some equality into this state of affairs, but not by giving the wife the right to divorce, but rather by speaking against the husband's right to divorce his wife. He told the Pharisees who had asked him about a man divorcing his wife:

Have you not read that from the beginning the Creator made them male and female and said 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to

his wife and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, no human must separate
(Matthew 19:3-6)

He then said: "*Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery"* (Matthew 19:9) and "*If she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery*" (Mark 10:12).

To this day, the Roman Catholic Church holds very strong views on divorce, so that couples desiring separation have no recourse but to go against the church's teachings and resort to secular authority. This needless to say dents the church's authority and still it sticks with this policy, despite it being the reason why the Church of England separated from it. That was when King Henry VIII wanted to divorce his wife and the Church refused, resulting in the birth of the Anglican Church.

Having looked at the many rights Islam gives women, both in the free choice of a life partner and the right to get out of a marriage if they wish let us now focus our attention on the question of polygamy which is a common grounds for misunderstanding Islam, especially in the West.

Polygamy, the practice of having more than one wife at the same time is permitted to a Muslim male, though it is limited by both the number of wives a man could have, and the condition of equal treatment. A Muslim male may have up to four wives at one and the same time. Says the Qur'an:

Marry women of your choice, two or three or four; But if ye fear that you shall not be able to deal justly (with them) then only one
(The Women: 3)

That four was the maximum number of wives allowed is seen from the example of Ghailan Bin Salamah who had ten wives in the pre-Islamic days of ignorance. When he embraced Islam the Prophet commanded him to keep only four and separate from the rest (Ahmad). A Muslim woman may however have only one husband at a time, a rule based also on the Qur'an which prohibits marriage with women already married (The Women: 24).

This does not at all mean Islam ordains polygamous unions like the Mormons do. Rather, it seeks to limit it as far as possible. In fact, it goes on to state, after permitting it:

Ye are never able to be fair and just as between women even if it is your ardent desire. But turn not away (from a woman) altogether. So as to leave her (as it were) hanging in the air
(The Women:129)

Here God Himself is saying that a man can never do justice between two wives, so who is man to think otherwise. Such a man who contracts multiple marriages puts himself in an impossible position. At the same time God does not wish for the women who have entered into such a marriage to suffer because of it and hence insists that he should not divorce her, but rather fulfil his duties to the best of his ability. Even the Prophet himself found it hard to treat all his wives equally. Although he loved his young wife Ayisha,the departed Khadija still held the most

favoured place in his heart. He often spoke of her which made Ayisha jealous, so much so that one day she called her 'a toothless old woman'. This displeased him very much. After all, who could be dearer to him than Khadija, the woman who had made the first move in proposing marriage to him when no other woman dared go beyond the social norms of her day, the woman who stood by him when the rest of the world had rejected him.

Islam permits polygamy only as a concession to human nature. This is because some men are by nature oversexed and find it difficult to content themselves with one wife. There are even those Western writers like Edward Westermarck who in his work on *The History of Human Marriage* argued that a major cause of polygamy was man's taste for variety, the sex instinct being dulled by long familiarity and stimulated by novelty. Such a man confined to one wife will lose interest in sex altogether which will also affect his partner who will not only be deprived of the sexual relations she longs for but also the love of her man. On the other hand, if he is given ample scope to take another wife or two, his sex instinct will improve, which will benefit all the wives equally.

Thus it is more prudent for the good of society to allow such a man to take a second or even a third or fourth wife rather than make him a virtual eunuch or pave the way for him to resort to illicit sexual liaisons or seek the services of prostitutes with its attendant dangers such as venereal diseases. Had the naughty founder of the Church of England, Henry VIII been allowed polygamy, he would have had no need to behead one wife after another on false charges of adultery to satisfy his lusts. Had it been permitted in the West, there would be no need for men to resort to prostitutes or carry on extra-marital liaisons and pass on venereal diseases to their own wives as a result. Nordan Max was perhaps overstating it when he wrote in Conventional Lies of our Civilization: "*Man lives in a state of polygamy in the civilized countries, in spite of the monogamy enforced by law; out of a hundred thousand men, there would barely be one who could swear upon his deathbed that he had never known but one single woman during his whole life*". But the fact is that there are many, many men in the west who think so and will act as such. Ask yourself: *why is it that brothels flourish where men are deprived of having more than one wife and brothels disappear no sooner polygamy is legalized.* Doesn't this say enough?

Polygamy also becomes a social necessity in certain circumstances, like in times of war, which throughout history have taken a greater toll of men than women, because it is almost always the men who do the fighting. Since a greater number of men die, it upsets the male female ratio resulting in a greater number of women in the population. Not only does it result in war widows who have lost their husbands in war, but also in more young women who are unable to find husbands since unmarried men too go to war, more often than married men. This was even illustrated in the early Islamic period, like in the battle of Uhud where seventy out of seven hundred Muslims were martyred. The surplus women had to be absorbed and polygamy provided the ideal solution. The Prophet himself set an example by marrying many widows who would have otherwise been left destitute.

Little is it known that the precedent set by the Prophet was even followed in Christian Germany a little over three hundred years ago, when in 1650, shortly after the Peace of Westphalia ended a bitter 30 year war, the Frankish Kriegstag based in Nuremberg passed a resolution allowing every man to take two wives.

But it's not only war that results in a lower male population in societies, there are other factors as well including greater male mortality at birth. In fact all nations on the face of the earth have a surplus of women except those that practice female

infanticide or foeticide, by which I mean india. The US has a surplus of over 7 million women, Germany 5 million and the UK 4 million. War only makes the situation worse. A female correspondent of the Sunday Chronicle had this to say in the British Press in the aftermath of World War II: "*Over three million women in Britain are doomed to lonely lives without hope of husbands, child or a real home. The surplus women have gradually increased in the last century. In September 1939 (When the War began) there were 2,818,343 more women than men in Britain. Now the toll of war has taken nearly 3,000,000 men*". She then answers: "*What is to become of thousands of girls who have lost husbands and sweethearts, is one of Britain's Post-War problems*".

In fact, shortly after the Second World War in Germany alone, there were found to be more than 7 million more women than men, almost half of them war widows.

In such situations a large number of women could be denied husbands who serve the dual role of breadwinner and sex partner. Such women could be left destitute with a good many women remaining spinsters all their life. Such women would naturally lust after men to satisfy their sex urges. They might seduce already married men or adopt a promiscuous lifestyle only to their own detriment with the risk of venereal disease and unwanted pregnancies hanging over them like a Damocles Sword. Others, for want of both money and sex could opt to become prostitutes which puts them at even greater risk, subject to all the lust and perversions of dirty men without any sense of morality or responsibility. They become a mere plaything in the hands of naughty men, for they are no more than sex slaves.

It is this pathetic situation that prompted well known social reformer Annie Besant to observe in her Life and Teachings of Muhammad:

"*There is pretended monogamy in the West, but there is really polygamy without responsibility; the 'mistress' is cast off when the man is weary of her, and sinks gradually to be the 'woman of the street' for the first lover has no responsibility for her future and she is a hundred times worse off than the sheltered wife and mother in the polygamous home. When we see thousands of miserable women who crowd the streets of Western towns during the night, we must surely feel that it does not lie in the Western mouth to reproach Islam for polygamy. It is better for woman, happier for woman, more respectable for woman, to live in polygamy, united to one man only, with the legitimate child in her arms and surrounded with respect, than to be seduced, cast out into the streets perhaps with an illegitimate child outside the pale of law, unsheltered and uncared for to become the victim of any passer-by night after night, rendered incapable of motherhood, despised by all*"

The obvious solution in such cases is polygamy where men such as can afford to maintain a second wife could marry these poor women in a legal manner, giving them all the rights to which a wife is entitled to, a union between equals, not one between master and maidservant. A woman in such a situation would certainly prefer to marry a married man than remain a spinster throughout her life or in the alternative become a mistress without any legal rights for herself or her children. Prostitution is unknown or very rare in Muslim countries where polygamy is legally recognized. Why, because it simply removes the conditions for it to thrive.

There may also be instances where a woman is infertile and the husband wishes for offspring or even cases where a woman is ill or unable to have sex due to some ailment or other. The story of Basil is very instructive in this connection. Basil judges his father only to have the father tell him his wife was ailing and he could not have sex with her, leading him to lavish his lust on his maideservant. These are things that happen not just in novels, but in real life.

Thus husbands driven by the need for sex or offpring or both might be driven to divorce their wives and take other women in their place. Now, I ask you, is it not better to let a man take another wife while keeping his first wife instead of driving him to divorce such a helpless woman for no fault of hers?

Now, it may be asked for the sake of equality, why if men are allowed to have more than one wife, why women cannot have more than one husband?

Let me put it this way. Women by nature prefer a single sex partner and having multiple husbands goes against the grain, against their feminine feelings and their very nature. A woman likes to have sex with a man with whom she bonds and forms an attachment. That is the nature of women. This is precisely why women find it so hard to accept polygamous males, because they judge men from their perspective. They are, to put it simply, wired differently. Besides they are not as easily aroused as men. They need to be familiar with a man before they give themselves to him. If God had not created them as such, the world would not have been able to sustain itself. There would have been unbridled promiscuity, overpopulation, breakdown of the family and the end of civilisation itself.

But there's also a practical reason why women ought not to marry many husbands at the same time. If she were to, it would not be possible to know the biological father of the child, and as you know it is only natural that a father would dote only on his child and not another's. so if there is no love in the father's heart, how can the child be given the love and affection he so needs to live and enjoy a healthy upbringing? The family, after all, is the basis of society, you harm it and you harm the very fabric of society.

Finally, all I can say is that polygamy is not usually tolerated in Muslim societies. Many Muslim women in the Arab world make sure to insert a provision in their marriage contract that their husbands shall not take a second wife, and that if they do so, they have the right to divorce their husbands. There are even countries that have gone even beyond this, invoking the Qur'anic verse: *You are never able to be fair and just as between women, even if it be your ardent desire* (The Women:129) to penalise polygamy with imprisonment and heavy fines for both such a man and a woman who knowingly enters into a polygamous marriage.

All this is certainly a better option for women than having no option at all such as happened with the Jews of old who allowed a man to contract multiple marriages with absolutely no condition. If you care to read the Bible you will learn that the patriarchs had many wives. Jacob had two wives Leah and Rachel and two concubines Zilpah and Bilhah through whom he fathered his twelve sons Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachor, Zebulun, Joseph, Benjamin, Dan, Naphtali, Gad and Asher, the founders of the twelve tribes of Israel. David had two wives Abigail and ahinoam and later took more wives and concubines in Jerusalem. His son Solomon went further, taking 700 wives and 300 concubines. In fact even in the modern state of Israel, Jewish men are permitted to have four wives without any obligations whatsoever.

Also nowhere in the New Testament is marriage required to be monogamous, nor is there any commandment prohibiting polygamy. It was very likely Saint Augustine who made it a requirement to conform to Roman Law: "*Now indeed in our time and in keeping with Roman custom*" said he "*it is no longer allowed to take another wife*". In fact Protestant leaders like Martin Luther found nothing wrong with polygamy and even deduced its permissibility from the Parable of the Ten Virgins spoken of in the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus himself envisages the possibility of a man simultaneously marrying as many as ten girls. As Luther said: *I confess that I*

cannot forbid a person to marry several wives, for it does not contradict the Scripture. If a man wishes to marry more than one wife he should be asked whether he is satisfied in his conscience that he may do so in accordance with the word of God. In such a case the civil authority has nothing to do in the matter.

We also learn from history, that the Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne had two consorts Himilitrude and Hildegard and as many as five concubines through whom he fathered many children, one of who became an abbot and another an abbess, all this while the Catholic Church winked at it. We also know that Phillip of Hesse bigamously married Christine of Saxony and Margarethe Von De Saale with the blessings of the Lutheran Church.

As recently as the 16th century the Anabaptists were preaching that he who wants to be a true Christian must have several wives with its German Bernhard Rothmann who lived in Germany taking as many as nine wives. It is also common knowledge that in much later times the Mormons in 19th century America were preaching the same thing, allowing its men to take as many wives as they pleased.

In India until very recent times, Hindu men could take any number of wives as laid down in the Code of Manu. In fact, even during British times, the Bengalis had this odious custom of marrying their girls to high caste Brahmin men which was known as *kulinism*. By this means, a Brahmin man might have upto a hundred wives or so without any responsibilities towards them whatsoever. What made it all the more reprehensible was the fact that when such a husband died, the young widows could never remarry as Hindu law prohibited widow marriage. In earlier times such women were compelled to immolate themselves on their husbands's funeral pyre and had it not been for the British who outlawed this custom called *Sati*, millions of Hindu women would have perished in the flames. In spite of all this, the British dare not lay a finger on this unbridled polygamy. It was only in 1954 that the Indian Parliament passed the Hindu Marriage Act prohibiting Hindu men from taking more than one wife.

Further, just because Islam recognizes polygamy as a concession to human nature, this does not mean that it disregards the right of a woman to a satisfying sex life. Islam very early on recognised the right of the wife to sexual fulfillment. Foreplay before sex was stressed by the Prophet himself when one of his companions named Jabir married a matron. The Prophet asked him "*Why not have a virgin who fondles you and you fondle her*" (Saheeh Al-Bukhari). This is borne out in an incident that took place in the lifetime of the Caliph Umar. Umar during his nightly rounds in the streets of Medina once happened to hear a woman lamenting: "*This night is becoming longer, darker (in the flush of my aroused passions) I am restive, I learn for my beloved to play with. By God, if I would n't have feared God, I would have managed someone in the bed and moved all its sides*". Umar, realizing that the woman's husband was away from her for a long time as he was engaged in a military campaign, asked his daughter Hafsa: "*How long can a wife tolerate the separation of her husband ?*" to which she replied "*From four to six months*". Umar promptly issued the order: "*No married person on military duty shall remain away from his home and wife for more than four months*" (Radd Al Mukhtar). In sharp contrast to European thinking, which as recently as Victorian times looked upon women as passionless, there were Islamic scholars like Al Ghazzali who wrote the book *Ihya Uloom al-Deen* stressing on the need for satisfying a woman's sexual cravings. Ghazzali held that a man must work towards ensuring order in society by satisfying a woman's sexual needs through the legitimate channel of marriage so as to avoid the chaos that might ensue if an unsatisfied woman decided to seek sexual satisfaction

outside of marriage. Likewise the Muslim physician Ibn Sina in his Canon of Medicine prescribed extended foreplay which included "*gently caressing the breasts and pubis until (the woman) is aroused and excited, at which point (the man) starts intercourse, making sure to rub her at the upper part of the labia- meaning the clitoris- because that is the site of her pleasure*".

Islam also gave women the right to inherit, to possess and to dispose of property long before the West did. As God says in the Qur'an:

Unto men (of the family) belongs a share of that which Parents and near kindred leave, and unto women a share of that which parents and near kindred leave, whether it be a little or much - a determinate share
(The Women:7)

And in no wise covet those things which God has bestowed his gifts more freely on some of you than on others: to men is allotted what they earn, and to women what they earn: but ask God of His bounty.
(The Women: 32)

Indeed, even the Prophet's wives did as they wished with their property, without even so much as consulting him. There was this slave girl named Barirah whose master offered her freedom for a sum of money. She came to the Prophet's wife Ayisha and asked her help. Ayisha promptly paid him the money and got Barirah released (Saheeh Al-Bukhari). This even applied to the larger Muslim community. It once happened that the Prophet was conducting the festival prayers and after delivering the sermon, he approached the spot where the women were. Bilal the freed slave then spread out a blanket whereupon the women placed their charity upon it.

The Prophet did not bother to ask them whether they had the permission of their husbands to do so because there was no need to. These women were giving away what they had on their own accord and did not need their husband's consent to part with things that were rightfully theirs. What all this shows that is that women are free economic agents in Islam and none can take this right away. But that's not all. Islam gave to woman the right of inheritance at a time when she herself was an object of inheritance in some cultures. The very idea that a woman could inherit at all in her own right was revolutionary at the time and for centuries afterwards.

To think English Common Law did not recognize a woman's right to own property until 1882 with the Married Women's Property Act. All that time, a wife was more like a bondservant of her husband, having no right to call even the clothes she wore her own. It was well within the husband's right to strip his wife naked in front of an assembly if he thought it fit, why because he owned her very clothes!

The sad part was that whatever a woman earned from the sweat of her brow or inherited from her parents automatically went to her husband. This rule was called *coverture* where the wife and her property, whether existing at the time of marriage or coming into her hands in the course of the marriage all came within the authority of her husband.With coverture a woman lost her legal personality. She became what was known in Common Law terms as *feme covert* "veiled as it were, clouded and overshadowed" by the authority of her husband, where all her rights to own and sell property, will it to others, enter into contracts, and sue others, were subsumed to the authority of her husband. As an Old English Law put it: *Man and wife are one person, but understand in what manner. When a small brooke or little river incorporateth with Rhodanus, Humber or the Thames, the poor rivulet looseth its*

name, it is carried and recarried with the new associate, it beareth no sway, it possesseth nothing during coverture. A woman as soon as she is married, is called covert, in Latin, nupta, that is, veiled, as it were, clouded and overshadowed, she hath lost her streame . . . To a married woman, her new self is her superior, her companion, her master.

It was only in Victorian England with the industrial revolution gaining steam that rich industrialists successfully lobbied the government to recognize the independent property rights of women, not for the love of them, but because it could induce them to work in their factories and so do as they pleased with their earnings.

Yes, the truth is that Islam was far ahead of its times when it came to recognizing the contribution of women in almost all aspects of life, including political life. For one thing it recognized the right of women to declare their approval of a leader by giving him the pledge of allegiance. In the days of the Prophet the women of Medina like their menfolk gave him the pledge of allegiance. When the Prophet arrived in the town, its men gave him the pledge and the women not to be outdone went to the Prophet and said to him: "*Messenger of God, our men have given you their pledges of loyalty. We also would like to give you our pledges*."

The pledge of the men took place by their shaking hands with the Prophet by saying "*Stretch your hand out to give you the pledge*.", but since the Prophet did not shake hands with women, they gave him a verbal pledge, establishing the right of women for all time to publicly participate in the selection of their leader.

The women's pledge even finds mention in the Qur'an: "*Prophet! When believing women come and pledge to you that they will not associate any partner with God, nor steal, nor commit adultery, nor kill their children, nor lie about who fathered their children, nor disobey you in anything reasonable, then accept their pledge of allegiance and pray to God to forgive them*" (The Examiner: 12)

We also learn that following death of the Caliph Umar, even women were consulted in selecting the new Caliph Uthman. When Abdur Rahman Ibn Auf consulted the people about the candidates, he consulted them singly as well as collectively, privately as well as publicly, and even reached out to the women to get their views (Al Bidayah wa Nihayah).

Contrast this with the attitude of the Christian West until recent times, when women did not even have the right to vote. In Britain women did not win the vote until and that too after a long struggle by the Suffragetes who risked imprisonment in campaigning for their due rights. In France women were not enfranchised until after the Second World War and Switzerland gave women the right to vote only a few years ago. The attitude of the West to women's enfranchisement could be seen from the reaction of Queen Victoria, herself a woman who wrote in 1870: "*The Queen is most anxious to enlist everyone who can speak or write to join in checking this mad, wicked folly of 'Woman's Rights' with all its attendant horrors, on which her poor, feeble sex is bent, forgetting every sense of womanly feeling and propriety*".

Even decades late when the women's franchise movement was gaining steam Winston Churchill, who would go on to be Prime Minister of Britain, cried out: "*Nothing would induce me to vote for giving women the franchise. I am not going to be henpecked into a question of such importance*".

But that's not all. Muslim women had other rights as well including the right to express themselves freely in important decisions of the state. Thus we hear that when Caliph Umar attempted to forbid people from paying excessive dowries saying: "*Don't fix the dowries for women over forty ounces. If ever that is exceeded I shall*

deposit the excess amount in the public treasury", a woman from the audience stood up and said: "*It is not within your right because God has proclaimed: Even if you have given one of them (wives) a whole treasure for dower, take not the least bit back*". When he heard this Umar said: "*The woman is right and the man (Umar) is wrong. It seems that all people have deeper insight and wisdom than Umar*". He then withdrew the proposed ceiling (Ibn Al Jawzi).

Contrast this attitude with the father of the church Saint Paul who said:

Women should keep silent in the churches, for they are not allowed to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says. But if they want to learn anything, they should ask their husbands at home. For it is improper for a woman to speak in the church
(Corinthians 14:34-35)

Muslim women also played a role in certain state functions such as in administering or policing marketplaces. Caliph Umar for instance is said to have appointed a woman, Shifa bint Abdullah, as the administrator of the market of Madina (Al-Isabah, Ibn Hajar) and Samra bint Nuhayk as an inspector to police the marketplace in Mecca. She even carried a whip to use in enforcing good and forbidding evil (Tabarani). Women also had the right to offer protection to whomsoever they wished, even if it were a man. In the very early days of Islam we find the Prophet's daughter Zainab announcing at the morning prayers in the mosque that she had given her protection to her Pagan husband Abu al As who had crept into her house unnoticed by the Muslims. The Prophet who was not even told of the incident supported his daughter's right to grant the man protection. In like manner, Umm Hani, the sister of the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law Ali gave a pact of protection to a Pagan warrior whom her brother wanted to kill during the conquest of Mecca. She told the Prophet: "*Messenger of God, my brother Ali claims that he is at war with a man to whom I have granted asylum, someone with the name Ibn Hubayrah*" only to have the Prophet tell her: "*We give protection to whomever you have given asylum, Umm Hani*"(Saheeh Al Bukhari).

Did you know that in the Prophet's time some Muslim women even participated in warfare and contributed to the war effort in no small way. When the Prophet and his companions went to war it was not rare for women to accompany them and involve themselves in war-related activities. Take Umm Atiyyah who participated in as many as seven battles with the Prophet, preparing food for the combatants, nursing the wounded and attending to the sick. To put it in her words:

I went with God's messenger on seven expeditions: I would watch over their belongings, cook for them, treat the wounded and nurse the ill
(Saheeh Muslim)

In the Battle of Yarmuk fought against the Byzantines, some Muslim soldiers drawn from some recently converted tribes, had, overawed by the Byzantine onslaught, fled to the women's camp. The hardy women of the Quraysh, leaving the men behind, rushed out to fight the Byzantines with swords flashing, among them Juwairiya who sallied forth into the thick of battle with her band of warrior women until she was wounded in the melee. Among them was Asma bint Yazid who took as many as nine enemy lives. We also learn that her better known

namesake, Asma, daughter of Abu Bakr, fought side by side with her husband on horseback against the Byzantines (Futuh Ash Sham).

Not just wives, even newly married brides showed their prowess in battle, among them Umm Hakim, the daughter of Harith who had just married one Khalid. She had pitched her tent near a bridge and the wedding feast was on when some Byzantines fell upon them. The bride herself fought bravely, killing as many as seven enemy soldiers (Usud Al Ghaba). And who can forget Nusayba bint Ka'b Al-Ansariyyah, also known as Umm Amara who in the Battle of Uhud rushed headlong into the fray with unsheathed sword in hand, defending the Prophet against his foes. The Prophet would later remark: "*Wherever I turned, to the left or right, I saw her fighting for me*".

In later times, this battle-hardened lady fought against the false prophet Musaylimah, sustaining as many as twelve wounds, the deepest of which was on her shoulder inflicted by a man named Ibn Qami'ah. Did you know that the Prophet even distributed the booty left behind by the enemy to the women who contributed to the war effort. The Prophet was so pleased with the contribution of Umm Dhahak who accompanied him in the Khaybar campaign that he gave her the same share of spoils as he gave the men (Al-Isabah). Nusaybah too took part in the war against Banu Qurayza and the Prophet gave them part of the booty.

During the siege of Damascus, the enemy approached the Muslim women in the rear to take them hostage, only to have Khaula, daughter of Azdar cry out: "*Sisters, will you disgrace the dignified skirts of Arabian chavalry. Let us die rather than submit*". They then took their tent-poles in their hands and wielded it at the enemy, killing as many as thirty of them before the Muslim army came to their assistance. At a time when Christian women were not expected to speak in church or public, this outspoken woman gave a fiery speech in Al Farat in support of her husband Atba's decision to battle the Byzantines. Atba had been appointed commander by Caliph Umar but did not have the power of speech to encourage the combatants to do battle. His wife did him the favour (Futuh Al Buldan, Baladhuri).

During the Battle of Maisan fought against the Persians on the banks of the Tigris, Ardah, the granddaughter of Kaldah, the well known Arabian physician, seeing the Muslim army locked in battle with the enemy, made a long banner of her apron and got the other women of her camp to make similar banners, before riding out towards the Muslim army with banners held high. The enemy, thinking that a fresh reinforcement of Muslims had arrived, beat a hasty retreat (Tabari).

In the Battle of Qadissiya also fought against the Persians, Muslim women played an important role in rescuing their wounded from the battlefield. As one woman would later recall: "*When the battle was over, we (women) rushed forward daringly to the battlefield with rods in our hands and picked up the wounded Muslim soldiers*" (Tabari).

There were others who took care of the wounded, like Rafida who pitched her tent in the mosque of the Prophet to serve as a sort of military hospital to wash and dress the wounds of injured soldiers. The Prophet had high regard for her skills. When Sa'd Ibn Muath was wounded in the Battle of the Trench, the Prophet said: "*Take him to Rafida's tent*" (Aboo Dawood).

Women in early Islam played an important as patrons of science and the arts and as builders of hospitals and universities. Sukayna, the great granddaughter of the Prophet and daughter of Husayn for instance was a fiercely independent woman and an educated one at that. She married more than once, and each time stipulated in her marriage contract that she would enjoy her independence without

interference from her husband in any way. In this manner she went about her business freely, addressed meetings and received men of letters at her home, oftentimes even debating important issues with them. And who can forget Zubayda, the wife of Harun al-Rashid of Arabian Nights fame who owned properties all over the empire managed by agents she appointed for the purpose. A patron of the arts and sciences, she made provision for hundreds of men of letters from all over the empire to come work in Baghdad.

During the Mamluk period in Egypt a thousand years ago women established as many as five universities. A few centuries later, in the Ottoman empire we hear of women, mainly the wives or mothers of sultans, founding some well known hospitals including the famous Nurbanu Sultan hospital. Women even built some great mosques, like Roxelana, the wife of Süleyman the Magnificent who among other things founded the Haseki Külliye, a sprawling complex, consisting of a mosque and seminary.

33rd Night

Johnny: Salams Sheikh, I must say last night was quite a night as if straight from the Arabian Nights. It was so inspiring to learn that Islam has given women so many rights, which is not what we often hear in the West. It's a subject worth writing a whole book about. Now to my next question:

Isn't the Islamic dress code too rigid?

The Janissary: Let's look at it this way. Man is the only creature on earth who wears clothes. Why, because he needs them. Animals have coats and fur to clothe them, but man alone has bare skin all over. This is because God created man as such - weak and vulnerable in his natural state. He clothed him only with a veneer of skin while he clothed the rest of creation with hardier stuff, coats of fur for the creatures of the land, plumage for those of the sky and scales for those of the sea. How is it that if indeed man evolved on this earth as atheists hold, he did not evolve a thicker skin like a dino, rhino or hippo or a coat of fur like our domestic pets? Even evolution theory cannot explain why man has no fur when even the apes of Africa from whom he is supposed to be descended have furry bodies.

The answer is simple. Man did not evolve here. He was created by God and given the earth as his abode to live and die. This is why man needs clothes, to protect himself from the ways of the world, its heat and its cold. This in itself shows that man is not of this world. His destiny is elsewhere, on a higher spiritual plane far from the animal nature atheism attributes to him.

Man doesn't stop at that. He takes great pains to dress properly because a well dressed man is looked upon as a cultured man, a gentleman. The female of the species is still more conscious of how they dress, going to great and sometimes absurd lengths to be chic. It's as if it were something inborn in man, this desire to dress well. But there's another reason why humans need clothes besides protection - and that's a feeling of shame. Humans are the only creatures who feel a sense of shame in front of their own kind. Even the most noblest of them possess this trait. After all who can forget Lady Godiva whose husband told her that if she wanted to have the taxes of the people reduced, she would have to ride through the town of Coventry naked. She accepted the challenge and told the townsfolk to shut their doors while she rode though. Folk legend has it that the only one who broke the trust, Peeping Tom was struck blind by God. This feeling of shame is something that even evolutionary theory cannot explain, it's that elusive!

This sense is something inborn in humans and has been there since the dawn of mankind. Adam and Eve felt it when they ate of the forbidden fruit and it has remained with their offspring ever since. So next time somebody asks you why people wear clothes, you know the answer!

So it was God who gave clothes to man, who bestowed nature with wool and cotton and other raw material to fashion clothes out of, and gave men the knowledge to put it to good use, to cover themselves for protection from the environment and to dispel their sense of shame. As God says in the Qur'an:

"O Children of Adam! We have bestowed raiment upon you
to cover your shame, and as an adornment for you.
But the raiment of righteousness - That is the best
(The Heights: 26)

Yes, clothing not only covers up your sense of shame, but also gives humanity beauty so that we are more beautiful to look at. It gives grace to people. It covers our ages, bulges and contours so that we look more dignified, certainly better than the types you find in your typical nudist camp. Clothing makes us more cultured which is why much of human culture over the ages has to do with clothing. In fact historians or seasoned arts connoisseurs are able to determine the era of a person portrayed in a picture or statue just by having a look at his or her attire. Such has been man's obsession with clothes over the ages. It's as if man has been continually changing his clothes for better or worse. Man has not evolved, clothing has!

It's in man's nature to love good clothes. That's quite natural and even God explicitly allows this in the Qur'an:

O children of Adam! Wear your beautiful apparel at every time and place of prayer. Eat and drink, but be not prodigal. He (God) loves not the prodigals
(The Heights:31)

The Prophet once said: "*No one will enter Paradise in whose heart is (as much as) a mustard-seed of pride*." A companion asked: "*What if a man likes his clothes to look nice and his shoes to look nice?*" . The Prophet replied: "*Verily, God is Beautiful and loves beauty; pride is rejecting the truth and looking down on people*."(Saheeh Muslim).

However Islam does not stop at that. It lays down a code of dress code for both men and women specifying the minimum amount of clothing that has to be worn. The great thing about such a code is that it cannot change over time like we saw in Britain over the last few centuries when the modest dress of women that prevailed in the mediaeval age was dumped in favour of fashions that almost exposed their bosoms as in the Elizabethan Age, only to be revived with added vigour to cover almost every part of the body except the face and hands during the Victorian Era. By prescribing such a code Islam ensured that pristine human culture with its focus on modesty will be preserved for all time.

By setting these standards, Islam ensured that people would behave decently in society and closed the door to vice and immorality. Why because lewd men and women find that unnecessarily exposing themselves or attracting unnecessary attraction to themselves with scanty, tight or see-through clothing is the easiest way to tell people who they really are and what they want.

The dress code is this. For men, it is to cover all that is between the navel and the knees when in the presence of others except for their wives. As a saying of the Prophet puts it "*Whatever is above the knee should be covered and whatever is below the navel should be covered*" (Daraqutni). The wearing of clothes below the ankles is also strictly prohibited for men, for the Prophet said that "*The part of a lower garment which hangs below the ankles is in the fire*" (Bukhari). This is the minimum requirement for men to cover in the presence of anybody, the only exception being in the presence of one's wife.

The Prophet himself used to dress very modestly. His attire often consisted of a *qamees*, a long shirt with an *izaar* or waist sheet for the lower garment. He also wore a red cloak, a black turban with its two ends that dangled between his shoulders and footwear with two straps on them rather like a sandal. White clothes he especially mentioned: "*Wear white clothes, for they are the best of your clothes, and shroud your dead in them*."(Tirmidhi).

Thus you will find Arabs and other Muslim peoples attiring themselves in very beautiful garments, from the long flowing white robe known as *dishdasha* so common in the Arab world to the coats, vests and trousers common in the Indian subcontinent. You place an Arab in his white *dishdasha* and headdress held firmly with a black ring alongside a Westerner dressed in shirt and trousers and you'll notice the difference. The Arab will stand out not because of his looks, but because the way he's dressed in the almost angelic raiment that even Jesus is shown to wear.

The Islamic dress code for women is a bit more strict than for men. It requires that every part of a woman should be covered when in the presence of a non-related male except for her face and hands. Ayisha, the Prophet's wife related that when her sister Asma once came to see him, she was wearing a thin, flimsy, perhaps almost see through dress. The Prophet immediately turned away from her and said to her: "*O Asma, once a woman reaches the age of puberty no part of her body should be uncovered except this and this*" and he pointed to the face and hands (Aboo Dawood). Needless to say, this includes her hair. This rule of course applies only in the presence of non-related men, not before one's husband or father or brother or sons. In fact, a woman can dress as she likes in front of her husband in the most sexiest, scintillating lingerie or harem pants if needs be with a pierced belly button to add to her allure - for her husband and him alone.

The need for women especially to be properly clad is also stressed in the Qur'an.

And tell the believing women to lower their gaze), and protect their private parts and not to show off their adornment except only that which is apparent, and to draw their veils over their bosoms, and not to reveal their adornment except to their husbands, their fathers, their husband's fathers, their sons, their husband's sons, their brothers or their brother's sons, or their sister's sons, or their (Muslim) women or the (female) slaves whom their right hands possess, or old male servants who lack vigour, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex. And let them not stamp their feet so as to reveal what they hide of their adornment
(The Light: 31)

It however makes an exception in the case of elderly women who are past childbearing age:

Such elderly women as are past the prospect of marriage – there is no blame on them if they lay aside their (outer garments), provided they make not a wanton display of their beauty; but it is best for them to be modest, and God is the One who sees and Knows all things
(The Light:60)

In another verse, God instructs His Prophet:

Tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks over their persons. That will be better, that they should be known so as not to be annoyed
(The Confederates: 59)

The word *jilbaab* mentioned here means an outer garment though whether it covered the face is uncertain. We however know that the Prophet's wives veiled themselves

when in the presence of strangers or going outdoors, based on which some jurists regard it as strongly recommended for Muslim women.

The Prophet's wife Ayisha says that when they were with the Prophet in pilgrim's garb, some riders appeared before them. They drew their overgarments from the head in front of the face and that when they rode past them, they uncovered their faces (Aboo Dawood). However it seems that covering the face was required of the wives of the Prophet on account of their special status as the *Ummul Moomineen* or Mothers of the Believers and this does not apply to Muslim women in general.

That a higher standard of propriety should be expected of the Prophet's wives is only natural, considering their exalted position as the Mothers of the Faithful:

O Consorts of the Prophet! You are not like other women. If you fear (God) be not too complaisant of speech, lest in one's heart is a disease be moved with desire, but speak a speech that is just. And stay quietly in your houses, and make not a dazzling display like that of the former times of ignorance, and establish regular prayer and give regular charity
(The Confederates: 32-33)

The veil was the outcome of what is known as the *verses of the curtain* which was meant to allocate private space to the Prophet's household. The Prophet, needless to say, was a public figure and the assumption was that his followers could have easy and ready access to him, notwithstanding the fact that he had a right to lead a private life as well.

O ye who believe, enter not the houses of the Prophet for a meal until leave is given you, and at the proper time. But when you are invited enter; and when you have eaten, disperse. Do not engage in familiar talk, for this would annoy the Prophet and he would be ashamed to bid you go; but of the truth God is not ashamed. If you ask his wives anything, speak to them from behind a curtain. That is more chaste for your hearts and theirs
(The Confederates:53)

This was a piece of protocol that applied to the Prophet's wives only on account of their distinct status as Ummul Moomineen or Mothers of the Believers. In other words, it was symbolic of their slightly different status. Other women soon followed their example and it became fashionable for women especially of the upper classes to wear he veil. You must also bear in mind that Arabian culture at that time was very egalitarian and it would not have been possible nor practical to prevent other Muslim women from taking to the veil.

The Mothers of the Believers were looked upon as the ideal women and so a good many women of those days adopted the veil, which in some conservative Muslim societies continues to this day as part of their culture. Did you know that in the middle ages, the wives of the crusaders also took to wearing the veil, not that they were compelled to, but only because they themselves felt it gave them more respect. Indeed some say that these crusader wives adopted the veil after seeing how well their Muslim sisters were treated by their menfolk and so wished to be treated likewise by their men.

That all that was required of women other than the Prophet's wives was to cover all except the face and hands is seen from the Prophet's statement to his sister-in-law Asma that: *Once a woman reaches the age of puberty no part of her body should be*

uncovered except this and this" and he pointed to the face and hands (Aboo Dawood).

The Qur'an certainly presupposes a society where women are not necessarily veiled, as in the verse:

> *Tell the believing men to lower their gaze and be mindful of their chastity. This will be most conducive to their purity. Verily, God is aware of all that they do. And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and to be mindful of their chastity, and not to display their charms (in public) beyond what may be apparent thereof" (The Light: 30-31).*

That the Holy Book should instruct men to lower their gaze when in the presence of strange women suggests that it was permissible for women to go about unveiled. Otherwise there would have been no reason for the Qur'an to command so. When a well known companion of the Prophet, Ibn Abbas was asked about the verse regarding women not displaying their charms except that which is apparent - *la yubdeena zeenatahunna illa ma Zahara* -, he said: "*it refers to the face and hands*" (Al-Musannaf, Ibn Abi Shaybah).

There is also the Prophet's statement "*The woman in pilgrim's garb should not cover her face or wear gloves*" (Saheeh Al-Bukhari). Now, anything that is prohibited in the normal course of life can never be made obligatory. Thus if exposing the face was in fact prohibited for women, then how could it be made obligatory as part of the pilgrims' garb? This suggests that veiling the face is not obligatory in Islam.

Other incidents from the lifetime of the Prophet and the early caliphs also support this view. Once Al-Fadl Bin Abbas was riding behind the Prophet on his camel, a beautiful woman from the tribe of Khatham arrived, seeking an opinion from the Apostle. Al-Fadl then began looking at her as she was a beautiful woman. The Prophet noticing his companion's gaze, held out his hand backwards, catching the chin of Al-Fadl and turning his face (to the other side) so that he would not gaze at her (Saheeh Al-Bukhari). This shows that the woman concerned was not veiled and the Prophet did not admonish her for being so. On another occasion when the Prophet was preaching to a group of women on a festival day, a woman with a dark spot on her cheek stood up to seek his view on something (Saheeh Muslim). That she should have been so described shows that she too was unveiled, even in the presence of the Prophet. This was so even in the days of the early caliphs. When Umar attempted to prohibit people from paying excessive dowers, a flat-nosed woman from among the women of the audience stood up and successfully challenged his decision (Ibn Al Jawzi). This again shows that the woman concerned was unveiled since there was no other way for the others to know that she was flat-nosed.

Now it may be asked, why are women told to cover their entire person save for face and hands while all that is required of men to cover is the region from navel to knee. Let's look at it this way. Even in Western countries there are laws defining what is decent and what is not. Breach them and you can be charged for *indecent exposure*. What this means is to cover one's private parts, in the case of a male his genitals and in the case of a female her genitals as well as her breasts. Thus even in the West you will find that due to anatomical differences between men and women, men are treated differently from women. No country has ever charged a man for exposing his chest while even in countries like the US women could even be charged for breastfeeding their children in public.

What Islam does is raise the threshold a bit more to ensure a greater sense of modesty, thus reducing the opportunity for enticing or arousing the opposite sex as far as possible. Islam does not frown upon sex, but rather encourages it, even regarding it as a charitable deed that brings reward. However it is very particular that such sexual activity be confined to wedlock. In fact a woman may appear in the most sexiest underwear in front of her husband in the privacy of their home in order to arouse him, but not in front of others which will only open the door to adultery and its attendant evils.

But there's another reason why Islam requires women to be covered more modestly and that is to ensure that they are not looked upon as sex objects. Throughout history men have been fascinated by the female form. Artists paint it and vulgar men fantasize about it. The large number of statues of female nudes found in cultures all over the world testify to it. Whether we like it or not, worldly men look upon women as mere objects for the gratification of their lusts.

Many a vain woman also likes to exhibit herself, just for the fun of it and this has been so since ages past. This is why that ancient Indian Sage, the Buddha observed two thousand five hundred years ago : "*A woman is anxious to exhibit her form and shape, whether walking, standing, sitting or sleeping. Even when represented as a picture, she desires most of all to set off the blandishments of her beauty, and thus to rob men of their steadfast heart! How then ought you to guard yourselves? By regarding her tears and her smiles as enemies, her stooping form, her hanging arms, and all her disentangle hair as toils designed to entrap man's heart. Then how much more should you suspect her studied, amorous beauty; when she displays her dainty outline, her richly ornamented form, and chatters gaily with the foolish man!*"

By requiring women to cover up, Islam ensures that men do not look at women in this way. It compels men to respect women for who they are, to judge them by their character rather than by the beauty of their bodies, by their inner spirituality, rather than outer appearances. By doing so it raises their status in the eyes of men. The moral holds true of Muslim women as it does Christian nuns.

Thus it is women's liberation in the truest sense, liberating women from entrenched sexist notions that a woman must be judged by her looks and looks alone. It is liberating because when a woman is dressed modestly, it allows her greater freedom to perform her duties and be an active member of society, unstifled by the gaze of vulgar men. It is also a shield against sexual harassment, unwanted advances and suggestive remarks which are only too common in the West.Why, because a woman who dresses modestly also gives a message: *No fooling around with me! Treat me as a human, not as your fantasy!* How sad it is to see western women even in these enlightened times contest in beauty pageants clad in nothing but scanty bikinis to be judged by men by their bodies and nothing else.

Could women ever achieve worth by making a wanton display of their bodies? Nay, not a bit. Little wonder such women have been reduced to the level of animals with men referring to them as a *chick* or *hot bitch*. Take the pin up poster girl which some in the West believe to be the peak of female attainment. What more is she in the minds of men than sex slave or public property! Not very far from the stone age are we?

What's more, dirty men are attracted to women with scanty clothes like a fly that settles on a piece of exposed candy. If a woman dresses like a whore, men will treat them as such. Even American men despite their liberal attitudes are known to find fault with their wife for wearing provocative clothing, with one well known actor,

Mel Gibson even going on record to comment that his wife looked like a *bitch in heat*, and if she got raped by a pack, it will be her *fault*.

If indeed, the dress code for women is oppressive as some would have us believe, why is it that young Muslim women are choosing to wear it even in the west. Why is it that they are reclaiming this heritage of theirs even in those parts of the world where their mothers and grandmothers had discarded it for the sake of 'modernity'? That is why you will find the headscarf gaining popularity in countries like Turkey and certain parts of the Arab world that once embraced Nationalist and Socialist ideals, but have since discarded these for true Islamic values. Why, because these girls know better than their parents. They know that it gives them not only what you call self-respect, but also respect in the eyes of the beholder. A woman's hair for some odd reason has long been called their 'crowning glory' as if nothing else of theirs really matters. But I tell you, cover it and you'll place more value on her humanity and her real worth.

Even the *niqaab* or face veil that only a small minority of Muslim women wear is not without its use in this day and age. Women who wear it, including Western women who have embraced Islam zealously, say it is 'liberating' because it gives them anonymity and frees them of any inhibitions they have when they are in the presence of strange men- and especially men who tend to stare at women- helping them to express themselves better. True, this is a subjective view, but still it is a view expressed by these women themselves and we ought to respect their choices. No one should question a woman as to how she chooses to dress. It's her choice and hers alone.

The face veil also serves a humanistic function. Why, because there are women who are physically unattractive or who are deformed or disfigured who might find it a relief to hide their defects with a voluminous gown and face veil, especially in societies where women are often judged by their looks. Thus it is unfair as some Western countries have done, to ban it. Everything in Islam has a reason. Why, because God made it so.

Finally all I can say is that it is not only Islam that requires women to dress modestly, all civilized cultures did and still do. Did you know that the Latin word for bride, *nupta*, from which we get the English word *nuptials* comes from a verb *nubo*, literally meaning 'to cloud', in other words 'to cover or veil'. This is why you will find the Roman bride always portrayed with her head veiled as a sign of modesty before her groom. To this day traditional Hindu women in India cover their heads when they go out as a mark of modesty.

Jewish and Christian women like their Muslim sisters also covered their heads in the olden days. In fact Judaism and Christianity, have at certain times, gone even further than Islam in calling for women to be veiled from head to toe. In the Bible we read that Rebecca covered her face at Isaac's approach while in Solomon's Song of Songs singing the charms of the beloved we hear the expression: *Your eyes are doves behind your veil* (4:1).

The Father of the Christian Church as we know it today, Saint Paul said:

"Women should adorn themselves with proper conduct, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hairstyles and gold ornaments, or pearls or expensive clothes, but rather as befits women who profess reverence for God, with good deeds" (Timothy 2:9-10)

He did not stop at that, but also wanted good Christian women to cover their hair:

If a woman does not have her head veiled, she may as well have her hair cut off (Corinthians 11:5-6)

That is why you will find that Mother Mary is always depicted in Christian imagery with her head covered like any good Muslim woman. That's not all, have a look at your nuns covered all in black and with hooded heads, looking even more modest than the average Muslim woman who may opt for a more colourful headscarf and may even have a nose stud or ring to adorn her face, the only ornament she could really display while sticking to Islamic norms.

In the Eastern Churches the covering of the head is taken further. In Russia for instance, it is not only nuns who cover their heads, but also ordinary women who will never go to church without a head covering. Indeed in the olden days, it was not only in church that Western women covered their heads. Have a look at the old pictures of noblewomen like Isabeau of Bavaria, Queen of France in 15th century or Anna Jagielon Queen of Poland or even Queen Victoria of Britain in her old age, just to name a few. In fact it was the accepted practice for Anglo-Saxon women to cover their heads when going outdoors during the Middle Ages. To this day certain orthodox Christian groups in America like the Amish and Anabaptists require that women cover their heads at all times. Indeed Anabaptist women take it further, wearing headcoverings to bed or when in the shower as their church holds that a woman is obliged to rebel against her husband if he as much as forbids her to wear the covering at all times, because as they say, it is better to obey God than to obey man. This means that these nice ladies cannot even take off their head coverings when having sex with their husbands. They go that far. Thank God our women never take it so far. But the point I want to stress is that covering the head is really as much a part of Christianity as much as it is of Islam.

Some Christians of old went even further, advocating the veiling of the face as well. An early Church father of the third century, Tertullian in his treatise on The Veiling of Virgins *De Virginibus Velandis* stressed on the necessity for the veiling of women, both virgins and married women, both inside and outside the church. The veil he advocated for Christian women was to cover the head and neck well down the back, so as to make it impossible for another to look into her face, and for her to look at others. He went on to declare: "*All ages are endangered in you. Put on the armour of modesty, surround yourself with a rampart of chastity, cover your sex with a wall which neither allows your eyes beyond it nor admits others in*".

You will still find remnants of this attitude in the flimsy white veils of brides and the black veils of widows which western women still wear on special occasions. To this day it is the custom for the bride to enter the marriage ceremony with a flimsily veiled head and face until the marriage is over or her father lifts it up in presenting her to the groom or the groom himself lifts it up. As for the black veils of widows, you only have to look at the famous photo of Jacqueline Kennedy at her husband's funeral or of the royal women at the funeral of King George VI. So just as Islam has had its ultra orthodox strain, which thankfully has never gone beyond a certain fringe, so has Christianity.

34th Night

Johnny: Salams Sheikh, your talk last night was quite an eye opener. I guess we in the West should not be too judgemental about how others dress. There is certainly more to it than meets the eye. So now to my next question:

Aren't Islamic dietary laws too strict?

The Janissary: Ever stopped to think of it, that physically man is what he eats. Plant is absorbed by animal and animal by man. The beauty of it all is that despite one feeding on the other, each organism retains its own nature. Man eats both plant and animal and all the nourishment he gets, he gets from these sources, and still he retains his own inherent nature. That is the beauty of creation. But there's a hitch. Man cannot eat what he wants. He has to take wholesome food that is compatible with his system. When one eats unwholesome food it affects his health and wellbeing. Since Islam is a holistic system, a whole way of life, it also takes into account what man should and should not eat, ensuring that he only eats wholesome food so as not only to ensure his physical health, but also his mental and spiritual health, because at the end of the day they are all more or less interconnected.

This is why God tells us again and again:

O ye people! Eat of what is on earth, lawful and good;
and follow not the footsteps of the Evil One,
For he is to you an avowed enemy
(The Heifer:168)

O ye who believe!
Eat of the good things that we have provided for you
And be grateful to God if it is Him ye worship
(The Heifer: 172)

Thus whatever laws concerning food Islam lays down, it is for a reason, to preserve our spiritual and physical health. Why look at the few things we have been prohibited, when there are so many good things we have been allowed. A true believer realizes that God is Most Wise and His rules are full of wisdom. Being the Creator, He knows best way what is good for His Creation to live happily in this world and prepare for the next. So let's see what God really prohibits us from taking:

He hath only forbidden you dead meat and blood and the flesh of swine
And that on which any other name hath been invoked besides that of God. But if one is forced by necessity, without willful disobedience, nor transgressing the limits
Then he is guiltless, for God is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful
(The Heifer: 173)

Forbidden to you are carrion, blood and flesh of swine, and that which has been hallowed to other than God, and that which has been killed by strangling, or by a violent blow, or by a headlong fall, or by being gored to death; and that which has been partly eaten by a wild animal, unless you are able to slaughter it duly
(The Repast:3)

That's all God prohibits us. Everything else He permits us. He even permits us the meat of the Jews and Christians (collectively known as the People of the Book) provided it does not go against His other commandments like the flesh of swine which Christians indulge in, but Jews avoid:

This day are (all) things good and pure made lawful unto you. The food of the People of the Book is lawful unto you and yours is lawful unto them
(The Repast:5)

Some scholars are of the view that while taking the meat of Jews is permissible since they mention God's Name when they slaughter the animal like Muslims, the meats slaughtered by modern-day Christians of the West are not so as they don't pronounce God's Name over the slaughtered animal any longer. Others are of the view that the Qur'an's permission is a general one and one need not question how it is slaughtered. If one is certain that the slaughterer of the animal is a practicing Christian, it could be eaten without demur. It was in this spirit that when a companion of the Prophet named Abdullah Bin Abbas was asked about animals slaughtered by the Christian Arabs, he said: "*There is no harm in them*" (Muwatta). When someone asked Abu Darda, another companion of the Prophet whether he could eat the flesh of a lamb, slaughtered for the Church of St. George, which had been given to him. he answered, "*O God, may You pardon us! Are they not the People of the Book, whose food is lawful for us and ours for them?* He then told the person to eat it. (Tabari.)

What God has allowed, none can prohibit. This is a very basic principle of Islamic law, applicable to food as anything else. It once happened that the Prophet abstained from eating honey at the instigation of his wives. But nay, he was admonished by God Himself:

O Prophet, why do you forbid (for yourself) that which God has allowed to you, seeking to please your wives
(The Prohibition:1)

In fact the Muslims of the Prophet's time consumed a variety of meats. The Prophet loved sheepmeat, ate chicken meat, accepted rabbit meat, allowed eating horsemeat and camel meat and although he avoided lizard's meat, he did not prohibit it. He however forbade the eating of donkey's meat (Saheeh Al-Bukhari). Other items of food consumed by the Prophet were cucumber and ripe dates (Tirmidhi), onions and possibly cheese (Aboo Dawood).He is also said to have been sent milk, venison and little cucumbers or mushrooms (Adab Al-Mufrad) suggesting that these too were consumed by him or his household. In fact all produce of the earth, including mushrooms, truffles, fruits and vegetables are permissible.

The only foods explicitly forbidden in the Qur'an are meat from animals that die of themselves, blood, pork and animals dedicated to other than God, that is, either undedicated or dedicated to other divinities or idols. However, the Prophet elaborated a bit more on the prohibited foods, forbidding all fanged beasts of prey and all birds with talons (Saheeh Muslim). Still, there are exceptions, since one may consume such meats if driven by necessity, if the only other alternative one has is to starve:

But if one is forced by necessity, without willful disobedience, nor transgressing the limits. Then he is guiltless, for God is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful
(The Heifer: 173)

So let us see why Islam bans us from consuming certain kinds of meats. The first is the prohibition against eating carrion, that is animals that die of themselves. There are many ways animals can die of themselves, through disease or poison, or being bitten or gored by another animal or falling from a height to give a few examples.

So tell me would you like eating the flesh of an animal you find dead, perhaps not knowing how it died? Would you take the risk of eating a diseased animal whose internal organs could well be a breeding ground for germs of all sorts including harmful ones like the one that causes mad cow disease? Would you take the risk of eating a poisoned animal, knowing that such poison can finds it way to your own organs? Would you take the risk of eating an animal bitten to death by another, well knowing that diseases such as rabies could be transferred through a bite? Even if you are sure, the creature concerned did not die of any of these, but perhaps from a headlong long, will it still be worth the risk, knowing that the blood of the animal could have been congealed in its flesh rather than be drained out of the body, potentially containing harmful toxins?

You'd better be, because science today tells us that the carcass of a dead animal that has not been drained of its blood retains its toxins, particularly in its arterial blood, causing the flesh to become a repository for microbes. So you will see the wisdom behind this prohibition of eating dead meat, all and all this well before modern science discovered those unseen little disease bearers known as germs through the use of the microscope.

The second is the prohibition against consuming blood. Throughout history men have consumed blood and blood products, little knowing the harm it could do. The English still have their black puddings made of pork blood and the African Masai drink the blood of their cattle fondly thinking it would keep them fit.

But man is not meant to drink blood. If God meant it to be so, He could have well created us as vampires. Drinking blood is for mosquitoes and vampire bats, but not for man. It goes against his nature and can harm his health. Why, because just as blood transfers nutrients absorbed by the intestines to bodily organs and muscles, it also carries harmful substances for disposal through sweat, urine and stools. Drinking or consuming such blood through other means could lead to our contracting countless diseases in both the short and long term, prominent among these being hyper-uremia leading to kidney failure and hyper-ammoniaemia leading to hepatic coma. So serious are its implications!

It is based on these two principles of not consuming dead meat and blood that the Islamic method of slaughtering animals has its basis. For one thing, the animal concerned must be alive at the time of slaughtering so as to ensure it is fit for human consumption, for another, it has to be drained of its blood after slaughtering. Combined with this is another very important requirement of the faith, that the animal concerned be slaughtered in God's Name.

To start with, one must first recite the formula *Bismillah* (In the name of God) before getting on with slaughtering the creature by swiftly slitting its throat by cutting its carotid and jugular vein. This ensures that when we take life, we take it only with God's Permission and when we do so we make certain that the animal does not suffer needlessly but is put to death as quickly as possible. Why because severing these blood vessels to and from the heart to the brain sends the animal into a state of natural anaesthesia so that it dies a painless death. Even animals slaughtered in the proper manner before they die of some other cause are also lawful as we gather from the story of the handmaiden of Ka'b who was herding some sheep in a mountain near Medina. One of the sheep was about to die and so she went over to it and slaughtered

it with a stone. The Prophet was asked about it and he said: "*There is no harm in it, so eat it*" (Muwatta).

However Islam does not limit meats to domesticated animals, but also permits game meat obtained by the chase. Wild animals such as deer, rabbits or waterfowl could be hunted by bow and arrow - and in today's context a gun - after reciting Bismillah or by means of hunting animals such as hounds and hawks, again by reciting Bismillah and letting them loose. Game taken alive must however be duly slaughtered in the prescribed manner. As God says: "*Lawful unto you are things good and pure; and what ye have taught your animals of the chase (to catch) in the manner directed to you by God. Eat what they catch for you, but pronounce the Name of God over it*" (The Repast:4).

This was further elaborated by the The Prophet who said*: "If you let loose (with God's Name) your tamed dog after a game and it hunts it, you may eat it, but if the dog eats of (that game) then do not eat it because the dog has hunted it for itself"*. A companion asked: "*Sometimes I send my dog for hunting and find another dog with it"*. The Prophet said: *"Do not eat the game for you have mentioned God's Name only on sending your dog and not the other dog"*(Saheeh Al-Bukhari).

However we know that the Prophet even allowed exceptions for meats people were doubtful about with regard to the recitation of the *Bismillah*. It once happened that some people who had recently become Muslims came and said to the Prophet: "*People bring us meat and we do not know whether they have mentioned the name of God over it or not. Shall we eat of it or not?*' The Prophet replied, '*Mention the name of God (over it) and eat"* (Saheeh Al-Bukhari).

Creatures of the sea are permitted without exception. The Qur'an clearly says of seafood:

And He it is Who has subjected to you the sea, that ye may eat thereof flesh, fresh and tender, and bring forth from it ornaments to wear
(The Bee:14)

Further unlike quadrapeds, sea creatures do not have to be slaughtered in the prescribed form and could even be consumed if they die of themselves, for the Prophet said of the sea: "*Its water is pure, and what dies in it is lawful food*" (Aboo Dawood). Thus all sorts of fish and shellfish such as crabs, lobsters, prawns could be eaten once they are dead without any qualms whatsoever.It once happened that a huge fish known as *Anbar*, perhaps a kind of whale got washed on to the shore and the Prophet's companions subsisted themselves on it for several days. The giant creature was dead when it was found and the Prophet not only permitted eating it, but even ate some of it himself.

But there is one very noteworthy exception of a creature that cannot be eaten by any means, even if slaughtered in the prescribed manner, and that is the pig. The Qur'an on more than one occasion prohibits the flesh of swine and even gives the reason for it:

Say, "I do not find in that which was revealed to me (anything) forbidden to one who would eat it unless it be a dead animal or blood spilled out
or the flesh of swine, for indeed, it is impure
(The Cattle: 145)

It is not only the Qur'an that prohibited pork, the Bible did too on the same grounds:.

The flesh of the swine you shall not eat, and their carcass you shall not touch.

They are unclean to you
(Leviticus 11:8)

Thus good Christians ought to avoid pork as Jesus did. But Paul would have none of it. He saw no reason why Christians should follow the Old Laws and declared: "*Let no one pass judgement on you in matters of food and drink or with regard to a festival or new moon or Sabbath. These are shadows of things to come; the reality belongs to Christ*" (Colossians 2:16-17). This is why to this day, even observant Christians see nothing wrong in eating pork, though it was prohibited by God Himself in very strict terms.

So good Muslims avoid eating pork because God had prohibited them from doing so and because as He Himself says it is unclean. Though there was no way to prove this in the olden days, we today know that pork is the most filthiest of meats, harbouring parasites of various descriptions, germs and worms that can pass on to humans and cause numerous diseases.

Why, because the pig is a born scavenger. That's what it was created for, to cleanse the earth of the filth and faeces of the rest of creation. Such is their filthy nature that no matter how clean the environments in which they are raised may be, they prefer to wallow in mud and filth, and if they cannot eat the excreta of other creatures, they will gladly eat their own. To feast on such a scavenger itself goes against the grain of all that is good and noble in man, all that is pure in him.

But it's not just the spiritual impurity pork imparts to one's soul. The pig's body is the ideal breeding ground for a host of diseases. Scientists know for a fact today that the pig is a great host for parasites and a mixing pot for viruses which can play a role in developing more dangerous strains of such viruses. One such germ pigs frequently harbour is the antibiotic resistant staph bacterium. Studies how that in the US despite its 'clean' pig rearing practices, almost 50 percent of pigs harbour these bacteria, which in the US alone is responsible for killing nearly 20,000 every year.

A more direct threat from consuming pork comes from the trichinella worm. The eggs of this parasite which may number several thousands are frequently found in the muscles of the pig and could easily enter the human body through pork consumption, leading to a fatal disease known as Trichinellosis.

As frightening is the Tapeworm, another parasite transmitted through pork that clings on to one's intestines and draws its nutrition at the expense of its human host. The tapeworm is no doubt the scariest creature to dwell in the human body. It is several metres long with a body like several strips of tapes stuck together and has over twenty hooks on its head, with which it clings to the intestinal wall. That's not all, its larvae seep into the bloodstream to settle in a bodily organ such as the liver or the eye, where it forms cysts. It could even find its way to the brain and cause a kind of epilepsy, a frightening condition medically known as neurocysticercosis.

As if that were not enough, pork is a very fattening meat. It contains very high levels of cholesterol and lipids which can adversely affect human health, causing strokes and heart attacks. Thus there is much wisdom behind the prohibition of pork which only now the scientific community is coming to realize. Need I say more?

Just as we are prohibited from consuming pig, we are also admonished not to become like them, eating anything and everything we come across. Overeating especially is strongly disapproved in Islam. In fact gluttony is almost a sin in Islam.

As the Prophet said:

A man does not fill any vessel worse than his stomach. It is sufficient for the son of Adam to eat enough to keep him alive. But if he must do more than that, then one-third for his food, one-third for his drink and one-third for his air
(Ibn Majah)

And now to that mother of all evils God bans till the end comes, and by this I mean alcohol of course. Let's hear what God has to say about it:

O ye who believe! Intoxicants and gambling (dedication of) stones and (divination by) arrows, are an abomination- of Satan handiwork; eschew them that ye may prosper. Satan's plan is to excite enmity and hatred between you, with intoxicants and gambling, and hinder you from the remembrance of God"
(The Repast: 90-91)

His Prophet went on to declare:

Alcohol is the mother of all evils
(Ibn Majah)

He once told his followers: "*Anyone who drinks intoxicants will be made to drink the mud of khabal*". His companions asked: "*O Messenger of God, what is the mud of Khabal?*' He replied: "*The juice of the people of Hell*" (Saheeh Muslim).

However the prohibition did not come down at once. In the Jahilliyah or Age of Ignorance before the coming of Islam, the Arabs like many other peoples were habitual drinkers. When the Prophet Muhammad migrated from Mecca to Medina, some of his companions, sorry that many of the townsfolk indulged in liquor, ruining both their God-given health and hard-earned wealth, asked him about it.

In response to their query, a verse was revealed that constituted the first of a series of revelations leading to the final and conclusive ban:

They ask you about wine and gambling. Say, "In them is great sin and (yet, some) benefit for people. But their sin is greater than their benefit"
(The Heifer: 219)

Although this verse did not clearly prohibit alcohol clearly it indicated that there more harm than good in alcohol and implied that it should be avoided. Some of the companions, learning of this verse abstained from taking alcohol from that day onwards. Others continued with the habit regardless as they did not take it as an outright ban. One evening, it happened that a companion named Abdur-Rahman Ibn Auf invited some of his fellows who had taken alcohol and as the time came for the evening prayer they stood up to pray. The prayer leader who was also drunk made an error in the recitation of the Qur'an. Then came the revelation of the verse:

O you who believe! do not go near prayer when you are Intoxicated until you know (well) what you say
(The Women:43)

This verse prohibited the consumption of liquor for the duration of prayer times, though the assumption was that at other periods, it was permissible. With this second verse many more of the Prophet's companions gave up the habit reasoning that what good can there be in something that harms one's very Prayer. Others continued with their old ways, till one day one Uthman Ibn Malik invited a few friends for a meal, after which liquor was served. They then started reciting poetry as was a popular Arab custom then. When Saad Ibn Abi Waqqas' turn came, he went a bit too far, reciting a few lines in which he belittled the Ansars of Medina who had in the first place welcomes the Meccan migrants with open arms. At this an Ansari youth became so vexed that he threw a bone at him, inflicting a wound on the reciter's head. When Saad complained to the Prophet, he beseeched God to grant him a clear cut command regarding alcohol. In response to his prayer came the following verses from God completely prohibiting alcohol along with gambling and other sins:

O ye who believe! Intoxicants and gambling (dedication of) stones and (divination by) arrows, are an abomination- of Satan handiwork; eschew them that ye may prosper. Satan's plan is to excite enmity and hatred between you, with Intoxicants and gambling, and hinder you from the remembrance of God. Will you then desist?
(The Repast: 90-91)

So God in his wisdom banned liquor in stages, firstly by revealing the evils of alcohol, secondly by prohibiting it at prayer times and finally when the time was ripe for a complete transformation declaring it absolutely prohibited. So complete was the ban that liquor was spilled out of their bottles by the townsfolk in respond to God's Final Verdict.

But Islam did not stop at that. It penalized drinking alcohol with corporal punishment, with as much as forty lashes of the whip for the offender, the only case of punishment for eating or drinking something not permitted by religion. When you eat pork for instance it's up to you and God to judge you, but the implications of drinking alcohol go beyond that as it has adverse effects on not only one's health, but also the larger society. This is why the Prophet said of the drunkard '*beat him'* (Mishkat Al Masabih) and they were beaten with sticks or sandals (Bukhari, Ahmad).

When the first Caliph Abu Bakr was faced with addressing the problem of drinking, he asked the Prophet's companions about it and though they were unsure guessed that the offender ought to receive forty lashes which he then imposed for the punishment of drinking (Baihaqi). However it is to the credit of Islam that it liberated people from the scourge of alcoholism through religious conviction rather than by force of law, since if it were merely a law, people would tend to imbibe it on the sly as they did in America during the Prohibition era. You only have to look at Muslims even in largely non-Muslim countries who almost to a man avoid alcohol as if it were rank poison.

But if you think it's only Muslims who abhor alcohol, you're sadly mistaken. All faiths do, except Judaism which has even made it into a ritual. Jews to this day give their newly circumcised baby boys a bit of wine to allay their pain and take it without any qualms later in life in spite of what the Bible says about it:

Look not upon the wine when it is red, when it giveth his colour in the cup, when it moveth itself aright. At the last it biteth like a serpent, and stingeth like an adder
(Proverbs 23:31-32)

Good Christians likewise are expected to eschew such strong drinks, as we read in Ephesians 5:18: "*Be not drunk with wine*". This is why Protestant Christians took a bold stand against it, culminating in America's nationwide ban on liquor in its peaceful inter-war years. But it was not only religion that had a say in the ban, it was also reason, because both the government and public saw its ill effects on society.

They saw how alcoholism increased crime and led to a rise in domestic violence, how it made shells of once sane men. And mind you this came about by an amendment to the US Constitution itself, the 18th amendment which ushered in what is popularly called 'The Prohibition Era' from 1919 to 1933. Women especially campaigned vigourously for the ban. They saw how drunkards beat up their wives and even killed their children. They even formed the Women's Christian Temperance Union led by a great woman named Frances Willard to tackle the problem, lobbying for local laws restricting alcohol and creating an anti-alcohol educational campaign that reached into nearly every schoolroom in the nation.

Although liberals are quick to argue that Prohibition failed, this is far from the truth. It cut overall alcohol consumption by as much as 50 percent during the 1920s when it was in full force - the rest who took to it was illicit liquor provided by bootleggers like Al Capone - showing that it did socialize a large proportion of the US population in temperate habits. It's a pity the ban was revoked by yet another amendment to the constitution, or else there would not have been so much crime in the US as we find today.

Yes, whether we like it or not, the fact is that alcohol is a scourge and has been so since time immemorial; the devil's handiwork to lead man away from a noble, decent life. If it's not the work of Satan, whose else's is it? Who made man make a filthy liquor out of wholesome fruit, turning fresh grapes and other lovely fruits God has blessed us with into a foul drink that smells so bad and prompts one to act like a madman as if touched by the devil himself ? Yes, I ask you, which fool discovered this poison that kills your brain, blurs your vision and sense of reason and costs countless human lives and causes millions of broken homes throughout the world, even as we speak?

The least one can say about indulgence in liquor is that it's a sign of a decadent society where on the one hand you have a licentious hedonistic upper class that is a world unto itself, caring not for anybody else and wasting away their miserable, purposeless lives; and on the other, a deprived and depressed class of destitutes who take to it to escape from life's harsh realities, unaware that it is just another narcotic, a temporary palliative that is only bound to make that reality a harder one. Escapism is no way to cast aside one's poverty, but this is what happens when liquor is freely available.

The worst one can say about it is that it's a silent killer. It's a toxin that kills you and a narcotic that wastes your life. Alcohol is no less addictive than other narcotics, only that it is more freely available due to the ease in manufacturing it and its being looked upon as a lucrative source of revenue for governments through the heavy excise duties it invites. Over time even moderate drinkers can become hopeless alcoholics. They might start with a bit and end up as slaves of it like any narcotic. That's how all drunks start life!

Such addiction, needless to say has a heavy social cost. Alcohol does not come cheap, and when one is addicted to it and imbibes it frequently you can only imagine how it tends to drain away one's monies, leading to financial problems. Leave aside the direct cost of liquor, take the opportunity cost, how much productive time to earn a livelihood goes waste due to drink and its hangovers.

Alcoholics also lose the purpose of life. They suffer from terrible depressions and experience frightening hallucinations distorting their sense of reality. They become delusional, paranoid, melancholic and even suicidal, threatening the lives of not just themselves, but all those around them. That's not all. It kills one's spirituality, making miserable creatures of once God-fearing people. Little doubt it earns the Wrath of God. After all, would the Creator love to see the noblest of his Creation stoop to such a low level, lower than even the beasts of the earth, because this is what happens when men drink, they let their basest animal instincts take hold. But hold on, animals at least have some sense which they never lose sight of, but man, when he engages in liquor, loses all sense, becoming even lower than the animal. When he walks, he staggers, when he speaks he slurs. His breath smells bad and his eyes are blood-shot, just like the devil would love men to be, the lowest of the low, fallen from grace, a disgrace to mankind and the rest of creation.

But that's not all. Did anybody tell you that alcohol is a poison? If nobody did, I would'nt be surprised, because it's not common knowledge, despite all the evidence to the contrary. Yes, alcohol is a deadly toxin that kills your brain cells slowly but surely. Alcohol leads to permanent brain damage since it damages the subventricular region of the brain where new brain cells are created to sustain brain function and protect against tumours and neurodegenerative diseases. It also scrambles messages to the brain and leads to problems in thinking clearly, controlling movements and storing memories. This is why alcoholics lose their sense of reality and are unable to even tell the place they are in or what time of day it is or even recognize the face of a loved one. They suffer from severe memory loss that gets only worse over time and gradually lose their very identity, the very trait that makes them what they are and give them their sense of reality. When it robs man of his identity, what more does it need to deprive him of?

But let's go a bit more. Alcoholics don't just lose their identity, they also lose their appearance. They look haggard due to its toxic effects and suffer from malnutrition and general lack of health because they are careless about what they eat. They often suffer from bad teeth, why, because they cannot even brush their teeth at night before going to sleep. The alcohol in the palates that had just an hour or so ago relished in the liquor are soon acted upon by bacteria, eating into their enamel and causing tooth decay. They also suffer from bad eyesight because alcohol damages the optic nerves so vital for clear vision.

There's more to come. Alcohol hampers their ability to build new muscles after a tiring day so that they don't bounce back to health the next day. It kills their sperm and leaves limp their penis, which is the only thing it really sobers down! Alcoholics indulge in sex crimes, not because of a higher libido, but because of a senseless passion to do the craziest things, just like the tendency to run over a pedestrian while drunk driving. Alcoholics are also more susceptible to falling, resulting in hemorrhaging in the head and broken bones.

The toll it takes on one's physical health does not end here. That's only the beginning. Alcohol consumption leads to severe vitamin and mineral deficiencies with ailments like anaemia and beriberi being the more manifest aspects of such deficiencies. Alcohol contributes to a deficiency of vitamin A which is needed for good vision, to regulate the immune system and for bone growth. It also burns up vitamin B especially Thiamin so important for nerve function, to maintain healthy nerve cells as well as red blood cells. The loss of Thamin due to alcohol consumption leads to irreversible brain damage including Wernicke Korsakoff syndrome found predominantly in alcoholics. It also interferes with intake of folate which helps

produce and maintain new cells. It causes a loss of calcium in the body by increasing urinary calcium excretion leading to osteoporosis. Calcium by the way is needed not only for bone development, but also for the secretion of vital hormones and enzymes and for transmission of messages through the nervous system. This is why, over time, alcohol wrecks our very being, transforming our once beautiful bodies to worn-down shells of our former selves and emptying our minds so that we lose our heads. It ages us like no other poison.

That's not all. Cirrhosis of the liver and pancreatitis are well known outcomes of alcoholism. But that's just the tip of the iceberg. There's also a host of cancers caused by alcohol. In fact, alcohol causes as many as seven forms of cancer. Recent research has shown that alcohol can cause cancers of the breast, colon, liver, larynx, oesophagus and rectum. It is also likely to cause skin, prostate and pancreatic cancer. Alcoholics are also susceptible to chest infections such as Pneumonia and Pulmonary Tuberculosis due to their weakened immune systems. But did you know alcohol consumption could also increase your risk of stroke and heart attacks?

Today researchers have found that drinking just one glass of wine a day can trigger a stroke, heart failure or dementia. Even moderate consumption of liquor increased the risk of an irregular heartbeat known as *atrial fibrillation*. This affects heart rhythm and increases the risk of blood clots forming, raising the risk of stroke and heart failure, not to mention Alzheimer's disease by reducing blood flow to the brain. In fact alcohol today kills as many as 3.3 million people worldwide each year due to drink driving, alcohol-induced violence and abuse, and a multitude of diseases and disorders, more than AIDS, tuberculosis and violence combined, according to the World Health Organization.That actually translates into one death every 10 seconds.

Let alone its toll on you, it also takes its toll on society as well. As you know all humans have a sense of shame, they have an inhibitory faculty wired into their brains which prevents them from doing things they know to be wrong. For instance using foul language or exposing one's private parts. When one is drunk, such inhibitions cease, so that one sees nothing wrong in answering a call of nature in full view of people rather than find one's way to the privy to relieve oneself. They become shameless, trespassing the bounds of accepted norms; men sexually harass women or cast vulgar remarks while women lose their reservations and let their passions take hold, giving themselves to any man they come across with absolutely no idea what they're getting into.

But that's the mild side of it. There's much worse. A high percentage of rapes takes place when one or both partners are drunk. It's higher with cases of incest, where almost all cases of such unnatural relations like between father and daughter are the result of alcohol. Indeed, a major reason for the spread of STDs like AIDS is alcoholism. Why because people lose their restraint and freely indulge in sex, taking no precaution as to who they are sleeping with and having no idea what a contraceptive is in their state of madness. Just one such rash act can make you suffer a lifetime. Suppose just for once you go for a binge, and in that state lose your sense of self control and in that one moment of lunacy commit a sex crime or engage in a sex act that causes you to contract a terrible disease, would not it last you a lifetime, so that your entire life suffers because of it?

So ask yourself, would you still want to take a poison? Because that's what alcohol really is! The only poison commonly indulged in and even advertised for public consumption!

35th Night

Johnny: Salams Sheikh, thanks for the talk last night. It was certainly food for thought. And to think all this while I thought your dietary rules were very strict like the kosher of the Jews. Now to my next question:

Aren't Islamic punishments too harsh?

The Janissary: It's not that Islamic laws are harsh. It's just that modern day laws with its concern for the rights of criminals and disregard for the rights of victims make it seem that way. Many people today have lost sight of why punishments for serious offences need to be in place. Little do they realize that if there were no punishment, people could get away with anything, and worse still prey on the weaker sections of society and thrive at their expense. Punishment establishes the boundaries for what is right and what is wrong.

To answer your question, did you know that until very recent times, Islamic law was one of the most lenient legal systems in the world, stipulating capital punishment for just three very serious offences and laying down other punishments such as amputation of hands for theft by attaching so many conditions that it was no easy task to apply them, so very mild compared to say the Common Law of England which stipulated death for even the most trivial of offences.

But that's the difference between Islamic and secular laws. Islamic law is for all time and as such cannot change according to the whims of men. It is firm when it has to be and soft when it has to be. Since God is the Creator, He best knows His Creation and is obviously the most qualified to lay down laws for His Creatures. Just to give you an example. As a parent, you know what's best for your child. You draft a set of 'house rules' for them not to break, like opening the door for strangers when you're away or playing with fire. Why, because you know what's best for them.

That is why it is best to leave the laws to God, to ensure that our laws are in accord with what God has revealed. This leaves no room for a dictator or legislature to enact laws contrary to God's Wise Laws. In this way, Islam ensures that justice will reign for all time and not be swayed by petty-minded men with vested interests and that it will not be subjected to the whims of tyrants or short-sighted legislators. By doing so, it ensures that the weaker are not oppressed by the stronger, that women are not enslaved by men, that the poor are not exploited by the rich and that the minorities are not tyrannised by the brute will of the majority. What history has thought us throughout is that when man writes down laws, they more often than not become nightmares that go against their own nature and the rest of creation. As God says in the Qur'an:

We made for you a law, so follow it,
and not the fancies of those who have no knowledge
(The Kneeling Down: 18)

The word used here for 'law' *Shariah* literally means 'path (to a waterhole in the desert)'. So just as water and knowing the way to it is vital for survival in the desert, so is following the Law of God necessary for peace in the world. To achieve such peace, the larger interests of society necessarily have to take precedence over the interests of the individual and this is what Islamic law is all about.

The primary source of the Shariah is of course the Word of God, the Qur'an which is supplemented by the Sunnah or Prophetic tradition incorporating the words and deeds of Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him). The practice of his close companions including the rightly guided Caliphs and consensus of opinion of the

community are also taken as complementary sources of law so long as they conform to the Word of God and the practice of His Prophet. State authority can in no way supersede the Law of God. This is precisely why Islam qualifies obedience to established authority. As the Prophet declared: "*No creature is to be obeyed if it involves disobedience to the Creator*" (Ahmad).

When we dwell deep into the rationale behind Islamic punishments, we would find two basic principles. One is that the punishment has to be proportionate to the offence. As God says in the Qur'an:

And if you punish, let your punishment be proportionate to the wrong that has been done to you; but if you show patience, that is indeed the best course
(The Bee:126)

Thus Islam's penal system can in no way agree with the likes of the Greek Lawgiver Draco who equally punished with death the pettiest theft and the most atrocious murder, nor can it agree with the laws of England or the ways of the American Wild West a couple of centuries ago where one could be killed for theft. Nor can it agree with the laws of modern day China which punishes with death nearly thirty offences including corruption and theft or smuggling of cultural items and where there have even been cases where accountants have been shot for embezzling funds to pay their gambling debts and thieves executed for stealing ancient relics from museums.

Under Islam, such a one may be deprived of the offending organ but that too only when certain conditions are met such as the stolen item being of significant value and that it be stolen from a place of safekeeping.

The other is that punishment is imposed not to humiliate the individual, but to prevent sins and crimes being looked upon lightly, to impress on the offender and the rest of society the seriousness of the offense. Once when a drunkard had been lashed, somebody remarked: "*May God disgrace you!*" whereupon the Prophet remarked: "*Don't utter these words, don't let the devil overwhelm him, but say O God! Show mercy to him and return to him!*" (Jamia ul Usul, Ibn Athir). In fact the Prophet enjoined us to fend off punishment as much as we can, like when he pronounced: "*If you find any way out for him, let him go. It is better for the judge to err in forgiveness than to err in punishment*" (Tirmidhi). To give the benefit of the doubt is as much a principle in islam as it is in modern legal systems of the West.

So you will see that in Islam the purpose of punishment is not to debase people but to prevent serious offences being accepted and perpetrated in the public domain. Take the case of adultery. True, Islam lays down stoning to death, but at the same time qualifies it with the condition that four witnesses catch the offenders in the act of penetration itself, making it very difficult to prove. The idea here is not to make a public show of your sins. Whatever sins you commit is between you and God, but expose it to the public and you create mischief, prompting others to do the same thing without a care for the world.

This is why God says:

Your Lord hath inscribed for Himself Mercy; verily if any of you did evil in ignorance and thereafter repented, and amended (his or her conduct),
Lo! He is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful
(The Cattle:54)

And why His Prophet said:

Stay away from those loathsome evils, which God has forbidden you from. If someone through a slip indulges in any such act then he should remain concealed behind the veil of God and ask forgiveness of Him. But if someone will produce his neck before us (i.e. stick to the sinful activities unashamedly and boldly) then we shall enforce the code over him
(Kitabul Hudood; Ibn Hajar Asqalani)

The Prophet's companions understood the rules very well. A man was once brought before the well known companion and judge of Kufa, Abdullah Ibn Masood in such a state that his beard was 'dripping with wine'. Abdullah casually responded: "*We have been forbidden to seek out faults. But if he does something openly before us, we will hold him responsible for that*"(Aboo Dawood).

Besides these, Islam lays down some general rules regarding punishment, which is that all are equally liable to be punished for their crimes, be they rich or poor, man or woman, ruler or ruled. See the beauty of it, even a ruler has to be punished for his offence. It once happened that the Prophet's friend and successor, the Caliph Umar addressed the community: "*Put me right if you discover any crookedness in me*" only to have one from the assembly retort: "*By God Almighty if we had found any crookedness in you, we should have put you right with our swords!*".

On another occasion, a man came complaining to him about a petty grievance while he was busy with some important work and the caliph in his anger laid a lash on him. The man walked away, but Umar sent for him, and handing his whip over to him said: "*You now lash me to even the matter*." The man refused, saying: "*I forgive you for the sake of God.*". The Caliph then went home, prayed to God in repentance and upbraided himself saying: "*0 Umar, You were low but God elevated you. You were wandering astray but God guided you. You were base but God ennobled you and gave you sovereignty over His people. Now one of them comes and asks you for redress of the wrong done to him, and you beat him? What answer have you to give before God?*"

This was so unlike the laws of mediaeval Europe which held royalty and the nobility to be above the law, an idea that suvived well up to the eighteenth century in countries like France whose pre-revolutionary constitution declared the King '*Sacred and Inviolable*' and hence immune from prosecution for whatever crimes he committed.

Once, when a woman of a noble clan known as the Makhzoom committed theft, some of his companions were deeply agitated and got the Prophet's close friend Usama to intercede. The Prophet would have none of it. He addressed his people:

O people! The nations before you went astray because if a noble person committed theft, they used to leave him, but if a weak person among them committed theft, they used to inflict the legal punishment on him. By God, if Fatima, the daughter of Muhammad committed theft, Muhammad will cut off her hand!
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

The same hold true of the sexes, both of whom are equally liable to punishment for their misdemenours, whether it be for fornication for which they are whipped or adultery for which they are stoned. Such a notion was strange to the peoples of old who often punished a woman for her faults while turning a blind eye to the faults of

men. You have only to read the Bible to see how unfairly women were treated, to the extent if a bride did not bleed from a rupture to her hymen on her first night – the so-called token of virginity - she would be killed if her husband accused her of not being a virgin before marriage:

But if this thing be true, and the tokens of virginity be not found in the damsel: Then they shall bring out the damsel to the door of her father's house, and the men of her city shall stone her with stones that she die: because she hath wrought folly in Israel, to play the whore in her father's house: so shalt thou put evil away from among you (Deuteronomy 18-21)

In Islam however, there can be no such injustice. Male and female have to be treated alike. As the Prophet said when it came to the punishment for illicit sex, which of course had to be proved by four witnesses who caught the couple in the act of penetration itself and not by a virgin's blood or a husband's rash accusation:

Take it from me. Verily God has ordained a way for them (the women who commit fornication): (When) a married man (commits adultery) with a married woman, and an unmarried male with an unmarried woman, then in case of married (persons) there is (a punishment) of one hundred lashes and stoning. And in case of unmarried persons, (the punishment) is one hundred lashes and exile for one year (Saheeh Muslim)

Thus in Islam, all are equal before the law - from prince to pauper. This ideal of equality was never taught by any religion before or after Islam. It is a very modern idea that took root in the West with the Age of Enlightenment through the writings of men like Rousseau and Voltaire. And to think Islam made equality before the law a cornerstone of the faith more than fourteen centuries ago.

This is what prompted French Philosopher Lafayet to declare:

O Muhammad, no one reached to your level in bringing justice among people

And the same that spurred Edmund Burke to observe:

The Muhammadan Law which is binding on all- from the crowned head to the meanest subject is a law interwoven with a system of the wisest, the most learned and the most enlightened jurisprudence that ever existed in the world

Another general rule of Islamic justice is that actions are to be judged by their intentions. Thus if you got mugged and struck someone in self-defence and he died, you will not be charged for murder. This is in keeping with the Prophet's words:

Actions are judged according to intentions, and everyone will get what they intended (Saheeh Muslim)

The Prophet also refused to impose any liability on a person who in the course of a struggle, while pulling out his hand from the mouth of another who was biting him, pulled out his tooth in the process (Sayd Ibn Zayd). In normal circumstances pulling out another's tooth would be punished by the law of like for like, tooth for tooth, but

here since the act was not deliberate and done in self-defence, there was to be no retaliation or compensation.

Yet another general rule is that a child or insane person or a sleepwalking person cannot be penalized for any offence inviting such punishment such as theft, apostasy or fornication. This is based on the Prophet's saying: "*The pen is lifted from three. The child until he matures, the sleeping person until he awakes and the insane person until he comes to his senses*" (Aboo Dawood). This too is in the fitness of things. Islam penalizes only those who are mentally fit to comprehend the nature of their offense, so unlike other law systems that never took this factor into consideration when awarding punishment, for instance the laws of England that even condemned little children to death for trivial offences.

Nor does Islam penalize one for the crimes of another. Indeed it even made provision to save the life of the unborn in case its mother had committed a capital offense. As the Prophet said: "*If a woman kills intentionally, she is not to be killed until she gives birth to what is in her womb and until she has nursed it after birth*" (Ibn Majah). Thus you will see that Islam did not want a child to suffer on account of its mother, for not only did it lay down that a pregnant woman could not be killed, but even ordained that the mother not be put to death until she had nursed the child, the period for which alone is two years. This principle was not recognized in the West until very recent times. After all, as late as the eighteenth century, an American woman named Bathsheba Spooner was hanged for murdering her abusive husband despite pleading for a stay of execution to deliver her baby. The Massachusetts Council rejected the petition and she was promptly hanged before a crowd of 5,000 people. She was five months pregnant.

So now to get on with the punishments like beheading for murder, stoning to death for adultery and amputating hands for theft that today have Westerners cringing in fear, but would have been laughed at by their ancestors for their mildness. You have only to compare these with the kinds of punishments that existed in Europe until fairly recent times such as pre-eighteenth century England when a teenager could be put to death for stealing something as trivial as a loaf of bread out of hunger.

Did you know that as late as 1810, there were no less than 222 individually defined capital crimes in England including "being in the company of Gypsies for one month", "strong evidence of malice in a child aged 7–14 years of age" and "blacking the face or using a disguise whilst committing a crime". Among other crimes punishable by death were stealing from a house the amount of forty shillings, stealing from a shop the value of five shillings, robbing a rabbit warren, poaching fish from another's fishpond, cutting down a tree, stealing firewood and counterfeiting tax stamps and clipping coins.

The Black Act prescribed capital punishment for as many as 50 offences concerned with theft and poaching. So harsh were these laws that Sir Samuel Romilly campaigned to have the death penalty removed for minor crimes such as shoplifting and in 1813 introduced a Bill in the House of Commons to repeal the law "*as punishes with death the offence of stealing privately in a shop, warehouse or stable, goods of the value of 5 Shillings*". The Bill was thrown out by the House of Lords. The archbishop of Canterbury, Charles Manners-Sutton even teamed up with six other bishops to defeat this bill that would have abolished the death penalty for stealing five shillings or less. Such was the harshness of Europe's man-made laws until recent times.

The American colonies were no less severe. Under the Capital Laws of New-England in the 17th century, the death penalty was imposed for pre-meditated murder,

sodomy, witchcraft, adultery, idolatry, blasphemy, assault in anger, rape, statutory rape, manstealing, perjury in a capital trial, rebellion, manslaughter, poisoning and bestiality. Virginia's governor, Sir Thomas Dale, implemented the Divine, Moral, and Martial Laws that made death the penalty for even minor offenses such as stealing grapes or trading with Indians. New York colony's Duke's Laws of 1665 stipulated the death penalty for denial of the true God, pre-meditated murder, killing someone who had no weapon of defense, killing by lying in wait or by poisoning, sodomy, buggery, kidnapping, perjury in a capital trial, traitorous denial of the king's rights or raising arms to resist his authority, conspiracy to invade towns or forts in the colony and striking one's mother or father. In fact by 1776 when the American Revolution began, most colonies had the death penalty for arson, piracy, treason, murder, sodomy, burglary, robbery, rape, horse-stealing, slave rebellion, and counterfeiting. Indeed even as late as 1837, North Carolina had the death penalty for as many as 14 offences including murder, rape, statutory rape, slave-stealing, stealing bank notes, highway robbery, burglary, arson, buggery, bestiality, hiding a slave with intent to free him and bigamy.

Many of these harsh laws continued in the US until very recent times. For instance in 1822 Thomas Davis was executed in Alabama for counterfeiting while in 1852 Theodore Velenquez was executed for horse stealing in California. More recently, in 1941 Frank Bass of Alabama was hanged for burglary. In 1964 Ronald Wolfe was executed for rape in Missouri and the same year James Coburn was executed in Alabama for robbery. As recently as 1945 Eddie Slovak was sentenced to death for desertion of the US army.

The Church of England and the Puritans in America were not alone in supporting such harsh laws. Much of Europe had similar and even harsher laws, for blasphemy and other offences, inspired little doubt by the Biblical laws of the Israelites which they were not bound to follow but which nevertheless affected their attitude towards punishment. So let's have a look at just some of the offences inviting capital punishment found in the Bible:

Whoever strikes a man a mortal blow shall be put to death
(Exodus 21:12)

Whoever strikes his father or mother shall be put to death
(Exodus 21:15)

Whoever curses his father or mother shall be put to death
(Exodus 21:17)

A man or woman who acts as a medium or fortune teller shall be put to death by stoning (Leviticus 20:27)

A priest's daughter who loses her honour by committing fornication and thereby dishonours her father also, shall be burned to death (Leviticus 21:9)

If a man commits adultery with another man's wife- both the adulterer and the adulteress are to be put to death
(Leviticus 20:10)

Six days there are for doing work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of complete rest, Sacred to the Lord. Anyone who does work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death
(Exodus 31:15)

Whoever blasphemes the Name of the Lord shall be put to death. The whole community shall stone him; alien and native alike must be put to death for blaspheming the Lord's Name
(Leviticus 24:16)

If there is found among you, in any one of the communities which the Lord, your God, gives you, a man or a woman who does evil in the Sight of the Lord, your God, and transgresses His Covenant, by serving other gods, or by worshipping the sun or the moon or any of the host of the sky, against My Command; and if, on being informed of it, you find by careful investigation that this abomination has been committed in Israel, you shall bring the man (or woman)who had done the evil deed out of your city gates and stone him to death
(Deuteronomy 17:2-5)

Contrast this with the Islamic approach to capital punishment which prescribes capital punishment for three offences, namely, murder, adultery and apostasy. But even in the case of so vile a deed as murder, the Qur'an though threatening Divine Punishment for the offender in the hereafter allows him or her a reprieve if the relatives of the victim are willing to forgive him and in lieu of putting him or her to death accept blood money for the crime. In the case of apostasy or blasphemy, true Islam prescribes the death penalty, but tempers this with the provision that the offender be given the opportunity to repent. So even when you compare the Bible and the Qur'an you will find how lenient the laws of Islam really are.

Let us first consider the punishment for theft for which crime an English teenager could be executed as recently as couple of centuries ago just for stealing a loaf of bread, the rigour of which went even beyond Jesus' prescription: "*If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one of your members than to have your whole body go into Gehenna*" (Matthew 5:29-30).
Islam it is true prescribes the amputation of the hand for theft. As God says in the Qur'an:

Cut off the hands of the thief, male or female, as a recompense for that which they committed, a punishment by way of example from God. And God is All-Powerful, All-Wise
(The Repast:38)

It is however established in the practice of the Prophet that only the right hand from the wrist joint would be removed for the first offence, the left foot for the second, the left hand for the third and the right foot for the fourth. This rule has its basis in an incident that took place in the lifetime of the Prophet. When a thief was brought to him, he ordered *Cut off his hand*. So his right hand was cut off. He was brought a second time and he said: *Cut off his foot*. So his left foot was cut off. He was brought a third time and he said: *Cut off his hand*. So his left hand was cut off He was brought a fourth time and he said: *Cut off his foot*. So his right foot was cut off (Aboo Dawood). This was of course the fate of habitual thieves who in spite of all the conditions that tempered the penalty got caught and despite being punished, persisted

with their crimes. It was out of consideration for the thief that the law laid down that for the second offense that the foot rather than the other hand be taken off since it would have been tragic for the thief to be deprived of the use of both his hands. Besides, a second or third punishment could not be inflicted for previous thefts, but only after a thief has been caught and punished by amputation of his or her right hand.

What all this shows is that Islam aims at reforming the individual with its punishments, but if they are unrepentant and persist with their crimes, they would have to pay the price for it. Repentance wipes out the sin of theft, which is why God says:

Cut off the hands of the thief, male or female, as a recompense for that which they committed, a punishment by way of example from God. And God is All-Powerful, All-Wise. But if the thief repents after his crime and amends his conduct, God turns to him in forgiveness, for God is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful
(The Repast:38-39)

However repentance here is possible only after the punishment has been meted out. A woman who had committed theft and whose right hand was cut off once came to the Prophet and asked: "*O Messenger of God! Is there a chance for me to repent*". "*Yes*" he replied "*This day, you are free from your sin just as the day your mother gave birth to you*" (Ahmed). The Prophet's wife Ayisha says about her: "*Hers was a sincere repentance, and she later on married and used to come to me after that, and I conveyed her needs to God's Messenger (so that he could help her)* (Saheeh Muslim). That theft is a very serious sin was even said by Jesus when he declared:

"*If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one of your members than to have your whole body go into Gehenna*"
(Matthew 5:29-30)

Thus it is not surprising that repentance could only be possible after the punishment has been awarded to remove the stain of the sin that in itself could drag one to the hellfire. Why, because theft is not a crime that can be taken lightly. A thief is like a parasite draining away the life blood of society, thriving at the expense of others by depriving them of their hard earned money or possessions and often disposing of it for a trifling price, not giving as much as a thought for the poor victim for whom the stolen item could be of great necessity or have sentimental value. Theft also creates suspicion of others which has to be shunned at all costs, but which cannot be easily erased from the victim's mind.

Needless to say, it creates unpleasantness in society and tends to harm its moral fabric. That's not all. Theft also harms the perpetrator of the deed. Thieves it is well known graduate from the petty to the deadly. They start off as petty thieves, graduate to more serious crimes like armed robbery and eventually end up as kidnappers and murderers. Very often, that's how most serious criminals start their lives.

Considering all this, don't you think it's better that a thief is punished as such before he becomes a scourge to society like we often see happening in countries like the US where crime is so rampant that even movies trivialize and glorify criminal acts like armed robbery.

At the same time Islam does not lay down the punishment for each and every act of theft. Rather, it lays down a combination of conditions that need to be met for the

full rigour of the law to be applied. As in any other offense, a minor, a lunatic or sleepwalker is exempt from the penalty. But that's not all. It cannot be applied to one stricken by poverty who steals out of hunger or in a time of famine. It once happened that a poor man named Abbad Ibn Shurahbil stole some dates from a garden. The owner caught him and beat him soundly. Abbad complained to the Prophet who called the owner of the garden and told him: "*He was hungry, you should have fed him*" whereupon the owner gave the poor fellow dates along with two sacks of wheat (Nasai).

Nor can it apply to dependent family members. Hind, Abu Sufyan's wife once complained to the Prophet about her husband: "*You know Abu Sufyan is a miser, he does not give enough provision for me or my children. Is it a sin for me if I take from his property for our maintenance?*" . The Prophet replied: "*There is no blame on you if you do that reasonably*". (Saheeh Muslim)

But that's not all. The penalty cannot be applied in times of war where there is great chaos and people often lose their sense of reason, which could also be expanded to any calamitous situation. As the Prophet said very clearly: *Hands are not to be cut off during a warlike expedition* (Aboo Dawood). It is also understood that stealing from public property will not incur the penalty since it is meant for all members of society in common including the thief himself.

Further, the intention of stealing should be clearly established as per the Prophet's saying: *Actions are judged according to intentions* (Saheeh Muslim).Thus if a person claims that he took an item thinking it was genuinely his and there is no evidence to the contrary, he is to taken at his word and let go. If he claims to have taken it to have a look at it and return it, he is to be taken at his word and let go.

But that's not all. The item stolen must also have a considerable value, which is to say that it should be worth a quarter of a gold dinar, in other words the equivalent of a little over a gram of gold which in today's context would be an item worth over 30 US Dollars or its equivalent in other currencies. However there are also scholars who argue that the stolen item should be worth a full dinar or over 4 grams of gold, the equivalent of over 100 USD, for the punishment to be applicable. Both these views have their grounding in the Prophet's sayings and doings.

The first view that the stolen item be worth at least a quarter gold dinar is based on the saying of the Prophet: "*The hand of a thief should be cut off for a quarter of a dinar and what is above that.*" (Saheeh Muslim). The Prophet had a man's hand cut off who had stolen from the place reserved for women a shield whose price was three silver dirhams (Aboo Dawood). Now, the rate of exchange at the time was twelve dirhams for the dinar (Muwatta), showing that a quarter dinar was the equivalent of three dirhams, so that there is no contradiction in what the Prophet said and did. However since what he mentioned explicitly was the quarter dinar, it is the gold value that will determine the minimum amount that invites the punishment.

However, there are also indications that the stolen item must be worth a gold dinar to implement the penalty. Now, a *dinar*, a word taken from the Roman *denarius*, was not a small sum, It could buy a shield, which in the olden days was quite a dear item which many could not even afford, considering the resources and labour that went to the making of one. That the stolen item must be worth at least a dinar to apply the penalty is based on an observation of the Prophet's wife Ayisha: "*The hand of a thief was not cut off during the lifetime of the Messenger of God except for stealing something equal to a shield in value*" (Saheeh Al-Bukhari) and a shield according to a companion named Al Abbas was worth one Dinar at that time (Nasai). The Prophet also said: "*There is no cutting (of hands) for stealing what is less than ten dirhams*"

(Musnad Ahmad) bringing it close to its equivalent of a dinar which was twelve dirhams, but could have fluctuated a bit as sometimes happens. As a result there are Islamic Jurists who argue that the minimum value of a stolen item the penalty would be applicable is one gold dinar which is the equivalent of over 100 US Dollars, quite a considerable sum.

But that's not all. The stolen item should have been removed from the secure custody of its owner, in other words a place meant for safekeeping such an item such as a safe or cupboard in the protection of one's home. For instance, a safe would be an appropriate place to keep cash, a drawer in a cupboard would be an appropriate place to keep jewellery while a fenced enclosure would be an appropriate place to keep livestock. This is based on the Prophet's statement: *The hand is not cut off for fruit hanging on the tree and for sheep kept in the mountains. So when they are taken from the fold or the place where the fruit is dried, a hand is cut off for whatever reaches the price of a shield* (Muwatta).

What this means is that for the punishment to be applicable, the item must have been kept in a place of safekeeping where the owner has taken every possible step to protect his property and is not guilty of its negligence by leaving it in an area that is easily accessible to the public. Thus one who steals jewellery left unprotected in a public place or an animal straying out of its pen cannot be subjected to the punishment. By extension, those who share a common residence thereby having access to an item of value such as family members whether they be one's child or spouse or even a servant or guest will not be liable to the punishment. Indeed even an employee who in the ordinary course of his work has access to such goods cannot be subjected to the punishment.

Furthermore, the theft should have been committed by stealth when no one was around. This is based on the strict lexical meaning of the Qur'anic terms used to define the thief to whom such punishment would be applicable, *sariq* for the male thief and *sariqa* for the female thief, that is persons who commit theft by stealth with the element of secrecy figuring in it. As such, thefts in public places in broad daylight even when no one is looking around at that particular time will not incur the punishment.

Appropriating an item by force - except in cases of armed robbery when the perpetrator will be treated as a rebel and subjected to the amputation of the right hand and left foot as prescribed in the Qur'an - will also take invite the punishment. Why, because in the first place it does not meet the condition of stealth and because plunder in itself does not invite the prescribed penalty based on the Prophet's saying: "*The cutting of the hand is not to be inflicted on one who plunders, but he who plunders conspicuously does not belong to us"* (Aboo Dawood).

Although this might strike one as surprising, the fact is that the one who seizes an item forcibly could be identified and the item recovered either by enlisting the help of others in the vicinity or by resorting to the strong arm of the law. The point here is that the perpetrator can be identified and the goods recovered without much difficulty unlike in the case of a thief who steals by stealth and whose identity remains unknown.

In addition, to prove the theft, two witnesses are required, though a confession from the thief would suffice. Even at this stage, the victim could pardon the thief by gifting the stolen item to him or her before he or she is taken to the judge or legal authorities for redress. This is based on an incident that took place in the Prophet's lifetime. A companion of the Prophet named Safwan was sleeping in the mosque in Medina with his cloak as a pillow. A thief took his cloak but Safwan grabbed hold of

him and brought him to the Prophet who asked the thief: "*Did you steal this cloak?*" He said, "*Yes*" So the Prophet ordered that his hand be cut off. Safwan said to him, "*I did not intend this. It is his as charity*." The Prophet told him: "*Why didn't you do it before bringing him to me?*" (Muwatta).

What this establishes is that if the owner of the item gifts the item to the thief, or does not claim it back or does not press charges, the hand of the thief does not have to be cut off. However if he is taken to court, the punishment will be meted out so long as it meets all the other conditions. In fact, throughout the nearly four centuries of Islamic rule in the Ottoman Empire which encompassed a good part of the Muslim world before the First World war there were only a handful of cases of amputation for theft which needless to say applied to habitual hardcore thieves who have persisted in their crimes at the expense of innocent people.

Even in a country like Saudi Arabia where the Sharia applies to this day, out of an average of about 2000 convictions for theft, only a single thief would end up having his or her hand cut off when all possible recourses to spare him or her the penalty have been exhausted.

But this does not mean that thieves who do not meet the criteria such as petty thieves, pickpockets or shoplifters should be allowed to get away with their crimes. What they do is obviously wrong and so discretionary punishment at the instance of the courts, either a jail term or corporal punishment by whipping could be inflicted to serve as a deterrent to them and others aware of the leniency of the law.

If you still think the Islamic penalty for theft is harsh, you only have to look at your own laws a couple of centuries ago, like how in England, as recently as 1772, a young mother named Mary Jones was hanged for theft, her child being plucked from her breast as she ascended the scaffold. Her crime: stealing bread to feed her two little children after her husband had been pressed into the navy. And if you care to look into Old Bailey records, you'll find that a young boy of nine years was sentenced to death in 1833 for stealing two penny-worth of paint. Islamic punishments are too good don't you think?

And now to the laws that involve the death penalty which many in our modern times think are rather harsh. Islam knows of only three offences that invite capital punishment, namely murder, for which the punishment is beheading, adultery for which the punishment is stoning to death and apostasy who also have to pay the ultimate price if they are unrepentant. This is based on the saying of the Prophet:

It is not permissible to shed the blood of a person who bears witness that there is no god but God except in three cases: a life for a life, a previously married person who commits adultery, and one who leaves Islam and forsakes the community
(Saheeh Muslim)

So let's first start with murder, the killing of man by man, the oldest of the crimes that go back to the days of Adam. As you would have read in the Bible, Adam had two sons Cain and Abel whom we Muslims call Qabeel and Habeel. Both of them were asked to offer a sacrifice to God. While Cain chose Abel offered his and so earned God's Favour. Cain out of jealousy killed his brother, becoming the first murderer to walk the face of the earth. The Qur'an too relates this story with a moral to go with it:

Recite to them the truth of the story of the two sons of Adam. Behold! They each presented a sacrifice (to God). It was accepted from one, but not from the other. Said

the latter:"Be sure, I will slay you". "surely" said the former "God accepts the sacrifice of the righteous. If you stretch your hand against me to slay me, it is not for me to stretch my hand against you to slay you, for I fear God, the Cherisher of the Worlds. For me, I intend to let you draw on yourself my sin as well as yours, for you will be among the Companions of the Fire, and that is the reward of those who do wrong". The (selfish) soul of the other led him to the murder of his brother. He murdered him and became one of the lost ones. Then God sent a raven who scratched the ground, to show him how to hide the shame of his brother. "Woe is me!" said he "Was I not even able to be as this raven, and to hide the shame of my brother?". Then he became full of regrets. On that account We ordained for the Children of Israel that if anyone slew a person – unless it be for murder or for spreading mischief in the land – it would be as if he slew the whole people. And if anyone saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of the whole people (The Repast:27-32).

In God's Sight this primeval murder, the work of the devil himself, risked putting His favoured creation into the path towards extinction. Why because there so few humans around at the time who could perpetuate their race. Thus God ordained that if anyone slew a fellow human, it would be as if he had slain all mankind and that if he saved a life it would be as if he saved all mankind. Get the moral of it!

The Bible clearly lays down the death penalty for murder:

Whoever strikes a man a mortal blow shall be put to death (Exodus 21:12)

It also upholds the law of equality, like for like which amounts to the same thing:

You shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth (Exodus 21:23-24)

This is of course in the fairness of things. But men must also learn how to forgive, especially if a murder was committed in anger or under great provocation. The Old Biblical Law of course did not make any allowance for forgiveness, either by the next of kin for a murder or by the victim himself if he had suffered grievous injury at the hands of the perpetrator. Then came Jesus who declared:

You have heard that it was said 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'. But I say to you offer no resistance to one who is evil-when someone strikes you on your right cheek, turn the other one to him as well (Matthew 5:38-39)

Jesus was only trying to impress on his fellow Jews the need to be forgiving and repel evil with good so that the evil-doer realizes the gravity of his offense and becomes ashamed of it. His was an appeal to one's innermost conscience, to leave justice to God and be content with one's lot. But the Jews would have none of it. They preferred the application of the full rigour of the Law.

Islam as always takes the middle path, allowing the victim of an injury to wreak vengeance or pardon the offender for a consideration of a sum of money and giving his or her relatives the right to condemn or pardon the perpetrator in lieu of

compensation if he or she be murdered. This is a combination of the law of *like for like* known to the Romans of old as *Lex talionis*, with the alternative of compensation to the next of kin, by the payment of blood-money, which the German tribes of old called *weregeld*. Rather than adopt one or the other Islam combined the two to ensure two things, retaliation to assuage the sense of vindictiveness of aggrieved next-of-kin who have been unjustly deprived of a loved one, or in the alternative to settle for monetary compensation if they thought fit to spare the life of the offender

Thus one who is murdered wrongfully can thus be avenged by his or her next of kin:

O ye who believe, prescribed for you is the law of equality in cases of murder
(The Heifer:178)

When Islam enjoined life for life, it recognized that it would have a deterrent effect:

In retribution, there is (preservation of) life, O men of sense,
that you may haply take heed
(The Heifer:179)

But there's another reason for the law of like for like, and that was to ensure that only the murderer pays the price for his crime and not his kith or kin. It has been a tendency in tribal societies for people to blame an entire clan for the sins of one, which is why you find that even in some so-called civilized societies children could be killed for the sins of their parents. If you think its savage, read Dickens *Tale of Two Cities* where the young French noble Charles Darney is sentenced to be guillotined by a French revolutionary tribunal for the crimes of his father and uncle, the oppressive Evremonde brothers '*Them and their descendants to the last of their race*' to put it in the words of Alexandre Manette.

This was also a common practice in ancient Arabia. In the year Mecca was conquered, a man from the Banu Layth was killed in retaliation for a murder committed by a member of his tribe before the coming of Islam. The Prophet forbade such acts of aggression: "*It is not allowed to kill a person other than the murderer. Whoever kills intentionally should be surrendered to the heirs (of the deceased), and they have the option of either retaliating or taking blood money from him*" (Saheeh Al-Bukhari). Thus this law restrained wanton killings that had plagued the Arabs of Pre-Islamic times.

The Prophet made it clear that it mattered not if the murdered one was a man or woman, a child or adult or a Muslim or non-Muslim. The offender was liable to the punishment for killing a human being, not just a Muslim. In his words:

The life of a Muslim may be taken in three cases only – in the case of a married person who commits adultery, one who has killed a human being and one who has forsaken his religion and separated himself from the community
(Bukhari, Muslim)

The term used for murder of a human being here is *qutal nafsan* literally meaning 'killing of a soul' which shows that it need not be confined to a Muslim victim in particular. Any victim of a murderer regardless of his or her religious affiliation could be avenged in keeping with the law. It is up to the heirs of the victim to decide that and even a court of law cannot interfere in the exercise of this right:

Nor take life-which God has made sacred- except for just cause. And if anyone is slain wrongfully, We have given his heir authority (to demand retaliation or forgive), but let him not exceed bounds in the matter of taking life
(The Night Journey: 33)

How fervently the early Muslims followed God's Word could be seen from the last wishes of the Caliph Ali, the Prophet's son-in-law who became the head of the Islamic Commonwealth a few decades after the demise of the Prophet. When felled by an assassin, he said that if the wound did not prove fatal, they must pardon the assassin, but if it did, they must straightaway slay him, so that the two might appear before God and be judged which side was the just one.

Contrast this attitude to Western rulers who despite Jesus' words enacted harsh punishments for any attempted harm to their persons, like the French King Louis XV who had his attempted assassin, the mentally unstable Robert Damiens who had lightly stabbed him with a penknife inflicting a slight wound, tortured to death, first with red hot pincers; the hand with which he held the offending object burned using sulphur and molten lead and boiling oil poured into his wounds, after which he was quartered by harnessing horses to his arms and legs to be dismembered, and his joints broken with an axe to the applause of the maddening crowd before his still living torso was burnt at the stake. And all this in the middle part of the eighteenth century. Had it been a Muslim Caliph he would have simply brushed him aside as a madman and at the most had him inflicted with a similar wound in keeping with the law of like for like and dismissed him.

But as I said, the aggrieved party could rather than demanding that the murderer be put to death, demand compensation from him or her. As the Prophet said:

The legal heirs have two options to make against the murderer, to exact retaliation or pardon him upon blood money
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

Both men and women are equally entitled to demand the right to retaliation or pardon the offender, for the Prophet made it very clear:

The legal heirs are to abide by their order of priority in inheritance in demanding retaliation, even if such priority vests in a woman from among them
(Aboo Dawood)

Now, you may wonder if this is fair, making the victim's family the judge and jury rather than letting the course of normal justice operate with a judge deciding whether the murderer is guilty and deserves the ultimate penalty? The fact of the matter is that the victim is no longer among the living and is in no position to give his opinion, whether to forgive the offender or not. As such it is only prudent that this right be transferred to the next of kin who would be the most grieved at the loss of a family member and at the same time would also have an idea whether the victim would have wished that the offender be punished. Since all close family members of the victim, both male and female kin, are given the discretion to decide, they all have an equal say and the decision must be unanimous. If they decide to forgive the offender, he or she is obliged to pay blood money, a sizeable compensation to the victim's family, which they could use for their upkeep, especially if the victim was the breadwinner of the family, or donate to charity or some worthy cause. This is certainly a better

option than sending the perpetrator to jail or executing him without any compensation for the family for the loss as happens under Western Law. If the family decides on the execution of the killer, that is their right, if they feel that the killing of the murderer is the only way their overwhelming grief could be assuaged. Fair enough, because they feel that grief more than you or I!

It is by no means a license to kill by paying blood money since the killer does not know that the family of the victim will accept blood-money and forego their right to retaliation. Even if they accepted it, the right of the murdered one to seek justice from God still remains, for as the Prophet said:

On the Day of Resurrection the slain will bring the slayer with his forelock and his head in his hand, his own jugular vein meanwhile dripping with blood, and he will say, 'O My Lord, ask him why did he kill me?'
till he brings him near the throne
(Nasaai)

And of course who can escape the Wrath of God who promises eternal punishment to murderers of innocents:

And whoever kills a believer intentionally, his recompense is Hell to abide therein, and the Wrath and the Curse of God are upon him, and a great punishment is prepared for him

(The Women:93)

Thus if the heirs demand retaliation, the murderer is surrendered to them on condition that they would put him to death the way he had done their loved one to death, for as the Prophet said: "*Whoever burns, we will burn him, and whoever drowns we will drown him*" (Nasb Al Rayah, Al Zaylai). There is also the story of the Jew who crushed a girl's head between two stones, and while she was still conscious she was asked about the murderer. Since she was unable to speak, they continued to mention names to her until the name of the killer was mentioned and she nodded. The Jew was brought and confessed to the killing, and so the Prophet ordered his head to be crushed with a stone (Saheeh Al-Bukhari).

However, the Prophet preferred beheading as a more merciful expedient, such as when he declared: *There is no punishment except with the sword*" (Ibn Majah) and "*if you kill, then kill with propriety*" (Tirmidhi). Thus the Prophet clearly preferred beheading the murderer, and it is this method of execution that strict Muslims still prefer. Very often than not, it is the state that carries out the execution on behalf of the victim's family by getting a skilled executioner to do the job. If you think beheading is cruel, it's not. It is as humane or even more so than any modern method of execution practised in the West. A single blow of the sword is all it takes to completely decapitate the offender. Even in the West until very recent times, it was the preferred method of executing murderers and what is supposed to be its more refined version, the guillotine of the French lasted until the Second World War till the invading Nazis abolished its use, preferring a shot to the head instead. At any rate beheading is certainly a better expedient than hanging, quartering and burning at the stake which were all well known ways of putting people to death in mediaval England which with time only became more cruel with boiling to death being approved in 1531, so horrible a punishment that some people boiled for up to two

hours before death came to them. Islam, by stipulating a single stroke of the sword did away with all the forms of torture aimed at a slow, lingering death which the wicked minds of men could conceive of.

In Islamdom, all persons, regardless of faith are given equality in demanding retaliation and this necessarily includes *Dhimmis* or persons protected by Islam who have submitted to the rule of the Islamic state. As the Caliph Ali said of the Dhimmis: "*Their blood is like our blood and their property likewise*" (Ahkam Al Qur'an, Al Jassas). The Prophet himself ordered a Muslim to be executed in retaliation for murdering a Dhimmi (Ibn Al Bilmani), and this practice was continued by the Caliphs Umar (Fatawa Al Uqdiya, Al Halawi) and Uthman (Nasb Al Rayah, Al Zaylai), showing that it was widely accepted by the early Muslims that the life of a Dhimmi was equal to that of a Muslim. Indeed, even one to whom a pledge of protection had been given even in a war situation was to be protected thus. The Caliph Umar once wrote to the commander of his army: "*I have heard that it is the habit of some of your men to chase an unbeliever till he takes refuge in a high place. Then one man tells him in Persian not to be afraid, and when he comes up to him, he kills him. By He in Whose Hand my Soul is, if I knew someone who had done that, I would strike off his head*" (Muwatta).

The same holds true of their right to demand blood money if they so wish. The Prophet clearly said: "*the blood money for the People of the Book is equal to that of their Muslim counterparts*" (Badai al Suna, Al Kasani). It is also known that Umar awarded a thousand dinars in compensation for the killing of a *Dhimmi* named Rifa Ibn Shamul in Syria (Ahkam Al Qur'an, Al Jassas).

In like manner a man could be killed for murdering a woman or vice versa. The Prophet made this clear when he pronounced: "*A man can be put to death for killing a woman*" (Nayl Al Awtar, Al Shawkani) which is also supported by his ordering the killing of a Jew for the murder of a slave girl (Nasai). Even the Caliph Umar ordered retaliation for as many as seven men who were found guilty of murdering a woman (Al Jassas).

Some Jurists of the olden days were of the view that the only exception to this process was when parents were involved in the killing of their children, arguing that a parent cannot be executed for murdering his or her child on the basis of a saying attributed to the Prophet: "*A father should not be killed for (the killing of his) son*" (Tirmidhi).

The authenticity of this alleged saying is however doubtful as even Tirmidhi who recorded it denied its authenticity since it had been related by untrustworthy people including the fraudulent Hajjaj Bin Artah. A weak tradition like this cannot abrogate the generality of the Quranic principle which does not make any distinction between offenders based on their relationship to the victim and which in fact penalizes the offense both in this world and in the hereafter

O ye who believe, prescribed for you is the law of equality in cases of murder
(The Heifer:178)

And whoever kills a believer intentionally, his recompense is Hell to abide therein,
and the Wrath and the Curse of God are upon him,
and a great punishment is prepared for him
(The Women:93)

Added to this is the saying of the Prophet:

The believers are equal (in their rights to demand) blood
(of the one found guilty of premeditated murder)
(Musnad of Ahmad & Nasai)

Even if a parent has killed his or her child and is not given the death penalty by a court, he or she is still obliged to pay blood money to the killed offspring's other kin as related in the tradition:

Abu Qataadah, a man from Bani Mudlij, killed his son and (Caliph) Umar took
from him 100 camels (as blood money)
(Ibn Majah)

In this case, the killer had thrown a sword at his son that struck his thigh, the wound bleeding so profusely that he died. Even though this was not a deliberate act of killing, but one done in anger, Umar fined the man severely. One can only guess how a parent deliberately killing his or her child should then be penalized. Should not it be more than for mere manslaughter?

Such a one neither inherits from the estate of such offspring nor gets anything from the blood money, since all companions of the Prophet including the Caliphs Umar and Ali were agreed on this based on the Prophet's Command:

The killer does not inherit from the one whom he killed
(Daraqutni & Bayhaqi)

There are even countries that penalize the crime of killing one's offspring by more than demanding they pay blood money. Killing one's children after all is a most foul deed and considered one of the grave crimes of Islam absolutely prohibited in the Qur'an:

Kill not your children for fear of want. We shall provide sustenance for them
as well as for you. Verily the killing of them is a great sin
(The Night Journey:31)

Thus in Islam there can be no right of *Patria Potestas* like the Romans of old had, where a father had the right of life and death over his children including the grown-up ones. Rather in Islam duties of one to the other are reciprocal. As God tells us of our duty to parents who have reached old age: "*And out of kindness lower to them the wing of humility, and say: "My Lord! Bestow on them Your Mercy even as they cherished me in childhood*" (The Night Journey:24). It follows then that parents are expected to be merciful to their children and harming them in any way except to discipline them by way of light punishment is prohibited.

Now, something that is prohibited must of necessity be prevented even by using punishment as a deterrent, which is why a court of law that may not mete out the death penalty for a parent who kills his or her offspring, besides ordering the payment of blood money to the kin, usually awards discretionary punishment such as a long jail term, a certainly more punishing sentence than in Western countries where parents can get away with a couple of years or even a few months for killing their

children on a plea of diminished responsibility, especially if they happen to be disabled. At the same time, Islam makes it very clear that unintentional murder or manslaughter cannot be penalized with death. The Prophet ordained:

If anyone is killed blindly, when people are throwing stones, or by beating with whips, or striking with a stick, it is accidental. Blood money is due. if anyone is killed deliberately, retaliation is due
(Aboo Dawood)

Umar even went to the extent of exonerating a girl from retaliation for killing a man who tried to rape her (Bayhaqi). Thus killing in self-defence is valid grounds for not being liable to the death penalty though the one who does so may be liable to paying compensation to the next of kin depending on the circumstances of the case.

We next come to the crime of adultery which is the second offense that calls for the death penalty in Islam. I say crime and not sin when I speak of adultery because this is exactly what it is. It is a crime because it is a betrayal of the marriage bond, marital treachery, infidelity at its worst. God says in the Qur'an:

Nor come nigh to adultery. For it is a shameful (deed), and an evil, opening the road (to other evils)
(The Night Journey:32)

God here is telling us not to even come near to adultery, why because it is such a great sin. Islam condemns all those avenues that could lead to adultery including the wanton display of one's physical charms. As God says in the Qur'an:

Say to the believing men to lower their gaze and guard their modesty. That is purer for them, Lo! God is aware of what they do. And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and guard their modesty and not to display of their adornment except that which is apparent
(The Light: 30-31)

It's not only Islam that regards adultery as a sin. All major faiths do. The Bible for instance lists it as one of the Great Sins forming part of the Ten Commandments. The Seventh Commandment laid down: *'Thou shall not commit adultery' (Exodus 20:12).* Jesus went even further, announcing:

Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time: 'Thou shall not commit adultery'. But I say unto you, that whosoever looks on a woman to lust after, he hath committed adultery with her already in his heart
(Matthew 5:27-28)

Paul, an early Church father to whom much of Christianity as we know it today has its origins went still further, lumping together not only adulterers, but also fornicators, with idolators and suggesting that there could be no repentance for them:

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites none of these will inherit the kingdom of God
(Corinthians 6:9-10)

It was in keeping with this attitude that the first Christian Roman Emperor Constantine imposed the death penalty for adultery while later emperors like Marcian and Leo changed it into life imprisonment. Justinian modified it further to flogging the woman and forcing her into a monastery, with the husband having the right either to get her out within two years or confine her there for the rest of her life. In fact. adultery still very much remains illegal in many Western countries including the US where a good number of states have laws against it.

One may wonder why in Islam adultery is looked upon by God as such a serious offence? For instance, a murderer may be spared death by the next of kin by paying blood money and a thief may not have his hand cut off if the victim chooses to gift the stolen item to him, but for adultery once proven there is no forgiveness even by the spouse of the offender. So heinous is it in the Sight of God.

The answer's simple. God does not like infidelity, which is why He calls unfaithful Israel when she had taken to idolatry, a harlot. Why because harlotry is a metaphor for idolatry. This is why we find James, in typical Biblical style using the word adulterers to describe those who are unfaithful to the covenant between God and man, the covenant being likened to the marriage bond: "*Adulterers! Do you not know that to be a lover of the world means enmity with God? Therefore whoever wants to be a lover of the world makes himself an enemy of God*" (James 4:4).

So just as humanity must be faithful to the covenant of God to worship Him and Him alone, without taking other gods beside Him, so must men and women be faithful to the marriage tie, loving their husband or wife as the case may be and not taking paramours. Faith is after all fidelity and disbelief infidelity. This is why Islam views marriage as an inviolable bond so long as it subsists.

But there's also a more practical reason. Why, because marriage is the very bedrock of society, the one institution established by God for the perpetuation of the human race. It lays the foundation for a family and a healthy society. Take it away and humanity will sink into chaos without the love of a mother or the protection of a father. Could such a promiscuous society survive for more than a generation or two I ask you?

This is why the marriage bond has to be guarded at all costs. Quite naturally infringing on this bond should invite punishment to safeguard its sanctity. If not, breaking this bond, sundering what God has joined together, will be taken lightly so that adultery becomes a very casual affair, threatening the very foundation of society as we know it. Even in the civilized West where men and women marry and lead faithful lives, would they with all their liberality, brook another mate coming in between them and spoiling that beautiful relationship? Certainly not! That is in the nature of things God has created for the good of humanity.

True, man has been created weak in the flesh, but this is nothing compared to the rest of creation who are slaves of their instincts, whose sex lives are governed by pheromones, strong body odours and keen sense of smell that man lacks, allowing him to live an ordered married life and withstand the sexual pressures of communal living, the only mammal of over 5000 mammal species to be able to do so. This itself shows that man unlike other animal species has a higher purpose in life, bound to control himself for the good of his kind so that they all have a good foundation to realize the purpose of their existence, which is to serve God and God alone. To remind man of it, God also sends down diseases upon promiscuous people. We know not what kind of venereal diseases affected the men of old, but in Victorian times there was Syphilis and Gonorrhea and in our times there is AIDS, just as the Prophet prophesied:

Sexual immorality never appears among people to such an extent that they commit it openly except that they will be afflicted by plagues and diseases unknown to their forefathers
(Ibn Majah)

This does not mean that Islam advocates repression of the sex urge, but rather control of it in such a manner as will satisfy the individual, perpetuate the species and bring stability to society. Control, after all, is the first impulse of civilization. Without it man is a mere animal. So I ask you, what better way than marriage to regulate our lives. Indeed in Islam lawful sex within marriage is even rewarded by God. The Prophet once said: "*A man is rewarded for the sexual act he performs with his wife!*". Some companions asked quite surprised: "*Is a man rewarded for satisfying his passions?*" and the Prophet answered: "*Do you not see that if he were to satisfy it in a prohibited manner, he would be committing a sin? So if he satisfies it in a lawful manner, he will be rewarded*" (Saheeh Muslim).

Although the Qur'an warns us to keep away from adultery, it does not ordain that the violators be stoned to death. That comes from the practice of the Prophet. However it does prescribe a punishment for the offence of *Zina* which is a general term covering illicit sex and used indifferently for both adultery, which is sexual intercourse outside marriage and fornication, which is pre-marital sex. The offenders in this case are called the *Zaani* in the case of the male and *Zaaniya* in the case of the female. This is what it says:

The Zaaniya and the Zaani, flog each of them with a hundred stripes. Let not compassion move you in their case, in a matter prescribed by God, if ye believe in God and the Last Day. And let a party of the believers witness their punishment
(The Light:2)

However all are agreed that such corporal punishment by whipping is applicable only to unmarried offenders, in other words fornicators because the Prophet very clearly laid down that the punishment for married offenders or adulterers was stoning to death:

Take it from me. Verily God has ordained a way for them (the women who commit fornication): (When) a married man (commits adultery) with a married woman, and an unmarried male with an unmarried woman, then in case of married (persons) there is (a punishment) of one hundred lashes and then stoning (to death). And in case of unmarried persons, (the punishment) is one hundred lashes and exile for one year.
(Saheeh Muslim)

However it is no easy task proving illicit sex - whether adultery or fornication. The Qur'an stipulates that four witnesses witness the act while it is being committed, meaning the act of penetration itself:

Those who launch a charge against chaste women, and produce not four witnesses, flog them with eighty stripes, and reject their evidence ever after
(The Light:4)

A man once came to the Prophet and asked: "*Can I kill a man if I see him committing adultery with my wife, or should I produce four witnesses to prove his guilt?"*. The Prophet responded that he ought to produce four witnesses (Aboo Dawood). Furthermore the Prophet made it clear that witnesses could simply not assume sex was taking place since they could have simply been embracing or lying on top of one another. Rather he required witnesses to testify that they had seen "*his penis enter into her vagina like an eyeliner applier entering into its container*" (Aboo Dawood).

These conditions make proof of adultery a very difficult one to establish and one cannot escape the feeling that it is mainly intended as a deterrent to impress on those who ever think of indulging in it the seriousness of the offence and to prevent its getting public acceptance and being indulged in freely. This is compounded by the fact that those accusers who cannot produce reliable witnesses are themselves to be penalized with as many as 80 lashes. Although the verse lays down the punishment for slandering chaste women, by consensus of opinion it also covers slandering chaste men. But what of spouses who accuse one another of adultery. The Holy Book does not take this as slander but has another solution for it:

As for those who accuse their spouses but have no witnesses except themselves; if they bear witness four times (with an oath) by Allah that they are solemnly telling the truth And the fifth (oath) (should be) that they solemnly invoke the curse of God on themselves if they tell a lie. But it would avert the punishment from the wife if she bears witness four times (with an oath) by God that (her husband) is telling a lie. And the fifth (oath) should be that she solemnly invokes the wrath of God on herself if (her accuser) is telling the truth
(The Light: 4-9)

Needless to say, such couples who accuse each other are divorced since after such accusations it would be difficult for them to live with each other. Still one has only to look at how well the Prophet himself handled an allegation of adultery alleged to have been committed by his own wife Ayisha. It once happened that Ayisha, while travelling, discovered she had lost her necklace. She went to look for it and got lost. A young man named Safwan came across her and placed her on the back of his own camel. When they returned the tongues started to wag. The Prophet himself did not know what to make of it and became cold with her as a result of which she returned to her parents home. The incident, needless to say, caused a scandal in the young Muslim community and even threatened to split it into two with two camps, one for Ayisha and the other against her.

So delicate was the situation that the Prophet went to confront Ayisha herself. The girl, then about fourteen years old was inconsolable. Her mother Umm Ruman had brushed it aside telling her that all beautiful women could expect this sort of trouble while her father Abu Bakr was at a loss of what to make of it. The Prophet urged her to confess her sin, saying that if she were guilty God would forgive her. The girl looked straight at her husband and said that she would never admit something she had not done. The Prophet then went into a trance and in spite of being a cold day, he sweated so profusely that Abu Bakr rushed to cover him with a mantle. "*Good news Ayisha!*", he called out to her "*God has sent down word about your innocence*". Her relieved parents urged her to come to Muhammad, but all she said was: "*I shall neither come to him nor thank him. Nor will I thank the both of you who listened to the slander and did not deny it. I shall rise to give thanks to God alone*". She soon regained her place in the Prophet's heart and that was it.

Just look at the example of the man. What a far cry from other, lesser men, like the founder of the Church of England, that impulsive wretch of a king named Henry VIII who beheaded one wife after the other on the slightest suspicion of adultery. If you think King Henry's act was an exception, you're sadly mistaken. It was a fairly common practice for European men in the middle ages to resort to the charge to get rid of a wife and take another in her place. A mere allegation of adultery by the husband could be penalized with death while it was unheard of for a wife to make such a charge against her husband. Even if she did it did not count. After all, was it not the Bible that laid down:

If a man commits adultery with another man's wife- both the adulterer and the adulteress are to be put to death
(Leviticus 20:10)

Strangely this Biblical punishment depended on the marital status of the woman, not the man. Nothing was said about a married man committing adultery with an unmarried woman whereas the man who committed the offense with a married woman was penalized, whether he was married or not. Thus in Biblical terms, adultery meant extramarital sexual intercourse involving a married woman, not a married man. This of course reflected the rigidly patriarchal customs of the Jews that considered woman to be the property of man.

This double standard also crept into mediaeval European society. In 14th century Vienna for example a man and a woman married to another caught in adultery could be impaled, with their bodies pressed against an iron pole to die a painful death while it did not count at all if a man cheated on his wife by cohabiting with an unmarried woman. Many were the cases where ruthless husbands resorted to the expedient of adultery to rid themselves of their wives. Take Maria of Brabant, Duchess of Bavaria who was beheaded in 1256 after being accused of adultery by her husband on the basis of an alleged love letter she wrote, Then there was Agnese Visconti, another nobleman of Italy put to death in 1391 after being falsely accused by her husband who wanted to end all relations with her father and Beatrice Lascaris di Tenda, yet another Italian noblewoman whose husband Filippo Maria Visconti, Duke of Milan, grew averse to her as he favored his mistress, the much younger and accused her of adultery because she was apparently seen sitting on the bed with a young troubadour who entertained her with song. Poor Beatrice was beheaded as was the young troubadour and two innocent handmaidens who were accused of complicity to the act. And who can forget Anne Boleyn, Henry VIII's second wife who was convicted on trumped up charges of adultery and beheaded without even having a proper hearing. And these were of course high born women who made the news of the day. One can only imagine the plight of ordinary women who would have been at the mercy of capricious husbands who could use adultery as and when it suited them to get rid of them.

How remote this hypocritical attitude was from the Muslim world is seen from the story of Caliph Harun Al Rashid of whose wife many tales were told but who tolerated her, without as much as lifting a finger to obtain a confession. There is this story in the Arabian nights that the suspicious Caliph once found man's semen on his wife's bed and summoned his judge to take a good look at it. The judge looked around, saw a bat hanging above and promptly despatched it, saying that it was the bat that was the culprit as its semen looked very much like human semen. Who was to know! What's more, in the nearly five hundred years that the Ottoman Empire

ruled Istanbul, we hear of only a single instance of stoning to death for adultery taking place!

And now we come to the third and last of the offences that invite the death penalty in Islam and that is apostasy or leaving the faith for another. There can be no doubt that in Islam, apostasy is a great sin. The Arabic term for apostasy, *riddah* literally meaning 'turning back' means desertion of Islam or conversion from Islam to another faith. The Qur'an says about such persons in very telling terms: The Qur'an says about such persons in very telling terms: "*And whoever of you reverts from his religion and dies while he is a disbeliever, for those, their deeds have become worthless in this world and the hereafter, and those are the companions of the fire, they will abide therein*" (The Heifer:217). Besides severing the bond with God and inviting Divine retribution, apostasy involves another dimension which is not strictly spiritual, but rather temporal in character, and that is desertion of the Muslim community which is regarded as a form of treason.

Treason means different things to different cultures and even in modern democratic countries of the west we still come across an offense called treason which is heavily penalized, sometimes with death. In Britain for instance young soldiers who deserted the army out of cowardice were until very recently condemned as traitors and executed by their own. In this manner, hundreds of British soldiers, some still in their teens and suffering from shellshock or simply unable to bear the carnage they saw in the battlefield were shot during the Great War from 1914-1918. One young fellow's crime was to hide in a barn to escape the horrors of war while another's was to leave his post to comfort a recently-bereaved friend stationed nearby. This was how the British viewed treason and to think that Islamdom did not even have a punishment for deserters in Holy War fought for the defence of the faith, though they would have to account to God for that. The fact is that the citizens of a country are simply expected to be loyal to it even though they may dislike their country for some reason or other. In this they do not have much of a choice. Working against a country in which they happened to be born and are citizens of, can have severe repercussions and so it is with Islam which is not simply a faith, but also a whole way of life encompassing political, social, cultural and economic spheres among others.

When one is born or becomes a Muslim, he or she also becomes a member of the Islamic fraternity and as such is required to be loyal to it and protect it from destruction, disorder and division. Leaving Islam means not just forsaking the Muslim community, but also hits at the very heart of the community, so that it could even be viewed as an attempt to split its ranks. And just as a deserter is a danger to an army, so is an apostate a danger to the faith. This was all the more so in the early days of Islam. During the Prophet's lifetime when a nascent Islamic society and polity was vulnerable to hostile forces, apostasy seems to have been inextricably linked to treason, hence the Prophet's definition of an apostate as one who leaves Islam and forsakes the community. Such treason often meant the redirection of one's loyalty to those enemies of Islam who were constantly conspiring and attempting to destroy the emerging community. Such people could not only support the enemy, but also side with them in battle. They also posed the very real danger of sowing discord within the community itself. Thus apostasy was not simply a matter of individual choice or free-will. It had other damning consequences as well, including political implications.

Apostasy laws also prevent people from forming cults, like we saw in America when too much freedom of religious conscience was given. Take Mormonism whose

founder Joseph Smith claimed he had been commanded by God to take additional wives after his first wife caught him having sex with their teenage maid in the barn, so that before he died, he had married nearly forty women. Brigham Young revered by Mormons as their second prophet was even worse, ordering that those whites who married blacks should be executed: "*Shall I tell you the law of God in regard to the African race? If the white man who belongs to the chosen seed mixes his blood with the seed of Cain (those of African descent), the penalty, under the law of God, is death on the spot*". And who can forget cult leader Jim Jones of Jonestown who called on his followers to commit mass suicide, who not only took their accursed lives but also those of their children with over three hundred of the little ones murdered by cyanide poisoning.

There are a few traditions that suggest that apostasy from Islam carries the ultimate penalty. One such is the statement of the Prophet that one of the reasons for which one who has testified to the Oneness of God, in other words a Muslim could be killed for if he leaves Islam and forsakes the community (Saheeh Muslim). Another tradition has it that there was a man in fetters beside Abu Musa. Mu'adh asked, "*Who is this?*" He answered "*It is a Jew who became Muslim and then reverted to Judaism*". He added "*Sit down*". Mu'adh said. "*I will not sit down until he has been killed. It is the judgment of God and His Messenger*" and repeated it three times. So Abu Musa commanded that he be killed. The Jew was asked to repent and when he refused he was killed (Aboo Dawood). Yet another tradition has it that some *Zanadiqah (*heretics) were brought to Ali and he burnt them. This reached Ibn Abbas and he said: *"I would not have burnt them because of the prohibition by the Messenger of God: 'Do not punish with the punishment of God.' I would have killed them in accordance with the word of the Messenger of God: 'Whoever changed his (Islamic) religion kill him'* " (Saheeh Al-Bukhari).

However just as Islam lays down the death penalty for the apostate, it has also given ample scope for the offender to repent, thus saving him or her not only from the Wrath of God, but also from the prescribed capital punishment.

The Qur'an clearly suggests that Divine Punishment will fall upon those apostates who do not return to Islam, showing that the repentance of apostates is possible. For instance, we have the statements:

Those who believe, then reject faith, then believe (again) and (again) reject faith, and go on increasing in unbelief. God will not forgive them nor guide them on the Way
(The Women: 137)

How shall God Guide those who reject Faith after they accepted it and bore witness that the Messenger was true and that Clear Signs had come unto them? But God guides not a people unjust. Of such the reward is that on them (rests) the curse of God, of His angels, and of all mankind. In that will they dwell; nor will their penalty be lightened, nor shall they be respited. Except for those that repent (Even) after that, and make amends; for verily God is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful
(Family Imran: 86-89)

These verses imply that just as there is repentance with God for apostasy in the spiritual sphere, the community of Muslims should also give him or her an opportunity to repent before putting him or her to death. This is also supported in the Prophetic tradition. For instance we have the tradition where the Caliph Umar asked a man whether he had any news. The man replied "*Yes, a man apostatized from*

Islam, so we killed him". Umar said: "*Why did you not lock him up for three days, and feed him on each day a loaf of bread and urge him to repent?*" and he then said: " *O God- you are a witness- I was not there, Nor did I command it, and when the news reached me, I did not approve*" (Muwatta). Umar no doubt had good reason to disassociate himself from the act, for the Prophet himself gave apostates an opportunity to repent like when he offered Islam to a woman who had apostatized. He said: "*It is good if she repents. If she does not, she is to be killed"* (Daruqutni).

In fact even the great majority of Classical Islamic Jurists were agreed that the apostate must be given an opportunity to repent before he or she is put to death. Most however felt that the grace period should be three days, after which the penalty ought to be carried out. A vocal few were however of the view that the invitation to rejoin Islam should continue for as long as there is hope that the apostate might change his mind and repent. There were even those who did not prefer instant execution, but rather that the apostate be beaten to death with a stick, a slow method that might provide him greater opportunity to repent.

Another more serious aspect of apostasy is blasphemy or speaking out openly against the faith which all jurists are agreed also invites the death penalty. Why, because blasphemy is apostasy as the one who speaks ill of God or His Messenger cannot fail, at the same time, to renounce Islam. Some jurists however go to the extreme of arguing that the blasphemer, unlike the apostate, should have no option of repentance because he or she openly places himself or herself on a war footing with the community. Strangely, they argue that blaspheming against God can be pardoned by repentance since it is between God and the man concerned, but blaspheming against the Prophet cannot be pardoned under any circumstances as the Prophet himself would have to pardon the offender, and since he is no longer with us, such pardon is not possible. This is in spite of the Prophet's character and way of life, for we know of numerous instances where he was subjected to verbal humiliation, but his reaction was one of patience, whether he was in power or not. Even when he gave the order for those who lampooned him to be killed, he forgave them when he heard of their repentance.

But first let's see what the Qur'an, the Word of God has to say about it:

To God belong the Most Beautiful Names. So call on Him by them.
But shun such men who profane His Names
(The Heights:180)

When you hear the Signs of God held in defiance and ridicule, you are not to sit with them unless they turn to a different theme. If you did, you would be like them
(The Women:140)

In these verses, God warns the believers to stay away from those who ridicule His Holy Names or Signs lest they become like them. It lays down no punishment for those who indulge in their blasphemies. Then there's the verse:

They swear by God that they said nothing (evil). But indeed they uttered blasphemy and they did it after accepting Islam; and they mediated a plot which they were unable to carry out; this revenge of theirs was (their) only return for the bounty with which God and His Messenger had enriched them! If they repent, it will be best for them, but if they turn back, God will punish them with a grievous punishment in this life and the hereafter
(The Repentance: 74)

In this verse, God warns the unbelievers who blaspheme that if they don't repent, they'll have to pay a heavy price both in this world and in the hereafter. Indeed even if we take blasphemy to be tantamount to waging war against God and His Messenger, we will still find that the option of repentance is always open before they fall into the hands of the believers:

The punishment of those who wage war against God and His Messenger, and strive with might and main for mischief through the land is execution, or crucifixion, or the cutting off of hands and feet from opposite sides, or exile from the land. That is their disgrace in this world, and a heavy punishment is theirs in the hereafter; except those who repent before they fall into your power. In that case, know that God is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful
(The Repast: 33-34)

As for those who cursed and uttered blasphemies against the Prophet, we would find that despite being the chosen one of God to convey His Message to all mankind, he conducted himself with great forbearance which certainly cannot be said of other men. It once happened that two men espied the Prophet with a leather shield in his hand with which he covered himself as he urinated. They said: "*Look at him, he is urinating like a woman*". The Prophet heard this and said: "*Do you know what befell a person from the Children of Israel? When urine fell on them, they would cut off the place where the urine fell, but he forbade them (to do so) and he was punished in his grave*" (Aboo Dawood). Here we have some Muslims, in their ignorance, comparing the noble Prophet's actions to that of a woman's and having the temerity to use this kind of language before the Prophet of God and the Ruler of the Community. But did the Prophet pronounce that they be killed for blasphemy? Nay, rather he explained himself and that was the end of the matter.

There were also other more serious cases of blasphemy to which the Prophet turned a blind eye. The Prophet's wife Ayisha relates one such incident:
A group of Jews entered upon the Prophet and said "As-Samu alaikum' (Death Be Upon You)". I understood it and said "Wa alaikum As-Samu wal La'an" (And upon you be Death and the Curse of God). God's Messenger said: "Be calm O Ayisha! God loves that one should be kind and lenient in all matters". I said: "O God's Messenger, didn't you hear what they (the Jews) said?". God's Messenger said: "I have (already) said (to them) "And upon you (be the same)!" (Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

Then there's the case of the Jewish poet Ka'b who composed poems denigrating the person of the Prophet. Ka'b not only composed poems lampooning the Prophet, but also tried to provoke the Quraysh against him. He therefore showed open hostility to the Muslims. As the Prophet later observed of him: "*He has openly assumed enmity to us and speaks evil of us and he has gone over to the polytheists (who were at war with Muslims) and has made them gather against us for fighting*". (Zurqani) Ka'b's blasphemous poetry was nonetheless a serious offence and caused a scandal in the young Muslim community which only ceased when the Prophet ordered him assassinated. When the Jews complained about his assassination, the Prophet told them: "*If he had calmed down, like others who follow his opinion or are of the same opinion as his have calmed down, he wouldn't have been assassinated!*

The Prophet's words show that Ka'b was assassinated not just for a few words he uttered against the Prophet but for the vigorous and continuous campaign of hate speech engaged in. As the Prophet himself explained, if he had calmed down like the others, he would not have been assassinated. But Ka'b would not stop, he continued

to lampoon the Prophet, which was an attack not only against his person, but also the young Muslim community he led. Slanderous poetry is by no means casual comment. It was much more than that and intended to get the maximum effect by catering to the lower instincts of men by attacking a man's honour. What Ka'b wanted was to make the Prophet an object of ridicule and demean him in the eyes of other men. Ka'b's actions were also a threat to the Prophet's mission, for to attack him verbally was also to attack his mission which was one of salvation for all mankind. To leave it unpunished would only have encouraged others to engage in this type of lowly character assassination, posing a threat to his mission as well. Such persons were placing themselves on a war footing against the Muslims. Their role in the anti-Islamic struggle was similar to that of the war-bards of old who were a rallying point for combatants. And all this at a time Islam was still weak in the young state of Medina. Had the Prophet looked the other way, who knows, he would have been thought of as a lesser man and his noble mission would have suffered in the process.

Thus Ka'b's assassination cannot be taken as evidence for not giving the opportunity for blasphemers to repent of their deed. Had Ka'b relented, the Prophet would have forgiven him as he himself indicated, for did he not say: "*If he had calmed down, like others who follow his opinion or are of the same opinion as his have calmed down, he wouldn't have been assassinated!*

This is also proven by the fate of his namesake, Ka'b ibn Zuhayr who had a death warrant on his head for composing poems against the Prophet and was on the list of Meccans to be denied the general amnesty given by the Prophet on the occasion of the conquest of the city. Although a general amnesty had been given to the inhabitants of the city, it was not to be applicable to six men and four women "*even if you see them hanging to the cloths of the Ka'bah"* though many of them were later pardoned by the Prophet.Ka'b was among them. Ka'b lost no time coming to the Prophet to make the declaration of faith, which he followed by a few lines in praise of the Prophet:

Inna rasula lasaifun yustadaau bihi
Muhannadun min Suyufillahi maslulu

(The Messenger, a light is he, source of light,
An Indian sword among the swords of God)

Hearing this, the Prophet took of his cloak and clothed him with it. When Muawiya, the son of the Prophet's erstwhile foe Abu Sufyan became Caliph, he wanted to have the cloak for himself and offered Ka'b a handsome sum of money but Ka'b would not part with it for all the money in the world.

Then there's the case of the two singing girls who also had their names on the black list of persons to be killed along with their master, a man named Abdullah ibn Khatal who used to be a Muslim but apostatized and reverted to idolatry after killing a servant of his for a trivial reason. The man had these women sing for him and for his companions songs abusive of the Prophet. The Prophet's instructions specified that the two slave girls were also be killed. The man was killed as he was holding on to the coverings of the Ka'aba and killed along with him were one of his slave girls. The other managed to flee until someone sought a special pardon for her from the Prophet, which he granted (Sirat Rasulullah. Ibn Hisham).

What we find here is a case similar to that of Ka'b. Songstresses who engaged in hate speech attacking the honour of an innocent man and a Prophet of God at that.

Songs, like poetry, have a profound impact on human minds and the danger posed by such singers could not be underestimated, especially in an age of ignorance where men could easily be misled by them instead of seeing reason. A message had to be given. But here too we find that it was a vigorous campaign of disparaging poetry that earned the Prophet's ire and not a few plain words uttered against him. And despite all this, the girl who fled and later sought the Prophet's forgiveness, was pardoned. If indeed, attacking the Prophet verbally was a punishment with no possibility of repentance, we may ask why the Prophet himself forgave the girl concerned. Surely, the Prophet would never have gone against God's Law, and to argue otherwise would only be heresy.

Then there's the case of the blind man who had a slave woman by whom he had children. She used to curse the Prophet and he would warn her to stop, but she wouldn't. One night she was carrying on with cursing the Prophet and so he took a dagger, put it in her stomach, pressed it in and killed her. In the morning, the news reached the Prophet and so he gathered the people and asked: "*I ask you in the name of God who ever did that to stand up*". So the blind man stood up and came walking to the Prophet until he sat in front of him and said "*O Messenger of God I am the one who did that, she used to curse you and I used to tell her to stop and she would n' t stop! I have from her two children like pearls and she was very kind with me. But last night she started cursing you so I took a dagger and I stuck it in her and killed her!* ". To this the Prophet replied "*Bare witness that her blood is invalidated!"* (Aboo Dawood) meaning that there was to be no punishment for the blind man for his act.

Firstly, what has to be borne in mind here is that the Prophet did not order the woman's killing. She was killed by an over-zealous follower of his who had beseeched her to cease her blasphemies again and again and only took her life when she refused to do so. Could we infer from this that the blind man was wrong in giving the woman several opportunities to cease her blasphemies? Certainly cannot, for the Prophet's companions knew Islam better than those who in their misguidance declare that even repentant blasphemers should be executed. So here again what we infer is that a blasphemer has an opportunity to repent from the act of reviling the Prophet and that he or she should be meted out the punishment only when they are unrepentant.

This in only in keeping with the way the Prophet would have liked us to behave.His wife Ayisha says of him: "*He never spoke ill of anybody. Instead of returning evil for evil, he used to forgive those who gave offence to him. He was always clear of injustice and never took his revenge. He never hit any maid, or slave or servant or even a dumb creature*". Hind, son of his wife Khadija through an earlier husband tells us: "*Kind of heart, he was nice and sweet-tempered. He never liked to displease or cause offence to anybody. He thanked others even for trifling favours. He took whatever food was placed before him without criticizing it. He never got any for anything concerning his own person, nor did he contemplate revenge or letting down anybody. But if anyone opposed what was just and right, he used to get sore and helped the right cause with all his might*" (Tirmidhi).

Thus, those who say that the blasphemer should be killed even when he or she repents are not the worshippers of the True God who accepts the repentance of all and sundry, nor the followers of the Prophet of Mercy who accepted the repentance of all those who sought his forgiveness, but the devotees of the unrepentant devil himself. Why, because Satan is unrepentant and does not believe in repentance. So it is only natural that those whom he has poisoned with his venom, should act likewise and not believe in repentance!

Islam's apostasy and blasphemy laws with its stress on repentance was far more lenient than the blasphemy laws that prevailed in Christian nations like Britain until fairly recent times. Take the English Criminal Code which as late as the 18th century, inflicted some terrible punishments on those found guilty of high treason which also meant adhering to a form of Christianity other than the established Anglican Church. With the profession of their faith declared as high treason many Catholics in England and Ireland suffered a very painful death. The unfortunate victims would be hung by the neck from a scaffold, being cut down and disemboweled while still alive after which their heads would be severed from their bodies and their corpses divided into four quarters.

Blasphemers also faced death without clemency like Thomas Aikenhead, a young twenty year old medical student at the University of Edinburgh was hanged in 1697 for making blasphemous statements such as calling the Old Testament 'Ezra's fables', and the New Testament 'the History of the Imposter Christ' based upon the evidence given by his erstwhile friends. The prosecution was told that Aikenhead 'preferred Mahomet to the blessed Jesus'. He was charged under Scotland's blasphemy act which mandated death for one who '*not being distracted in his wits shall rail upon or curse God, or any of the persons of the blessed Trinity*'. Aikenhead was found guilty of cursing and railing against God the Father and the Son, denying the incarnation and the Trinity, and scoffing at the Scriptures. Despite submitting a petition for leniency he was hanged and buried on the road to Leith.

Medieval European countries' harsh blasphemy laws were no doubt inspired by the Old Testament which lays down that those who speak blasphemy "*shall surely be put to death*" (Leviticus 24:16). The early church fathers went even further, like Paul who wrote many books that form the present New Testament, in one of which he says: "*Anyone who rejects the Law of Moses is put to death without pity on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Do you not think that much worse punishment is due the one who has contempt for the Son of God, considers unclean the covenant blood by which he was consecrated, and insults the spirit of grace?*" (Hebrews 10:28-29). So going by all counts, whether in its capital punishments for murder, adultery or apostasy or other punishments such as for theft or fornication, Islam's was until very recent times an extremely lenient penal code. If it seems harsh today, it's because modern western society with its focus on this fleeting material life perceives it to be so!

36th Night

Johnny: Salams Sheikh, your talk on crime and punishment last night was quite interesting, especially your contention that Islam's is really a very lenient law when compared to our penal laws not very long ago. In fact I myself was shocked to learn how harsh my own forefathers would have been, and that's a bit depressing. Now to my next question:

Why are Muslims so scrupulous about cleanliness?

The Janissary: It is in the nature of man to be clean. Like it or not, humans are the only creatures on earth who need proper grooming to keep themselves clean. Take for instance fingernails or superfluous body hair which continues to grow until it is deliberately removed through human intervention. Other creatures simply shed these redundant outgrowths. But man has to remove these to maintain his health. If he does not he is likely to suffer the consequences of disease.

Likewise we have to clean ourselves when answering a call of nature. No other creature on earth or land or sea needs to do so when it excretes. It's all simply jettisoned through a valve that opens and closes to meet that specific need so that they are clean down there soon afterwards. But not so man. This is the way we have been created, so different from even the great apes to whom we are anatomically similar, but still so different when it comes to this natural function despite the contentions of evolutionists that we are in fact descended from the apes, when in fact these apes like other creatures evacuate their waste without any of it sticking onto their persons. As a result we are the only creatures on earth who need to clean ourselves after a call of nature and that too alone and hidden away from others.

What this shows is that we humans have been created in such a way that we need to take care of our bodies to maintain good health. This also marks man apart from the animal, this fact that he has to make a conscious effort to keep himself clean, which in turn sets him on a psychological trajectory towards a more civilized way of living.

While humans in general consider cleanliness to be a good thing, something pleasing and desirable, Islam insists on it and makes it a religious obligation to be clean in both body and mind. This is because in our faith, cleanliness means much more than its physical aspect of maintaining good health; it also has a religious dimension. Why, because to worship God we need to be clean of bodily impurities and superfluous outgrowths like long fingernails and pubic and armpit hair that can harbour dirt. What's more, being clean helps us stay healthy and free of disease, laying the groundwork for a healthy mind and inner self committed to do God's work on earth.As God says in the Qur'an:

God loves those who turn to Him and those who keep themselves pure and clean
(The Heifer: 222)

His Prophet told his followers:

Verily God is good and loves goodness, is clean and loves cleanliness, is generous and loves generosity, is hospitable and loves hospitality. So keep your rooms and courtyards clean, and be not like the Jews
(Tirmidhi)

Islam holds that just as one should be spiritually clean of sins, one should also be clean in body. As the Prophet said:

Cleanliness is half of faith
(Saheeh Muslim)

Spiritual cleanliness is achieved when we stay away from sin and repent of it. This is why the good Muslim, in keeping with the practice of his Prophet supplicates at the beginning of his prayer even before the *Fatiha* or Islamic Lord's Prayer: *O God, distance me from my sins just as you have distanced the East from the West, O God, purify me of my sins as a white robe is purified of dirt, O God, cleanse me of my sins with snow, water and hail* (Saheeh Muslim). Here we see sin being compared to dirt and its cleansing compared to washing it away with snow, water and hail.

The Prophet told his followers a nice parable about the daily prayers which he compared to bodily cleanliness:

If any of you had a house with a stream in front of you, and you went into that stream and washed five times a day, would there be any dirt on you?"
(Saheeh Muslim)

Similarly when we approach God in prayer, we should be pure in body as well, to stand before the Most Pure One. So just as prayer cleanses our souls of our sins, the ablution we perform prior to it removes physical impurities from our bodies. However much we long for spiritual purity, we cannot do so without being clean in the worldly sense. This is because the body is an earthly reflection of the soul and its very repository in this worldly life of ours. Should not it be kept equally clean?

Thus washing the exposed parts of the body as part of the ablution is obligatory before we pray. Only when one is truly clean physically that one gets this soothing feeling that one is really, really close to God. Indeed, the Prophet told us that ablution even brings us spiritual benefit:

Whoever makes ablution and makes it well, his sins will come out of his body, even from under his nails
(Saheeh Muslim)

When the believing servant makes ablution and washes his face, the sin of everything he looked at with his eye comes away with the last drop of the water, and when he washes his hands, the sin of everything he stretched out his hands to comes away with the last drop of the water. And when he washes his feet, every sin which his feet walked towards comes away with the last drop of water
(Saheeh Muslim)

This ablution prior to prayer is not just a recommended act, but an absolute requirement before the prayer. God Himself is very clear about it:

O ye who believe! When you rise up for prayer, wash your faces, and your hands up to the elbows, and wipe your heads (with wet hands), and (wash) your feet up to the ankles. And if you are in a state of major ritual impurity, purify yourselves (by taking bath). And if you are sick or on a journey, or one of you comes from the answering of call of nature, or you have had contact with women, and you find no water, then go to clean earth and wipe your faces and hands with some of it. God does not want to place you in difficulty, but He wants to purify you and to perfect His grace upon you that you may give thanks
(The Repast: 6)

Thus in Islam purity of body is a necessary condition for Prayer to be valid. Since Prayer has to be offered at least five times a day, a Muslim is required to wash his face, hands up to the elbows and feet up to the ankles this number of times, though one can pray with a previous ablution so long as one does not answer a call of nature, pass wind, come into contact with filthy substances, fall asleep, lose consciousness or become so sexually excited as to emit a discharge of seminal fluid or vaginal secretion. Each body part is usually washed three times in keeping with the practice of the Prophet, though it could also be washed twice or even once as the Prophet himself did this as well. However it's best to wash thrice, not just from a spiritual perspective, but also from a physical point of view. The first wash moistens the dirt,the second wash loosens it and the third wash removes it. Needless to say, this helps one keep oneself clean daily, constantly removing sweat, dust and environmental pollution, which is perhaps more important today than ever before.

Being clean for prayer also means removing from one's person all traces of bodily excretions arising from a call of nature. When one passes stools one has to wash the area around the anus so that not a trace of faeces is left. Only water can so purify and this means that we Muslims cannot use toilet paper for the purpose. Likewise when we urinate, we have to ensure that all traces of urine are washed away from the end of the penis or vulva.

But that's not all, Islam requires that we a have a bath after sexual intercourse or ejaculation of semen so that one becomes ritually clean again to offer one's prayers. As the Prophet said:

When anyone sits between the four parts of a woman and the parts (of the male and female) which are circumcised join together, then bath becomes obligatory
(Aboo Dawood)

This bath involves a total ablution where water has to touch all parts of the body, even the skin under the hair. As the Prophet said:

There is sexual defilement under every hair. So wash the hair and cleanse the skin
(Aboo Dawood)

Such a bath we can be certain contributes to the cleanliness, not only of the genital organs of the amorous couple, but of the entire body. The passion of sex often leaves saliva, seminal fluid and vaginal secretions on our persons and what better way to cleanse oneself of it than by taking a cooling bath? If you stop to ponder, you will notice that after sex you will feel enervated, as if sapped of your strength and get this feeling that you're not in a very clean state. Take a bath and feel the difference. You'll feel like a new man or woman! But no need to be hasty, the bath is required only before offering one's daily prayers.

Menstrual blood is also polluting. The Qur'an commands the believers abstain from sexual intercourse with women during their menses. But that's not all. A woman may not pray during her menstrual period. She must also take a bath after her menstrual flow has ceased to purify herself for prayer.

They ask thee concerning women's courses. Say: they are a pollution. So keep away from women in their courses, and do not approach them until they are clean. But when they have purified themselves, you may approach them in any manner, time or placeordained for you by God. For God loves those who turn

to Him constantly and who keep themselves pure and clean
(The Heifer:222)

The Prophet even went to recommend that a woman perfume her genitals after purifying herself with a bath. The Prophet's wife Ayisha tells us:

A woman asked the Prophet, may God bless him and grant him peace, about menstruation". He told her how to wash, saying, 'Take a piece of cloth scented with musk and purify yourself with it'. She repeated, 'How shall I purify myself with it?'. He said, 'Purify yourself with it.' She said,'How?'. He said, 'Glory be to God! Purify yourself with it!'". (Ayisha says):"I pulled her towards me and said 'Wipe off any traces of blood with it'"
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

So you see, Islam made bathing a religious duty. It made it an obligation at a time when mediaeval Europe regarded it as a sin and a necessary evil at the most, where cleanliness of the body was tantamount to the pollution of the soul.That's why you will find in old European accounts monks and nuns boasting that they had never bathed in their lives. One such nun recorded with pride that up to the age of sixty she had never washed any part of her body except the tips of her fingers when taking the mass. Ordinary people were a little better. Some bathed once a week or so, others once in two weeks, yet others only once a month. Many however seem to have bathed only once a year for a few consecutive days at the best time of year. Even royalty was no better. Queen Elizabeth I for example took a bath only once a month and proudly boasted about it. The Sun King, Louis XIV, never took a bath at all.

In contrast, the Arabs took bodily cleanliness to extreme lengths. They invented soap as we know it today by combining vegetable oils with sodium hydroxide and aromatics such as thyme oil. This they used in their public baths known as *hammams* centuries before it caught on in Europe. That was after soap-producing Muslim cities began exporting their product to Europe. Indeed did you know that the modern spa has its origins in the Arabian *hammam*? Cordoba in Islamic Spain alone had as many as 300 public baths. Many such baths were destroyed on the orders of Phillip II on the grounds that they were the relics of infidelity. Fortunately the idea survived and so we have the spas and bathrooms of modern Europe.

This is why Wilmot Buxton was prompted to write in his Makers of Europe: "*In every Moorish town were erected magnificent public baths; for the Moors were the first to teach the healthfulness and duty of cleanliness to the Western World. Thus, under the rule of the Moors, the face of the country became utterly changed, and a new spirit pervaded the land".*

Besides bodily cleanliness, Islam stresses on oral hygiene, requiring that we keep our teeth clean by brushing it regularly. In the time of the Prophet this was done with a little twig known as *miswak*, the end being made like a brush by beating or chewing it so as to separate the fibres, the functional equivalent of the modern toothbrush. Today, the toothbrush as we know it serves the same purpose and could be used with toothpaste, without losing out on its benefits:

As the Prophet said:

Were it not hard on the community, I would order them to use the tooth-stick at the time of every prayer
(Aboo Dawood)

On another occasion he declared:

The prayer that is made after brushing the teeth with miswak is seventy times stronger than the one without it
(Musnad, Ahmad)

And to think that people in the West began brushing their teeth as a habit only in fairly recent times, when its benefits in preventing dental decay was made known by the medical community. Muslims have been brushing their teeth for over a thousand years, maintaining a very high level of oral hygiene that helped do away with bad odour and preserve their teeth while at the same time earning its spiritual benefits.

Still, the *miswak* which the Prophet recommended to brush our teeth with can hold its own against any toothbrush. This wonder twig of the *Salvadora Persica* is as good or better than your usual toothpaste for preventing gum disease, dental caries and plaque buildup, not to mention the fact that it dislodges food deposits that can later cause trouble and removes bad breath. Recent studies have shown that *miswak* has germ-fighting properties, like the one done by the Wrigley Company which found that mints laced with *miswak* extract were 20 times more effective in killing bacteria than ordinary mints. Such bacteria needless to say cause tooth decay as any schoolboy knows. That's not all, it contains over ten different natural chemical compounds essential for maintaining oral hygiene including fluoride, salvadorine and trimethylamine.

Islam also encourages that one wash his or her hands before and after meals. The Prophet said:

Food is blessed when one washes his hands before and after it
(Tirmidhi)

I need not dwell too much on this hygienic prescription recommended by our Prophet since we of our day and age well know the importance of washing the hands with which we eat, very well knowing that germs lurk everywhere and can easily get into our bodies when we take in food. Its equally important to wash our hands after eating since food residue can easily decay and attract germs of all sorts to become a breeding ground for dangerous bacteria which could then pass on to your body the instant you take your next morsel.

The Prophet did not stop at that. He gave instructions to keep food and drinks clean and sanitary by covering the vessels used for food and tying up waterskins, especially at night:

Cover the utensils used for eating and drinking, because there will be a night during the year during which an epidemic will fall. Whenever such epidemic will pass by an uncovered eating or drinking utensil, it shall infect it
(Saheeh Muslim)

Just imagine, the Prophet spoke of epidemics that could be passed on by germs simply settling down on things long before science discovered their existence. When the Prophet spoke of epidemics passing by and infecting things, especially food, he obviously meant germs, what else! This was more than a thousand years before Louis Pasteur's discovery that microbes could cause diseases. What the learned men of Europe and other parts of the world thought was that epidemics were a visitation by God for the sins of men or that they were caused by evil spirits or the stars.

Exposed food also poses other dangers. Since food is soft, it is especially susceptible to contamination caused by pests. Rats may eat of it and cockroaches nibble and walk over it, leaving in their wake numerous germs that can cause a host of diseases. Today we have health experts telling us to make sure all left over foods are tightly sealed in food containers before turning off the lights since cockroaches love food and feast on them in the dark. But that's just the start. Roaches are by nature filthy creatures and pick up germs on the spines of their legs since they crawl through decaying matter or sewage before passing these unto food. If you can digest more, the latest findings show that roaches can spread as many as 33 kinds of bacteria, six kinds of parasitic worms, and at least seven other kinds of human pathogens. Among the diseases they contribute are gastroenteritis and food poisoning resulting from *Salmonella*, *Staphylococcus* and other bacteria. In fact, roaches carrying *Escherichia coli* from human faecal matter which can cause terrible bouts of diarrhea have even been found in food establishments.

The same holds true of rats who carry bacteria that causes food poisoning such as *Salmonella* and *E. coli* that causes diarrhea not to mention pathogens causing dangerous fevers such as Seoul hantavirus and Leptospira. That's not all. Scientists have found 18 unknown species related to viruses already shown to cause diseases in humans with two of them being similar to the virus that causes hepatitis C. Who knows, with time, these germs can mutate to cause some terrible sicknesses among humans.

Who can, after all, forget the great plague known as the Black Death that ravaged Europe centuries ago caused by infected rats that found their way to human dwellings. Yes, *Yersinia pestis*, which caused bubonic plague, wiping out an estimated third of Europe's population was spread by rats.

Islam did not just stop at ensuring cleanliness to prevent outbreaks of epidemics. It also took measures to control it once it had broken out. It forbade people to leave or enter lands where there had been an outbreak of plague so as to check the spread of the disease, thus giving the world the first lesson in quarantine. As we know today, even people who may not show any outward signs of disease, may actually be carrying the disease which they could transmit to other people. As the Prophet said of the plague:

It is a remnant of the chastisement inflicted upon the Israelites. If a plague breaks out in a place where you are, do not leave that place, and when you hear of its spread in another place, do not go there
(Tirmidhi)

He who runs away from the place of plague is like the one running away from fighting n the cause of God; and he who is patient and stays where he is, he will be rewarded with the reward of a martyr
(Ahmad)

Thus Islam made quarantine whenever an epidemic breaks out as a religious obligation so that it could be contained and not spread to other areas. Had Middle Age Europe followed it, the Black Death would not have spread beyond a very limited area.

But that's not all, Islam also prescribed a number of other sanitary measures to ensure its followers were healthy. One of these was its call to avoid contact with dogs, and especially their saliva which it regarded as extremely polluting. Muslims are discouraged from keeping dogs on the grounds that angels do not visit homes in which dogs are kept. The Prophet once became sad and said that Gabriel had promised to

meet him at night but did not turn up. *"By God what has kept him back*," said the Prophet. Then he realised a puppy was under his bed. He ordered that the puppy be removed and the area be sprinkled with water. In the afternoon when Gabriel came the Prophet asked about the delay and Gabriel replied: "*We (angels) do not enter a house where there is a dog or pictures*". (Saheeh Muslim)

The only exception to this are dogs kept outside the house as watchdogs to watch over one's property or livestock or as hounds used for hunting. As the Prophet said:

Whoever acquires a dog - with the exception of a dog to guard livestock, a hunting dog, or a farm dog - each day a Qirat is deducted from his reward
(Aboo Dawood)

It is very clear however that they cannot be taken into one's house. For one thing, dogs are not clean creatures like cats who are naturally inclined to wash their whiskers and coats clean and even bury their excreta under the soil. Dogs on the other hand need regular washing to keep clean and defecate on the surface rather than covering it under the soil. Their faeces is extremely unclean and is host to a number of deadly germs and parasites. A garden with dog poo if left unchecked for as little as a week can become a mine field bursting with germs and can contaminate the soil and nearby water sources, especially after rain. Among others it contains pathogens like whipworms, hookworms, roundworms, threadworms, campylobacteriosis, giardia, coccidia and parvovirus which could lead to infections, especially in little children. Hookworm larvae who lay dormant waiting for a new host by this means easily pass on to humans directly through the skin or by accidental ingestion.

Further dogs tend to lick people often, exposing them to the dangers of their saliva which can be host to a number of dangerous diseases such as rabies. A dog need not be openly mad to make it rabid, for rabies can breed in it for weeks or even months before manifesting itself. Needless to say, it's the dog's saliva that they find the ideal way to reach a human host. The bite comes later in the more advanced stages. There is also the very real danger of intestinal parasites such as roundworm being passed by a dog merely licking you. Other diseases that can be transmitted by dog saliva include *Leptospirosis*, *Salmonella* and *E. coli* that can cause severe intestinal diseases in humans and in severe cases blindness and brain disorders. Dogs also tend to lick their anus or eat their faeces which is why they are known, along with pigs, as *coprophagic creatures* or creatures that tend to eat their faeces. So parasite eggs found in their faeces could also find their way to humans through licking especially of the face which many folk in the West affectionately call 'puppy kisses' not aware of the dangers they face. The single celled parasites, *Giardia* and *Cryptosporidia* can cause immediate infection simply after being transmitted by a lick while contracting hookworms, tapeworms, threadworms take longer to show.

It is not surprising then that the Prophet should have warned us of the saliva of the dog when he pronounced:

When a dog licks an utensil you must wash it seven times,
using earth for the seventh time
(Aboo Dawood)

Personal grooming is also very important in Islam since it is inextricably connected with not only comeliness, but also cleanliness. It once happened that a man with unkempt hair and beard came to the Prophet's mosque in Medina and the Prophet

pointed with his hand that he should take care of his appearance. When the man had done so, the Prophet said to him: "*Does not it look nicer than the one like the devil with messy hair and beard*" (Muwatta).

Even the early scholars of Islam compared uncleanliness to devilishness. For instance there was Ibn Qayyim who said in his Ahkam al Mawlood: "*What is more beautiful than to cut what is too long and exceeds limits in the foreskin, the pubis, the armpit and moustache and the fingernails ? The Devil is hidden inside of all of these, is acquinted with it and lives in it. He blows in the penis and the vagina of the uncircumcised more than in those of the circumcised. He hides himself inside the hair of the pubis*".

Even flowering trees become unsightly when they are overgrown, even the rose or bourganvillea, an eyesore rather than an object of beauty. So it is with humanity. Removing superfluous hair, trimming nails and circumcising bring beauty to humanity. It restores to humanity its pure, God-given nature, which is why such acts are called the acts of the *Fitra*. The *Fitra* is the pattern one is created by God in accordance with one's natural disposition. Thus *Fitra* acts are those Divinely-inspired natural inclinations of humans that align our physical state with our natural state of cleanliness created by God thus bringing about the equilibrium necessary for a truly Godly life, removing all else that interferes in this process. This necessarily involves the removal of redundant outgrowths that contribute to uncleanliness, taking the human body to that more perfect state desired by God. To attain such a state may mean taking some pain like the rough stone does when it's polished into a gem, but as always perfection often comes with a price.

As the Prophet told his followers:

Five are the acts of fitra: circumcision, shaving the pubes, clipping the moustache, paring the nails, plucking the hair under the armpits
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

The first of these, circumcision involves the removal of the foreskin in the case of males and the prepuce of the clitoris in the case of females. In the case of men, it helps to keep the penis clean and free of germs and prevents urine getting trapped beneath the foreskin. In the case of females, it frees the clitoris of its prepuce, a useless bit of skin that gives out a bad smell and breeds germs that can harm their genital health as well as their male partners. Once done it lasts a lifetime since it is not something you can undo. Likewise the benefits it confers you lasts a lifetime. Circumcision also marks one as a Muslim, like initiation in tribal societies that brings about loyalty. It gives one the feeling of having sacrificed a part of oneself, however small it be, for purifying the self for the sake of the faith.

As for the other fitra acts such as removing the pubic hair, plucking the hair under the armpits and paring the nails, these have to be done regularly and not to be left for more than forty nights. This is based on a narration from the Prophet's close companion Anas who said, "*The Messenger of God set a time limit for us for trimming the mustache, trimming nails, removing armpit hairs and removing pubic hairs. They cannot be left for more than forty nights*" (Saheeh Muslim).

The removal of these superfluous outgrowths facilitates good hygiene. Take the removal of public hair which tends to grow in men and women to become an unsightly mess if left unchecked. Pubic hair is often very thick and combined with the oil and sweat that often collects in the area around the genitals can contribute to

general uncleanliness in this vital part of the human body. The pubes if left unshaven attract crab louse which in fact takes its scientific name of *Pthirus Pubis* from the pubes it loves so much. This little parasite which could hardly be seen feeds exclusively on blood, gorging it up five times a day. Still worse is the fact that these creatures spread rapidly since the female lays about three eggs a day on the coarse hairs of the pubes so that in less than a month one could have fully grown adult bugs continuing with their bloody meals and perpetuating their species to reach other hairy parts of the body to infest and spread to other people.

Similarly plucking the hairs under the armpits also helps maintain hygiene. Armpit hair if let to grow is not only unsightly but also unhealthy since it tends to combine with sweat and grime that very frequently collect under the armpit, giving out a bad odour and serving as a breeding ground for bacteria to thrive leading to infections like *trichomycosis axillaris* caused by the bacteria *Corynebacterium tenuis* which thrives in the moist hair under the underarm. The infection produces unsightly yellow masses that grow around the hair shafts, but that's not all. It releases a revolting body odour as the bacteria causing the condition can break down sweat, metabolizing testosterone in the sweat to form foul-smelling compounds.

Likewise paring the fingernails is vital for cleanliness since dirt and germs can easily be trapped under the nails and get passed on to oneself while eating or others while preparing food. Indeed, uncut fingernails are one of the most prolific places for germs to breed. The little spaces under the nails can harbour numerous bacteria that can cause diarrhea and other potentially deadly diseases, not to mention pinworms, a very common little roundworm *Enterobius vermicularis* that can find its way to the intestines to wreak havoc there. Even ordinary day to day activities like cleaning one's genitals after a call of nature or changing diapers or handling food like raw meat can leave such germs under one's nails especially if they are longer than three milimetres. Needless to say, this creates a potential health hazard.

Health workers with long nails are among the most likely to carry the deadliest germs such as *Klebsiella*, a bacteria that causes pneumonia and urinary tract infections, *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*, an all too common bacteria that can find their way into nasal passages and *Candida parapsilosis*, a yeast that causes wound and blood stream infections, all of which have been blamed for the deaths of newborns in maternal hospitals. If such diseases caused by long nails can occur under extremely sanitary conditions in the health care sector one can only imagine what problems they can cause in other settings? Yes, long fingernails can even kill, literally! Needless to say, keeping nails short on all occasions is the best solution. It is unfortunate that many western women continue with the practice of growing long fingernails to splash with colour as a fashion statement unaware of the lurking dangers it poses. One wonders why they cannot just keep their nails short like any good Muslim woman.

All these practices of removing redundant bodily matter are not really peculiar to Islam. It is part of universal human culture since man has this innate longing to be clean and control the growth of unseemly things. But Islam goes further, making of it an obligatory duty and even lays down a time limit within which they have to be removed from the body. The only fitra act that is not so universal is of course circumcision. However it is in man's nature to desire it, however much it may scare you if you grow up uncircumcised in a culture that doesn't accept it due to the perceived pain it involves or a misguided sense of prudishness.

The fact is that circumcision is so widespread a cultural practice that it is only natural to suppose that humans are predisposed to practice it. In fact no other cultural

practice except the use of fire and manufacture of tools has such a wide global distribution. It has been found in Africa, Asia, the Americas and Australia independent of Jewish or Islamic influence while a recent discovery suggests it was also practiced in Stone Age Europe as seen in an engraving in Los Casares Cave in Spain going back several thousands of years. In the Middle East, the Arabs and other Semitic peoples like the Jews practiced it long before Islam. Islam did not at all introduce this practice, it merely continued the practice as a religious rite binding on Muslims.

In the Old Testament of the Bible we read of God's Covenant with Abraham: *This is My Covenant which you shall keep, between me and you and your seed after you. Every male among you shall be circumcised. Circumcise the flesh of your foreskin and that shall be the mark of the covenant between you and me* (Genesis 17:10-11). It was in keeping with the covenant that even Jesus was circumcised. As we read in the New Testament: *When eight days were completed for circumcising the Child (Jesus), he was named Jesus, the name given him by the angel before he was conceived in the womb* (Luke 2:21). But the Bible did not make circumcision obligatory on the gentiles, merely the seed of Abraham or the Jews. Because the Jews were a race and not merely a religious community, the rite did not need to be extended to the gentile followers of Jesus as argued by Paul, which is why Christians generally do not practice it, although Jesus was circumcised. The Jews however confined circumcision only to their males on the eighth day after birth, the exclusion of their females being in keeping with their patriarchal idea that the covenant with God applied only to the males of their tribe.This of course had other implications. By obligating only its males to be circumcised and denying circumcision to women, Judaism denied women a place under God's Covenant in contrast to Islam which made the rite equally binding on male and female, thus recognizing their inherent equality.

In Egypt circumcision was known thousands of years before Islam reached it as seen for instance in a bas-relief in the tomb of Ankh-ma-Hor at Saqqara which shows it being performed on two adolescent youths well before 2000 BC as well as numerous references by Greek writers. The circumcision of females was also known as seen from the case of an Egyptian girl named Tathemis in Memphis in a Greek papyrus of 163 BC which mentions it as 'the custom among the Egyptians', the word used for the procedure being *peritemnein* or 'cutting around', the same term used by the Greeks for male circumcision. So hallowed was the rite in the case of both males and females, that they became an established custom of the Coptic Church of Egypt.

The same holds true of the Ethiopian Christians according to whose ancient traditions circumcision was introduced to them by the son of Solomon Meilech, to which his mother, the Queen of Sheba Maqueda, added the circumcision of women in keeping with the custom of her kingdom in Southern Arabia, she herself being circumcised before puberty, and before her journey to Jerusalem to meet Solomon.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, circumcision of both males and females has been practiced for ages among Non-Muslim tribes from Liberia in the West to Ethiopia in the East. Much of it is linked to religious belief. For instance the Masai of Tanzania preserve a tradition that Marumi, a Moses like figure was ordered by God to circumcise their male and female children. Male circumcision has been found among Polynesian peoples like the Pacific Islanders of Fiji, Tonga and Samoa, the aboriginal peoples of Taiwan and the Filipinos where it is still practiced on boys before their teens more than a century after they adopted Christianity. The Australian aborigines also practiced it. In the Americas the Chippeways of the Mississippi region in North

America and the Aztecs and Mayans of Central and South America practiced it before European colonization obliterated it.

The circumcision of females must also have been common though it was lost in the mists of antiquity, perhaps due to a false sense of prudishness, with the few recorded cases outside the Middle East and Africa being in South America, among the Tecunas of the Amazon, the Salivas of Orinoco, Panos of Ecuador and Conibos of Peru, and perhaps amongst Japan's original inhabitants, the Ainu who until recently preserved a practice performed on both males and females that could have well been a vestige of it.

Although the procedure varies among different peoples, the original form must have been analogous to male circumcision with the prepuce or skin covering the clitoris being removed, a practice that was in vogue in Peru among peoples such as the Conibos of the Upper Ucayali where European observers recorded that an old woman performed it on grown-up girls in such a manner as to expose the clitoris in preparation for marriage, one account desribing it as involving the scraping of the clitoris of the girl to remove the top skin.

Even modern Americans often circumcise their infants, with the circumcision rate being around 60 percent though it is a pity they circumcise only their males, so that their females who may later come to realize its benefits get it done much later in life as adults under the name of a surgical procedure known as hoodectomy.

The wide geographical distribution of the practice both in ancient and modern times suggests that humanity has a natural inclination to keep their genitals clean through circumcision, that the circumcised state like the other fitra acts is the one that is naturally desired by humanity and that it is the fear of pain and prudishness that has contributed to its disuse and continues to keep people away from it.

In Islam circumcision is very strongly stressed with most scholars of the view that it is obligatory or at any rate strongly prescribed in the faith. Some are of the view that it t ought to be more stressed in the case of males than of females, but this is erroneous. That circumcision like the other fitra acts should apply equally to females as much as males goes without saying as both sexes have a prepuce, a fold of unclean skin covering the erectile tissue of their genitals that serves a breeding ground for germs. Besides, it is a well established principle of Islam that males and females are to be treated equally in all respects where they are similar and there can be no doubt that in this respect they are indeed similar. It is also agreed that if a practice is not mentioned specifically as being applicable to one gender only or if pronouns do not indicate a certain gender, then it is applicable to both sexes. What's more there are numerous sayings of the Prophet that stress on its importance specifically in the case of females.

That circumcision is very strongly stressed in Islam is seen from the fact that the Prophet told a person who wished to embrace Islam:

Remove from yourself the hair that grew during the period of unbelief
and get yourself circumcised
(Aboo Dawood)

Among his other sayings that stress the importance of circumcision in the case of both males and females are, firstly:

Circumcision is my way for men and ennobling in women
(Baihaqi)

This suggests that both male and female circumcision was recognized by the Prophet as Islamic acts. The term he used for both was *khitan*. In the original Arabic: *Al-khitanu sunnatun li ar-rijali makrumatun li an-nisa*. The different uses of the word 'the way' for men and 'ennobling' for women does not necessarily affect the obligatory character of circumcision in the case of females for the simple reason that it would have been quite inappropriate to apply the term *sunnat* '(Prophet's) way' for the female operation. Similarly, the term *makrumah* or ennobling used in the case of women need not affect its obligatory character since it merely indicates the fact that women are ennobled by it. Its use nevertheless says a lot. In the Qur'an we read: "*We have honoured the children of Adam*" (The Night Journey: 70). The Arabic word used here for 'We have honoured' is *karramna* which is related to *makruma,* the feminine form of honour or dignity.

Secondly, his statement:

When the (male) circumcised part meets the (female) circumcised part,
bath becomes obligatory
(Ahmad)

Here we have the Prophet stating in very clear terms that the bath following sexual intercourse (without which no prayer is valid) becomes obligatory when both the circumcised parts meet. That the Prophet should define sexual intercourse as the meeting of the male and female circumcised parts when stressing on the need for the obligatory post-coital bath pre-supposes the obligatory nature of circumcision in the case of both males and females. There are two forms of this tradition, one in which the prophet used the term *khitanain* (the two circumcised parts) and the other *khitanul khitan* (the male and female circumcised parts), leaving no doubt as to what the Prophet meant by it.

There are still other statements of the Prophet stressing specifically on female circumcision shows that it is something that ought not to be taken lightly, like the statement related by Abdullah Ibn Umar who tells us that the Prophet instructed some Ansar (Medinan) women visiting him to '*be circumcised*' (Mukhtassar zawaid musnad al bazzar, Ibn Hajar). Another tradition has it that the Prophet told Umm Atiyyah Al Ansariyyah, a woman who circumcised girls in Medina: "*When you circumcise, cut plainly and do not cut severely, for it is beauty for the face and desirable for the husband*" (Baihaqi, Aboo Dawood, Al Awsat of Tabarani and Tarikh Baghdad of Al Baghdadi).

Indeed, even the Prophet's closest companions believed it to be necessary for women. Thus we have Umm Al Muhajir relating: "*I was captured with some girls from Byzantium. (Caliph) Uthman offered us Islam, but only myself and one other girl accepted Islam. Uthman said: 'Go and circumcise them and purify them*" (Adab al Mufrad of Bukhari). Likewise Umm Alqamah says that when the nieces of Ayisha's brother were circumcised, 'A'isha was asked: "*Shall we call someone to amuse them?*" "*Yes*" she replied (Adab Al Mufrad).

So here we have Uthman, one of the closest companions of the Prophet and the third Caliph of Islam commanding that some women who had converted to Islam be circumcised. And who can dispute the fact that the Prophet's own wife Ayisha had her nieces circumcised, suggesting that she believed it to be obligatory or at any rate prescribed in the faith. Even early Arabic literature testifies to the fact that female circumcision was thought to be obligatory by the community. In the story of the

Muslim Champion and the Christian Damsel in the *Alf Layla wa Layla* (Thousand and One Nights) we are told of this Christian girl who at her request was expounded the tenets of the faith by a Muslim soldier in the days of the Caliph Umar. The story continues: "*And she became Muslimah, after which she was circumcised and he taught her to pray*".

But hold on, I know you must be thinking that what Islam wants us to do is to remove the clitoris of our women to reduce their sex drive as you often hear in the Western media which equates our practice to barbaric forms of female genital mutilation practiced in certain parts of Africa like clitoridectomy where the entire clitoris is removed or infibulation where the clitoris and inner labia are removed and the vulva stitched together to ensure a girl is a virgin until marriage, the equivalent of a mediaeval chastity belt.

Nothing can be further from the truth. All Islam requires is the removal of only the prepuce of the clitoris, a fold of useless skin covering the clitoris like a hood which is analogous to the foreskin of the male which is taken off during circumcision. All the early jurists of Islam were agreed on this. Thus we have Nawawi who states in his Sharhul Muhazzab that the part that has to be removed is "the *skin of the structure which is like the cock's comb above the urethral opening*". He further says in his commentary Sharh Muslim that it constitutes the removal of "*a little bit of skin in the upper private parts*". Then there's Ibn Hajar Asqalani who states in Fathul Bari that it is the removal of "*the skin covering the cock's comb-like structure, and not the flesh*". Abu Nasr Ibn al-Sabbaagh says in Kitab Ash-Shaamil: "*In the case of a woman, it means cutting the skin that looks like the comb of a rooster at the top of the vagina, between the two labia*" while Ibn Taymiyya says in Majmoo Al fatawa: "*Her circumcision consists of cutting the prepuce which is like the cock's comb*, further adding that it is the prepuce of the clitoris which he calls by the name of *qalfa* that is removed in the procedure. Then there's Abu al-Hasan Al Mawardi who says of the female's circumcision: "*It is to be limited to cutting off the skin in the shape of a kernel located above the genitalia. One must cut the protruding skin without removing the whole fold*". These early scholars of Islam did not arbitrarily decide how it should be done. They based it on a saying of the Prophet:

When you circumcise, cut plainly (in a shallow manner) and do not cut deeply,
for it is beauty for the face and desirable for the husband
(Aboo Dawood & Tabarani)

This clearly indicates what needs to be done in the circumcision of girls. The words "*Cut plainly and do not cut deeply*" (*ashimmi wa la tanhaki*) is to be understood in the sense of removing the skin covering the clitoris, and not the clitoris. The word *ashimmi* used here comes from the root word *m-sh-m* which literally means 'to sniff', thereby implying a delicate sniff of steel (over the clitoris to remove its skin). *La tanhaki* means 'do not cut deeply', 'do not uproot' which is a clear prohibition to do harm to the clitoris. Thus it is very clear that the Prophet commanded the removal only of the clitoral prepuce and prohibited harming the clitoris in any way.

The expression "*It is beauty (more properly brightness or radiance) for the face*" is further proof of this as it is to be understood to mean a face suffused with pleasure, in other words, the joyous countenance of a woman arising out of her being sexually satisfied by her husband. Another version of the saying puts it more directly, because instead of *ashraq li'l wajh* (radiance for the face) it says *ahwa li'l mar'a* (more pleasure to the woman). When the Prophet said that it was more desirable for the

husband, what he obviously meant was that he would be pleased that his wife too had attained orgasm at about the same time as him, maybe even had multiple orgasms and that he need not exert himself further to ensure she is fully satisfied. The underlying idea here is that it is only with the removal of the prepuce of a woman's clitoris that she can find real sexual satisfaction. Why, because a circumcised clitoris without its cumbersome skin is much more likely to be stimulated as a result of direct oral, penile or tactile contact. This ensures our women are satisfied sexually within marriage, ensuring their chastity.

Isn't it remarkable that Islam should have taught this 1400 years ago when only recently Western Sexologists found this to be true, especially after Shire Hite's groundbreaking study on the importance of the clitoris in the arousal and satisfaction of the female. Until then this little pink beauty had been considered a rather insignificant part of the female anatomy. But Islam had already recognized its importance over a thousand years ago and even prescribed a procedure which exposed its surface area to greater stimulation during the sex act as well as during oral sex.

It has now been found that a hooded clitoris is to blame for the failure of countless women to reach orgasm with their sex partners. Yes, all evidence reveal that a large number of women experience sexual dysfunction due to the presence of the clitoral hood. It has been found that roughly one quarter of American women treated for sexual dysfunction have clitoral phimosis, which means that hood of skin surrounding their clitoris is too tight or that there is no opening in the skin for the glans or head of the clitoris to protrude for stimulation. And this mind you, is the proportion of women who sought treatment for their frigidity. What of those countless women who didn't ?

Thus all the evidence suggests that the prepuce of the clitoris is an obstacle to direct stimulation, reducing sexual sensation or even eliminating it altogether which is why so many women find it hard to achieve an orgasm. This is all the more so during oral sex where the prepuce is the greatest obstacle to direct stimulation. This is why many American women are increasingly seeking surgical treatment to get their clitoral hoods removed in a little procedure commonly known as hoodectomy, which by the way is the same as the female circumcision spoken of my the Prophet and the early Islamic jurists. Wonderful isn't it?

Indeed as far back as 1900 a Chicago gynecologist A.S. Waiss wrote about the success of this procedure, after having tried it out on a young married woman who was "*absolutely passionless*," which greatly troubled her . He promptly identified the culprit as the hood covering her clitoris and removed it. The good doctor noted that the lady soon became, in his words "*a different woman*"— "*lively*, *contented and happy*" and that sex brought her satisfaction. Houston's first female surgeon, a bright woman named Belle Eskridge who won a fellowship in the American college of Surgeons for her skill with the scalpel also promoted the procedure, routinely circumcising the girls in her care, believing it would do them a lot of good. She titled her paper to a medical journal in 1918 *Why not circumcise the girl as well as the boy?* and described the procedure as a very simple operation by removing the prepuce with a sharp pair of scissors so that the glans was exposed, which is exactly what the Prophet prescribed four hundred years ago when he instructed Umm Atiyyah on how it should be performed.

In the 1950s another American surgeon W. G. Rathmann sent out a questionnaire to women whose hoods he had removed and to his delight found that of the 72 women who reported having never experienced an orgasm prior to the surgery, as

many as 64, almost 90 percent, reported successfully achieving orgasm after the surgery. One woman who had five divorces to her credit before being circumcised remarried the last man she had divorced and told the doctor that she had "*wasted four perfectly good husbands*". Why, because she could not find enjoy sexual joy with them, a condition that could have been easily treated with circumcision had she known about it earlier. In the 1970s another American surgeon Leo Wollman found that out of a hundred women he treated as many as 92 reported improvement in intensity of sexual response, rapidity of sexual response, and greater number of orgasms after the procedure. More recently, there was this lady named Dannielle Egan who in 2006 wrote a piece titled '*Uncovering the Designer Vagina'* showing that unhooding the clitoris could give three to nine times better orgasm based on the reports of women who had undergone the procedure.

Pardon me for that little digression, but what I wanted was to disarm you a bit before getting on with your question about cleanliness since you must have heard some horrible claims of this practice, that it seeks to diminish, not enhance the sexual joy of women as it should, but you can take my word there is an agenda behind this. It is in the interests of the Jews to criticize female circumcision while promoting male circumcision. Why, because male circumcision is a Jewish practice and female circumcision is not. As soon as it became evident that all that Islam required was the removal of the clitoral hood and that an increasing body of evidence was building up to show that it did indeed improve the sexual lives of women, the Jewish media machine got to work claiming that it was not Islamic, which even some misinformed Muslims fell for without even as much as bothering to look at what the Prophet said about it or how the early scholars defined it.

And now to the health aspect of it. As you may be aware male circumcision has been proven again and again to confer health benefits, among these, a reduction in urinary tract infections, penile cancer and AIDS. Americans due to their strong Judeo-Christian background came to view male circumcision in a positive light with these findings The medical establishment there more than a century ago discovered that the foreskin was a breeding ground for germs due to the constant accumulation of smegma, a whitish, cream or cheese-like foul smelling substance formed of desquamated epithelial cells that collected beneath the prepuce. They found that it served as a good media for bacterial growth and other microorganisms, helping these germs collect and proliferate at the expense of one's genital heath. This resulted in uncircumcised males having a much higher incidence of UTIs and penile cancer. More recent findings have shown that circumcised men are much less likely to contract AIDS and that they are very much less likely to pass on the Human Papilloma Virus to their female partners which could cause cervical cancer.

To get on with a bit more detail, it is now proven beyond doubt that UTIs are almost always confined to uncircumcised males. Such infections affect the urinary system from the urethra to the bladder, and may even reach the kidneys. This is because the orifice through which urine passes at the tip of the uncircumcised penis hosts pathogenic bacteria not found in circumcised males. Likewise cancer of the penis is almost non-existent among circumcised men, since circumcision reduces the occurrence of cancer-causing types of HPV in men which find refuge and breed in the moist areas under the foreskin. Penile cancer is not rare as one tends to think and may represent over 10 percent of all cancers found in men. Male circumcision also confers 50-60 percent reduction in transmission of HIV in heterosexual penile vaginal sex since a penis deprived of its prepuce with its warm, moist environment can prevent the virus finding its way from the female genital tract to breed, especially

among the langerhans cells of the prepuce which is especially targeted by HIV. Circumcision has also been associated with lower rates of genital herpes caused by the herpes simplex virus.

Not only circumcised males, but their female partners too benefit from the procedure since it prevents HPV being transmitted to the cervix or neck of the womb which can cause a very common cancer among women known as cervical cancer. Female partners of circumcised men are at much less risk of contracting bacterial vaginosis and trichomoniasis.

It was not until the early twentieth century that some American doctors like Pilot and Canter, reasoned that since women too had a prepuce, some of the health benefits conferred on males through circumcision could be enjoyed by women, especially when they found that the clitoral prepuce also secreted smegma It had to, because the clitoris anatomically corresponds to the penis in the male. They are both erectile with each consisting of a body, a glans or head at the tip and a prepuce or fold of skin covering it. Like in the male this skin covers the body of the clitoris as well as its head or glans. It usually has two surfaces with connective tissue in between, the outer surface being normal skin and the inner an epithelial surface having Tyson glands which produce the very same sebaceous secretion known as smegma found in males.

Since the clitoris is usually hidden in the vulva it is less likely to be cleansed of this mess. As a result it tends to collect underneath the clitoris, to play host to germs that can cause a number of diseases, the most frequent being Urinary Tract Infections, an all too frequent complaint in women, even more so than in uncircumcised little boys. If still left unremoved such accumulated smegma can harden in the fossa clitoridis, the cavity in which the glans clitoridis resides, to produce adhesions that glue together the glans of the clitoris with its prepuce, making sex a painful, rather than a joyful experience. Much of this has to do with the formation of smegmaliths, rosary like nodules which can cause frigidity or painful intercourse.

There is also good reason to believe that female circumcision could prevent genital cancers in women, just as much as it helps prevent penile cancer in men - vulvar cancer for instance, a malignant persistent growth in the vulva reported in about 4 percent of all types of gynecological cancers. Other benefits include a reduction in genital Herpes, a sexually transmitted genital infection, Chancroid, a bacterial infection that leads to painful sores on the genitalia and Granuloma, inflammations in the vulval region. What's more it can prevent male partners getting oral cancer as a result of engaging in oral sex with uncircumcised women. As more and more men engage in cunnilingus to satisfy their female partner by stimulating the clitoris with their mouths, the more likely they are to contract Human Papilloma Virus that causes oral cancer. Did you know that actor Michael Douglas recently revealed that his throat cancer was caused by HPV contracted by giving oral sex to women?

Now, it is obvious that the only way men can acquire HPV is through the oral stimulation of one's partner's clitoris, allowing the virus to enter the mouth and find sanctuary in its mucosal cavities. The virus, it is obvious breeds in the prepuce of the clitoris just as it does in the foreskins of males, through the transmission of which cervical cancer occurs in females. Thus removing the prepuce of the clitoris is the surest way of removing the area in which the virus thrives, safeguarding their male partners from the risk of oral cancer. In any case, it should benefit women as well. It is well known that men are turned off by unpleasant smells during sex . When it comes to oral sex they could be easily put off by the foul smell of smegma that could

have collected underneath their female partner's prepuce, unless of course she has thoroughly washed her clitoris by retracting it and cleansed it with soap or body wash.

Whether we like it or not, it's easier for males to retract and clean their foreskins of the regular buildup of smegma than women to clean theirs due to obvious anatomical differences. It would be necessary for them to retract the hood each day or every other day, in order to prevent adhesions forming and smegma collecting beneath the prepuce. In fact genital hygiene in women is, on the average, poorer than that of men because of the numerous folds and the semi-hidden position of the clitoris. I quote from Doctor Edwin Hirsch who has to say about it in his book on conquering frigidity titled *Sexual Fear*: "*The 'buried' or concealed clitoris is a common anatomical cause of sexual anesthesia. Frequently this is due to lack of clitoral hygiene. We know this to be a causative factor, for when the 'buried' glans clitoridis is elevated out of its bed by separating the strands of tissue which have grown over it, clumps of stale, foul-smeling secretion (smegma) surround this structure. Periodically the hood or foreskin of the clitoris should be retracted so that the accumulated secretions that collect thereunder may be easily removed by soap suds and a slight amount of friction. When the fear of this hygienic process is done away with, a large number of frigidity cases will be automatically corrected*".

But why go through all this as a routine matter day after day when it could be permanently corrected by a minor surgery, preserving both sexual joy and genital hygiene in its purest form?

Now you may ask if God indeed wanted us to be circumcised and benefit from it, why didn't he create us as such when we issued out of our mother's wombs? Let's put it this way. The prepuce has a purpose because it protects the sex organ in the process of birth itself and in early childhood prevents urine after a pee dribbling into one's pants, but as one grows older it outlives its use and becomes a repository for smegma that starts building up as one reaches one's teens. So you may ask, why did God make it that way?

Yes, He could have created us prepuceless had he willed. But God in his Wisdom knew very well what he was creating, and he created us with these minor imperfections -like having a prepuce or fingernails that grow- so that we would value our bodies and look after it. This takes us back to what I told you earlier, that man has been created in such a manner that he needs to make a conscious, deliberate attempt to keep himself clean unlike the rest of creation. Take the trimming of nails or shaving of pubic hair. Do not these too take effort? They do. The same holds true of circumcision. It involves some pain no doubt, but then again, the benefits last a lifetime, whereas you constantly need to trim your nails or shave your pubes all your life to keep clean!

So think again, it is only when man makes a conscious effort to keep himself clean that he rises above the animal and attains a state of culture beyond the beast, putting him on the trajectory to a more civilized way of life. So just as his conscious belief in God and realignment of his life with the Divine Commands helps him achieve the equilibrium consistent with the nature God created him in - that pure spiritual state known as the fitra into which every human is born, so does his conscious effort to keep himself clean return him to his pure physical state. This is why both the natural belief in God as well as our efforts to keep ourselves clean and pure by means of circumcision and removal of other superfluous bodily matter are known as *fitra*. So think of it as a little sacrifice you make for the sake of God - and for your sake.

But at the end of the day, it is faith that counts. Though circumcision is obligatory for a Muslim, this does not mean that a man or woman nor cleansed by it is not a Muslim. You are a Muslim so long as you declare that there is only One God and that Muhammad is His Messenger, irrespective of whether you are circumcised or not. It is your inner spirituality that truly matters and God knows that Best!

37th Night

Johnny: Salams Sheikh, and thanks for last night's discourse on cleanliness. I'm sure this is something we in the west and you could see eye to eye on. Now to my next question:

Does Islam tolerate religious minorities?

The Janissary: True, Islam is a missionary faith that, like Christianity, obliges its followers to carry its message to all humanity till what it believes to be true is accepted as such by all mankind. But there's a hitch. It stops short of propagating the faith by force. God is very clear on this:

Let there be no compulsion in religion. Truth stands out clear from error
(The Heifer: 256)

Thus there can be no compulsion in Islam. Those who embrace it must do so by sincere conviction. Muslims are supposed to invite non-believers to Islam in a manner that will convince them of the truth of the faith rather than through futile arguments or means of brute force which could only be counter-productive.

Invite (all) to the Way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious. For thy Lord knoweth best who have strayed from His Path and who receive guidance
(The Bee: 125)

Every endeavour except force may be resorted to in order to attract persons to Islam. Even if this goal is not achieved by whatever means at our disposal, we are not supposed to curse, but rather pray for the guidance of those who don't believe so that we all become one in faith. As the Qur'an very beautifully puts it:

God is our Lord and your Lord. For us our deeds and to you yours. Between us and you let there be no strife. God will bring us together. And to Him shall we return
(The Consultation: 15)

Tell those who believe to forgive those who do not look forward to the Days of God. It is for Him to recompense each people according to what they have earned
(The Kneeling Down:14)

There are no less than three verses of the Qur'an which make it clear that Islam is not to be compelled on people and that they are to adopt it of their free will without any compulsion whatsoever being brought upon them.

Let there be no compulsion in religion. Truth stands out clear from error. Whoever rejects evil and believes in God hath grasped the most trustworthy handhold that never breaks
(The Heifer: 256)

If it had been the Lord's Will, they would all have believed- All who are on earth! Wilt thou then compel mankind, against their will, to believe?
(Jonah: 99)

And say to the People of the Book, and to those who are unlearned "Do ye submit yourselves?". If they do, they are in right guidance. But if they turn back, thy duty is to convey the Message. And God's Sight is on His servants
(Family Imraan: 20)

What all this shows is that Muslims are only obliged to convey the message of Islam. Since no Prophet will come after Muhammad, upon whom be peace, it is the community of believers who are charged with this responsibility. In fact, they may employ every possible inducements to convince people of the truth of Islam since the underlying intention is a noble one. In fact, one of the areas in which the Alms tax collected from Muslims could be used is, as the Qur'an says:

To attract the hearts of those who have been inclined (towards Islam)
(The Repentance: 60)

Thus Islam did not merely preach toleration of other faiths. It embodied it into law. Why, because unlike other religions which preached blind faith, Islam looked upon it as a matter of conviction. Truth after all mattered a great deal and whoever desired to pursue it had to be allowed the liberty to do so. In fact Islam explicitly allowed Muslims to maintain good relations and treat those of other faiths on equal terms. All it prohibited was having relations with those who sought to imperil the faith or harm the community by acts of aggression:

God forbids you not, regarding those who fight you not for faith , nor drive you out of your homes, from dealing kindly and justly with them, for God loves those who are just. God only forbids you only regarding those who have fought you for your faith, and driven you from your homes, and have supported (others) in driving you out, that you should take them for friends;
(The Examiner: 8-9)

But that's not all. It called for inter-faith dialogue with those of other scriptures to reach a common ground and to understand one another better:

Say: "O People of the Book! Come to common terms as between us and you. That we worship none but God, that we associate no partners with Him, that we erect not from among ourselves lords and patrons other than God"
(Family Imraan: 64)

This is why you will find it was always the Muslims who reached out to the West, such as when Caliph Haroun Al Rashid sent his emissaries to the Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne to build good relations between Frank and Arab, Christian and Muslim, West and East. and presented to him the keys to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem which lay in the Caliph's extensive domains, thus recognizing the Christian claim to the Church. When the West engaged with Islam, it was very often with the sword as we saw during the Crusades. Even then, Muslim leaders always sought negotiated peace, offering the foe very favourable terms as Saladin did to the Crusaders of his day.

In spite of all such verses that speak of tolerance, there are detractors who refer to what they call the Verse of the Sword:

Fight and slay the Pagans wherever ye find them: seize them, beleaguer them, and lie in wait for them in every stratagem (of war). But if they repent and establish regular prayer and practice regular charity, then open the way for them, for God is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful
(The Repentance:5)

They argue that this verse called for the death of all unbelievers. By doing this, they have taken it completely out of context. Why, because the verse referred to the idolators of Mecca who were sworn enemies of the faith and had done everything in their power to destroy it, including killing its more helpless followers like the slave girl Sumayya who became the first martyr in Islam. They had also infringed on a treaty they had with the Muslims - the treaty of Hudaibiyya - by assisting an allied tribe known as the Banu Bakr with men and arms to perpetrate a massacre of a non-Muslim tribe allied with the Muslims, the Banu Khuza. The Muslims were bound to come to the support of the oppressed tribe, despite their being non-Muslims. Furthermore, the verse in question has to be read in conjunction with what precedes and follows it. So let's see what precedes it:
:
(The treaties) are not dissolved with those Pagans with whom you have entered into alliance, and who have not failed you nor aided anyone against you, So fulfill your engagements with them to the end of their term, for God loves the righteous
(The Repentance:4)

So here we are told that those Pagans with whom the Muslims have a treaty and who had not aided their enemies against them are not to be harmed. So now let's see what follows the so-called verse of the sword:

If any amongst the Pagans ask thee for asylum, grant it so that he may hear the word of God and then escort him to where he can be secure
(The Repentance:6)

Here we are told that when the Pagans ask for asylum they are to be given it to learn about Islam and escorted back in safety if they did not wish to embrace it, But that's not all. The following verse commands Muslims to stand true to them so long as they stand true to the Muslims by not betraying or oppressing them:

As long as they (Pagans with whom ye have made treaty) stand true to you, stand ye true to them, for God loves the righteous
(The Repentance:7)

That the Pagan Idolators were not to be killed or forcibly converted was seen in the example of the Prophet himself when his ten thousand strong army took Mecca. A general amnesty was given and all its inhabitants including the Prophet's arch enemy Abu Sufyan and his wife Hind embraced Islam freely of their own accord. Even those who feared for their lives and fled from Mecca were forgiven. Thus when Ikrima, the son of Abu Jahl and a leading critic of the new faith fled to Yemen, his wife who had embraced Islam and knowing of the great mercy of the Prophet brought him to his presence for forgiveness, whereupon the Prophet forgave him by saying: "*Oh, the running cavalry! Welcome!"* (Al Isabah, Ibn Hajar Asqalani).

The Prophet also made it very clear that Islam was to be marked by its tolerance of other faiths. As he put it: "*Let the Jews know that in our religion there is latitude. I was sent with the kindly Hanifiyyah*" (Musnad, Ibn Hanbal). The word for 'kindly' *samha* used by the Prophet in association with the *hanifiyyah* (the natural religion, i.e. Islam) also suggests tolerance since it is of the same root as the Arabic word for tolerance *samaha* or *tasamuh*.

The Prophet also made it very clear that whoever killed a Dhimmi or non-Muslim citizen of the state would be liable for worldly punishment. Once when a Muslim had killed a Dhimmi, the Prophet promptly ordered his execution saying "*I am responsible for obtaining redress for the weak ones*" (Nayl Al Awtar, Shawkani). That's not all, he also promised that the perpetrators would be punished in the hereafter as well:

Whoever kills a Dhimmi shall not smell the fragrance of paradise though its fragrance can be smelt at a distance of forty years (of travel)
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

One who hurts a Dhimmi hurts me, and one who hurts me, hurts God
(Al Tibrani)

Whoever oppresses a Dhimmi I shall be his prosecutor
(Mukhtasar Al Maqasid)

Since the protection of the *Dhimmis* is a religious duty, Muslims are bound to treat them well, and protect their blood, property and honour. In fact, the persecution of non-Muslims in an Islamic state has long been considered by Muslim Jurists as a crime even more heinous than the persecution of Muslims by non-Muslims. This is precisely why the Caliph Umar when on his deathbed, exhorted his successor to treat the *Dhimmis* as the Messenger of God treated them, *so that their life and property should be defended even if it means going to war (with oppressors)* (Kitab al Kharaj). All this, despite the fact that he himself had been fatally stabbed by a non-Muslim Persian named Aboo Lulu. The word *Dhimmi* used of such persons comes from the Arabic word *dhimma* meaning 'security', thus *Dhimmi* is a person to be so protected.

Thus at the very inception of Islam, the Prophet enunciated the principle of tolerance which is remarkable for a faith that in its nascent stages faced so much intolerance that its adherents had to migrate to save themselves from persecution and in some instances even attain martyrdom for the sake of their faith. Who can, after all forget the fact that when the Prophet began his mission in Mecca his own tribe, the Quraysh opposed him except for a very few, the leaders among them employing every possible means at their disposal to stamp out the new faith. Who after all can forget the sufferings of Bilal the slave who was forced to lie in the hot sands of Arabia and whipped mercilessly to force him to revoke his faith, who can forget the beatings taken by Zanira who lost her eyesight as a result and the martyrdom of Sumayya when her master speared her private parts; who can forget the sufferings of Prophet Muhammad whom they scorned and placed animal entrails on and finally plotted to do away with his life. So vehement indeed was the opposition of the Meccans to the new faith that the Prophet and his little band of followers were compelled to migrate to the town of Medina in 622 AC which would change the course of history forever, for here they were welcomed by its inhabitants, leading to the establishment of the first Islamic state in the world.

The Prophet not only invited people to Islam through preaching, but also by dispatching emissaries to rulers of other nations with letters he himself wrote, among them the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius, the Persian emperor Kisrau and the Negus of Abyssinia. The letter he sent the Negus, the Christian ruler of Ethiopia is very telling:

In the name of God, the Compassionate and Merciful. From Muhammad, the Messenger of God, to the Negus Al-Asham. King of Abyssinia. Peace Be with you. I Praise before you God, the Most Holy, the King, the Peace, the Keeper of Faith, the Watcher, and bear witness that Jesus the son of Mary is the spirit of God and Word from Him that he cast into Mary, the chaste, goodly and virgin, so that she conceived him. For God has created him from his spirit and breathed into him, similar to the way he created Adam by His Hand and breathed into him. I call you to God, the one with no partners, and to persist in His obedience. I also call you to follow me and believe in what has been revealed to me. For I am the Messenger of God

(Tarikh Al Rasul Wal Muluk, Tabari)

This letter, the first to a foreign ruler by the Prophet, was received by the Negus with great reverence. He is said to have kissed it and after reading it, came down from his throne and declared his Islam by uttering the *Kalima* (Tabaqat Ibn Sa'd). His people however chose to remain Christian. The Prophet received news of his death the very day he died from the angel Gabriel in spite of the vast distance between Medina and Ethiopia and said to his companions: "*Today a pious man has died. So get up and offer the funeral prayer for your brother Ashama*" The Prophet then made them stand in rows and led the funeral prayer for the Negus (Saheeh Al-Bukhari).

But that's not all, the Prophet even entered into treaties with those of other faiths, guaranteeing the free exercise of their faith. One such was a covenant he entered into with the Christians of Najran in Southern Arabia. When the delegation led by Bishop Alqama arrived at Medina the Prophet permitted them to pray in his mosque and gave them a lasting promise despite their choosing to remain Christian:

The people of Najran and their dependents shall remain under the protection of God, and Muhammad the Prophet, the Messenger of God. Their persons, their religion, their lands, their possessions and their churches shall remain safe. This treaty holds good for all people of Najran, whether present or not. No bishop shall be removed from his bishopric, no monk from his monasticism and no devotee from his devotions

(Tabaqat al Kubra, Ibn Sa'd)

These Christians had many years earlier suffered a terrible persecution by a tyrannical King named Dhu Nuwas, a convert to the Jewish faith. When they refused to convert to Judaism, the King had them thrown into burning ditches. Islam on the other hand took them under its wing, gave them protection and won their hearts, so that in a generation or two all of them embraced Islam.

What's more, the Prophet gave the monks of Saint Catherine's Monastery near Mount Sinai a covenant in the closing years of his mission enjoining the Muslims to protect Christians. And this mind you was at a time when Islam was well established in Arabia. The covenant, preserved to this day, runs as follows:

This is a message from Muhammad son of Abdullah, as a covenant to those who adopt Christianity, near and far, we are with them. Verily I, the servants, the helpers, and my followers defend them, because Christians are my citizens; and by God!

I hold out against anything that displeases them.

No compulsion is to be on them. Neither are their judges to be removed from their jobs nor their monks from their monasteries. No one is to destroy a house of their religion, damage it, or carry anything from it to the Muslims' houses. Should anyone take any of these, he would spoil God's covenant and disobey His Prophet. Verily, they are my allies and have my secure charter against all that they hate. No one is to force them to travel or oblige them to fight. The Muslims are to fight for them.

If a female Christian is married to a Muslim, it is not to take place without her approval. She is not to be prevented from visiting her church to pray. Their churches are to be respected. They are neither to be prevented from repairing them nor the sacredness of their covenants. No one of the nation (of Muslims) is to disobey the covenant till the Last Day (end of the world) (Tabaqat Ibn Sa'd, Qasas Al Anbiya, Ibn Kathir)

St Catherine's monastery still stands. It is one of the oldest standing monasteries in the world, having been built shortly before the Prophet's birth, and is fitting testimony to the tolerance shown by the Prophet's followers throughout the ages.

As could be expected, the Jews were hard of heart and could not be easily won over, despite the Prophet's entreaties to them. Still he persisted in his mission. In his letter to the Jews of Khaybar he wrote:

I adjure by God and by what he has sent down to you, by the manna and quails he gave as food to your tribes before you, and by His drying the sea for your fathers when He delivered them from Pharaoh and his works, that you tell me, do you find in what He has sent down to you that you believe in Muhammad? If you do not find that in your book, then there is no compulsion upon you. The right path has become plainly distinguished from error (Ibn Hisham)

The Prophet's first and finest followers followed his example of tolerance to the letter, among them the early Caliphs of Islam Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman and Ali, all companions of the Prophet. Although they embarked on some grand conquests for Islam by military means, they never resorted to force. For them it was a war to win hearts and establish justice. Those who refused to convert to Islam were given the option of paying a capitation tax known as jizyah and living peacefully under Islamic protection. Besieged towns or villages so besieged were in keeping with the orders of the Prophet given three choices. This is best illustrated in an encounter that took place between the Muslim general Khalid bin Walid and the besieged citizens of Hirah. When the inhabitants of the city sent a deputation to arrange the terms of capitulation, Khalid told them: "*Now choose you one of these three things. Either (1) accept our faith. Then your rights and obligations will be the same as ours, whether you choose to go to another country or stay in your own land; or (2) pay capitation tax; or (3) war and battle. Verily by God ! I have come to you with a people who are more desirous of death than you are of life*". Upon hearing the delegate say that they chose the second option, namely, paying the capitation tax known as jizyah , Khalid simply commented: "*Ill-luck to you! Unbelief is a pathless desert and foolish is the Arab who, when two guides meet him wandering therein – the one an Arab and the*

other not – leaves the first and accepts the guidance of the foreigner" (Tarikh of Tabari).

The Caliph Umar even had no qualms about entering into covenants with cities that the Muslim armies were about to take. One such was the covenant he entered into with the Christians of Jerusalem following the capitulation of the city:

In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. This is the security which Umar, the servant of God, the commander of the faithful, grants to the people of Aelia (Jerusalem). He grants to all, whether sick or sound, security for their lives, their possessions, their churches and their crosses, and all that concerns their religion. Their churches shall not be changed into dwelling places, nor destroyed. Neither shall they or their appurtenances be in any way diminished.

When Umar was visiting the holy sites in the city, the patriarch Sophronius accompanied him to the Church of the Resurrection. As it was the appointed time for prayer, he bade Umar offer his prayers there. Umar thoughtfully refused and disclosed his honorable motive: "*Had I yielded to your request*" said the Caliph in all candor: "*the Muslims of a future age would have infringed the treaty under the colour of imitating my example*" (Tabari).

Even captives taken in the course of war were given the option to embrace Islam freely without being compelled or harmed in any way. During Umar's caliphate, the Christian prisoners of war in Egypt were given the choice of embracing Islam or retaining their faith by paying the poll tax. When one chose to be a Muslim, the Arabs "*cheered louder than they captured the city of Alexandria*" and when they chose to keep their old faith they became gloomy (Tabari). That the same was true of women is seen in the words of Umm Al-Muhajir who was captured with some other women in the course of a campaign by Caliph Uthman:

I was captured with some girls from Byzantium. Uthman offered us Islam, but only myself and one other girl accepted Islam. Uthman said:
"Go and circumcise them and purify them"
(Adab Al-Mufrad)

In fact the Muslim armies were so tolerant that they won the confidence of their Christian Cousins in no small measure. So much so that they contributed significantly to the Muslim victory against the Persian Empire. In the Battle of the Bridge and the Battle of Buwayb fought a few years after the Prophet's demise, the Christian Arab tribes of Banu Tayy and Banu Namir contributed to the Muslim victory in no mean measure For example, in the Battle of the Bridge when the Arab warriors were hemmed in between the Persian army and the Euphrates, it was a Christian chief of the Banu Tayy who came to the assistance of Muthannah, the Muslim general to defend the bridge of boats which provided an orderly retreat and when reinforcements were sought to turn the tide in favour of the Muslims, the Banu Namir who dwelt within the confines of the Byzantine empire lost no time in throwing in their lot with their Muslim compatriots. Many such Christian tribes eventually accepted Islam thus swelling the Muslim ranks.

How tolerant the Muslims were could be seen from the contents of the following letter sent by the Nestorian Patriarch Ishoyabh to Simeon, the Metropolitan of Revardashir in Persia regarding the conversion of the Christians of Khurasan to Islam:

And the Arabs, to whom God at this time has given the empire of the world, behold they are among you as you well know…And yet they attack not the Christian faith, but on the contrary, they favour our religion, do honour to our priests and the saints of the Lord, and confer benefits on churches and monasteries. Why then have you people of Merv abandoned your faith for the sake of these Arabs ? And that too, when the Arabs, as the people of Merv themselves declare, have not compelled them to leave their own religion.

Indeed, Islam was thought of as a liberating force even by those who chose to keep their faith. Why because it offered every sect a peaceful atmosphere to practice their faith if they so wished. We know that in the days of the Caliph Umar Ibn Abdul Aziz there lived a Christian physician named Abdur-Rahman whose consultation rooms were just below the minaret of the Holy Mosque in Mecca, while a Christian tutor named Jufaina lived in Medina, teaching reading and writing to little children (Ibn Sa'd).

This was in sharp contrast to Christendom where one sect fought against the other over petty theological issues with the help of the authorities in power drenching it in blood. Take the persecution of the Copts, Jacobite Christians of Egypt 200,000 of whom the Byzantine emperor Justinian put to death in the city of Alexandria alone.

The persecution was so severe that the Patriarch Benjamin went into hiding. Let's hear what the Coptic historian Al Moqanna says of how the Arab army under Amr Ibn Al As ensured the Copts could practice their faith freely again:

Sanotius, a leader of the Egyptian church told the Arab leader Amr that the Egyptian pope Benjamin had been hiding for 13 years in an unknown place. Amr forthwith published a notice stating: "Wherever the Coptic Pope Benjamin is – there is the promise of security and peace of God for you. Come back calm and safe, lead your church and take care of your community. Pope Benjamin heard of the integrity and reliability of the Arabs and returned with a Muslim escort.

It was this turn of events that led Michael the Elder, the Jacobite Patriarch of Antioch, to see in the conquests of the sons of Ishmael (the Arabs) the hand of God:

This is why the God of vengeance, who alone is all-powerful, and changes the empire of mortals as He wills, giving it to whomsoever He wills, and uplifting the humble, beholding the wickedness of the Romans who, throughout their dominions, cruelly plundered our churches and our monasteries and condemned us without pity, brought from the region of the south the sons of Ishmael, to deliver us through them from the hands of the Romans. And, if in truth, we have suffered some loss, because the catholic churches, that had been taken away from us and given to the Chalcedonians, remained in their possession; for when the cities submitted to the Arabs, they assigned to each denomination the churches they found it to be in possession of; nevertheless, it was no slight advantage for us to be delivered from the cruelty of the Romans, their wickedness, their wrath and cruel zeal against us, and to find ourselves at peace.

More than a thousand years later let use see what Macarius, the Patriarch of Antioch had to say about the atrocities the Catholics inflicted on the Russians of the Orthodox Church:

"*We all wept much over the thousands of martyrs who were killed by these impious wretches, the enemies of the faith, in these forty or fifty years. The number probably amounted to seventy or eighty thousand souls. O you infidels ! O you monsters of impurity ! O you hearts of stone What had the nuns and women done ? What the girls and boys and infant children, that you should murder them ? And why do I pronounce them accursed ? Because they have shown themselves more debased and*

wicked than the corrupt worshippers of idols, by their cruel treatment of Christians, thinking to abolish the very name of Orthodox. God perpetuate the empire of the Turks for ever and ever ! For they take their impost, and enter into no account of religion, be their subjects Christians or Nazarenes, Jews or Samaritans. Whereas these accursed Poles were not content with taxes and tithes from the brethren of Christ, though willing to serve them; but they subjected them to the authority of the enemies of Christ, the tyrannical Jews, who did not even permit them to build churches, nor leave them any priests that knew the mysteries of their faith".

It was because of Islam's tolerance of others that when the Muslim army in its conflict with the Byzantines reached the Arab lands to their north then peopled by Christians, they preferred to submit to Islamic rule in preference to that of the oppressive Byzantines. This is what they wrote in a letter to the Arabs:

> *O Muslims, we prefer you to the Byzantines, though they are of our own faith, because you keep better faith with us and are more merciful to us and refrain from doing us injustice and your rule over us is better than theirs, for they have robbed us of our goods and our homes*.

The people of Emessa went to the extent of closing the gates of their city before the Byzantines could enter and told the Muslims that they preferred their rule and justice to the oppression and injustice of the Byzantines. In like manner many other cities in Syria and elsewhere entered into treaties with the forces of Islam where they agreed to submit to their rule while preserving their religious freedoms.

To this day you will find Christian communities living peacefully amongst their Muslim neighbours in Arab countries like Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine. They have lived thus for over a thousand years under Islamic rule freely practicing their faith. Indeed there is reason to believe that in the first century of Islamic rule in the Middle East when Muslims were ruling from Egypt to Persia, the majority of its citizens were Christians belonging to various sects who had submitted to the Pax Islamica, living under such peace and liberty as they had never seen under Rome or Byzantium, Christian states that ruthlessly persecuted other followers of Christ who did not conform to the official sect. It appears that they embraced Islam gradually over a period of time so that today they are a minority living among the Muslims.

However, even in cases where Christians had abandoned their faith for Islam, the churches were left standing. Even when in ruins, they were still left alone since the Muslims could not even think of razing them down, so that if they wanted to build a mosque they would build it in front of these churches. Indeed the survival of Christianity under Arab rule even surprised the Spaniards when they re-entered Tuledo and the Normans when they took Sicily. Christian churches were found to be intact while its clergy celebrated its holy liturgy without any interference whatsoever.

Likewise when Constantinople fell to the Turks in 1453 after nearly a thousand years of holding out against the forces of Islam, the Ottoman Sultan Muhammad II did everything in his power to make its citizens feel safe. He proclaimed himself Protector of the Church and strictly forbade the persecution of Christians. He even granted a decree to the newly elected patriarch Gennadios, securing to him and his successors and the bishops under him, the enjoyment of all the old privileges enjoyed under the former Byzantine rule. The patriarch received from the hands of the Sultan himself the pastoral staff, the symbol of his office, together with a purse of a thousand gold ducats and a horse with gorgeous trappings, on which he was privileged to ride with his train through the city.

The same was true of Spain where Muslims ruled for over 700 years with such mildness that everybody including the large Christian and Jewish communities prospered equally. In Moghul India, where Muslims ruled for over 300 years, the Hindus were never forced to embrace Islam. Those who did so entered the faith willingly and were mostly from the depressed castes who were looked down upon by their fellow Hindus. When the British took over India, they found the Hindus to be a thriving community governed by their own laws and customs tempered of course by a few restrictions the humane Moghuls had imposed such as laying down that a widow could only be burnt on her husband's funeral pyre in keeping with the then common Hindu custom if she herself desired it and was not being forced into it.

Coming to more recent times, did you know that the keys to the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, Christendom's holiest site, has been in the custody of a Palestinian Muslim family - The Nuseibeh. This has been so for over a thousand years to prevent rival Christian sects clashing for control of the church shared by six different Christian denominations, Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Armenian, Ethiopian, Syrian and Coptic. Tradition has it that the keys were entrusted to the family when Caliph Umar conquered Jerusalem. The clan takes its name from a woman named Nusaibah Umm Umara Al-Mazinniyah who fought alongside Prophet Muhammad in battle and is regarded as a war heroine in the Islamic world. Sorry to say this, but had it not been for Islam, the Christians would have probably bled each other to death so that none would have been alive today. It was Islam that protected them and ensured their survival to this day.

True, Islam spread far and wide by Jihad or Holy War in the days of the Prophet and the early Caliphs, but bear in mind Jihad then was not oppression but liberation, so unlike the wars of Europe that were meant for the glory of kings or nations at the expense of the common people who had to do the dying. True, the early caliphs waged jihad, but bear in mind it was all in good faith - to spread the Islamic order of justice in the conquered territories and to ensure that its message of could reach people freely without any sort of repression. To allow the enemies of faith a free hand to oppress the believers had to be rooted out at all cost. To turn a blind eye to such oppression would only be cowardice. Had Islam not ensured the freedom of all those who wished to profess it to do so freely by means of arms in those benighted times when the rest of the world did not recognize this right, Muslims would have probably been confined to a few pockets, persecuted and hounded out of existence. Why, because pacifism could not have succeeded in a world that knew only brute force.

Take the battle of Mutah in Syria when the Muslims fought against the Byzantines. It was the result of the arrogance of an ally of the Byzantine empire, an Arab Christian prince of the Ghassanid Kingdom named Sharhabil who had the Prophet's envoy Harith Ibn Umayr executed for seeking to convey the message of Islam there. But that's not all. A couple of years earlier the Byzantine emperor Heracles had crucified one Farwah bin Amr al Juthami, who was his governor in Greater Syria. Farwah had embraced Islam and sent some gifts to the Prophet. When Heracles heard about it, he had him crucified him and passed a law that anybody who embraced Islam in Byzantium was to be crucified.

As the Qur'an tells the believers :

And why should you not fight in the cause of God and for those weak, ill-treated and oppressed among men, women and children

(The Women:75)

Fight for the sake of God those who fight against you, but do not aggress against them. God does not love transgressors
(The Heifer: 190)

And fight them until there is no more oppression, and there prevails justice and faith in God. But if they cease let there be no hostility except against the oppressors
(The Heifer:193)

That Jihad was to be a collective effort against oppression is made clear in the Qur'an again and again:

To those against whom war is made, permission is given to fight because they have been wronged, and verily God is Most Powerful for their aid (They are) those who have been expelled from their homes without just cause
except *that they said: "Our Lord is God".*
(The Pilgrimage: 39)

Had not God checked one set of people by means of another, there would have surely been pulled down monasteries, churches, synagogues and mosques in which the name of God is remembered abundantly would have been demolished.
God will certainly aid those who aid (His Cause)
(The Pilgrimage: 40)

But that's not all. Even those who had waged war against the Muslims and later relented and sued for peace were to be forgiven:

If they (thine enemies) withdraw from you and fight you not, but send you peace, then God allows no way for you (to war against them)
(The Women: 90)

This jihad of the Prophet and the early caliphs was not without its benefits even to the conquered peoples, for it ended the oppression of one religious group by another and established a system of social justice based on the idea of human equality never seen before in history. The message was clear and went something like this: *Are you for the Kingdom of God which includes all of us, or are you for your own community against the rest of mankind?*. In this sense, the Jihad of those days should be looked upon not as a war in the sense we usually understand it, but as a means to a lasting peace, in other words *A war to end all wars!*

Besides Jihad was governed by strict rules of combat in the prosecution of war which was followed to the letter by the Islamic armies wherever they went. Non-combatants including women, children, aged persons and those who had taken to religious pursuits were not to be harmed in any way. That non-combatants were not to be harmed in war is seen from the Prophet's own reaction, when, seeing a woman lying dead in the battlefield, he protested: "*She was not engaged in fighting*". That's not all. He quickly sent instructions to his military commander Khalid bin Al Walid not to kill women or neutral bystanders who took no part in the war against the Muslims. He also instructed his military leaders: "*Do not kill the elderly, infants or children and women. Do not exceed the proper bounds*" (Aboo Dawood). Only those

who took part in hostilities were liable to be killed, be they men or women. This is seen from the siege of the Banu Qurayzah where a Jewish woman who took part in attacking the Muslim army by throwing a millstone was beheaded.

Not only humans, but even animals and crops of the enemy were not to be harmed in any way as seen in the Prophet's instructions to his troops before dispatching them against the oppressive Byzantines: "*In avenging the injuries inflicted upon us, harm not the harmless inmates of homes, spare the weakness of the female sex, injure not infants at the breast, or those ill in bed, Demolish not the houses of unresisting folk, destroy not the means of their sustenance, nor their fruit trees*" (Seerah Ibn Hisham)

In like manner the first Caliph of Islam Abu Bakr ordered Usamah Ibn Zayd before he sent him to war:

Do not commit treachery or fraud nor depart in any manner from the right. Do not mutilate any one, nor kill a child or aged man, nor any woman. Injure not the date-palm or burn it with fire; nor cut down any fruit-bearing tree. Slay not sheep or cows or camels except for your needful sustenance. You will come across persons who spend their lives in retirement in monasteries; leave them in their state
(Tabari)

Thus Islam not only prohibited killings of innocent non-belligerents in wartime, but also forbade for all time, 'scorched earth' policies that western armies employed until very recent times to subdue other nations, like the English did against the Boers of South Africa a little over a hundred years ago when they wantonly destroyed livestock and crops to starve the people into submission, so that they could lay their dirty hands on the rich gold mines of Transvaal.

Islam also prohibited killing Prisoners of war. The Qur'an commands the believers:

When ye have subdued them, bind a bond firmly (on them). Then (is the time for) generosity or ransom until the war lays down its burdens
(Muhammad:4)

Thus captives are to be shown generosity and freed without ransom or for ransom, whichever benefits Islam, until the war lays down its burden. Such ransom could even take the form of teaching. In the days of the Prophet, some Meccan captives were released on condition that they taught some Muslims in Medina how to read and write. So long as they were in the hands of the Muslims they were to be treated like any one of them. As the Prophet commanded his companions concerning captives of war:

They are your brothers. Offer them what you eat and drink!
(Saheeh Muslim)

So well treated were they, that a Meccan prisoner of war would later recall: "*Blessings be on the men of Medina!. They made us ride while they themselves walked, they gave us wheaten bread to eat when there was little of it, contenting themselves with dates*" (Seerah Ibn Hisham)'. In the Battle of Hunayn, as many as 6000 prisoners of war were taken from the Hawazin tribe and they were all set free (Saheeh Al-Bukhari). It was in the same spirit that Caliph Abu Bakr said when he

sent his troops to Syria: "*Beware not to stain your swords with the blood of the one who yields*", adding "*Treat prisoners and he who renders himself to your mercy with pity, as God shall do to you in your need*" (Tarikh of Tabari and Seerah Ibn Hisham).

This was more than a thousand years before the Geneva Convention established the rights of prisoners of war. As I said Islam was well ahead of its times!

Much has also been said of the Capitation tax known as *Jizyah* Islam expected those who did not embrace it to pay. Let's look at it this way. Such Jizyah was like the alms tax known as zakat every Muslim male and female had to pay the state. Thus while Muslims were obliged to pay the Alms Tax, non-Muslims were not obliged to do so, and in its stead had to pay a poll tax which differed according to one's means - 48 dirhams for the rich, 24 for the middle classes and 12 for the poorer sections for a full year. Fair enough.

But that's not all. It released them from the military service the Muslim subjects of the state had to provide. Thus one has to look at it as a form of protection secured to them by Muslim arms since their faith prevented them from serving in the army. For instance when the people of Hirah contributed the sum agreed upon, they expressly mentioned that they paid the tax on condition that "*the Muslims and their leader protect us from those who would oppress us, whether they be Muslims or others*". Further, in a treaty entered into by Khalid with some towns in the neighbourhood of Hirah, he stipulated: "*If we protect you, then jizyah is due to us; but if we do not, then it is not due*".

Thus we hear that in the reign of Caliph Umar, the Byzantine emperor Heraclius had raised a large army to drive back the Muslim forces who had now to concentrate all their energies on the impending encounter. The Muslim General Abu Ubaydah wrote to the governors of the conquered cities of Syria, ordering them to pay back all the jizyah that had been collected from the cities, and wrote to the people saying "*We give you back the money we took from you, as we have received news that a strong force is advancing against us. The agreement between us was that we should protect you, and as this is not now in our power, we return you all that we took. But if we are victorious, we shall consider ourselves bound to you by the old terms of the agreement*". In keeping with this order, large sums of money were paid back out of the state treasury. The Christians were so touched that they called down blessings on the heads of the Muslims saying: "*May God give you rule over us again and make you victorious against the Romans; had it been they, they would not have given us back anything, but would have taken all that remained with us*".

Even when some zealous Muslims went against the teachings of their faith and oppressed those of other faiths, the rights of the wronged were restored without delay. It once happened that a complaint was brought before Caliph Umar Ibn Abdul Azeez that the grand mosque in Damascus had been enlarged at the expense of a church. The caliph promptly ordered that the part of the mosque that had been built on the usurped piece of land be demolished and the church restored. However the Christians preferred being compensated by money and the matter was settled to the satisfaction of all. Had it been the Jews they would have probably demanded their pound of flesh as we may gather from Shakespeare's Shylock, but even this would have been conceded. In fact, it once happened in the days of the first Umar, that some zealous Muslims had constructed a place of worship on the land of a Jew. The Caliph ordered the restoration of the land to the Jew in spite of the fact that it meant demolishing a mosque.

Alhough one might think that this tolerance was confined to Christians and Jews as '*The People of the Book'* this is not so. The Prophet made it clear that the

Zoroastrians, the followers of the Persian Prophet Zarathustra, were to be treated exactly like the People of the Book and that jizyah might be taken from them in return for protection (Kitab Al-Kharaj, Abu Yusuf). So strictly followed was this rule that in the reign of the Caliph Al-Mutasim we hear of a Muslim general ordering an *Imam* (Leader of Prayer) and a *Muazzin* (Caller to Prayer) be flogged for the offence of destroying a Zoroastrian temple in Sughd and building a mosque in its stead.

Islam did not stop at just ensuring the rights of Non-Muslims, it also did everything possible to make them feel at ease and win their hearts, even if it meant giving them important concessions which included among other things their livelihood. The Prophet himself is known to have engaged Non-Muslims in his service and the early Muslim rulers saw no harm in it. After all, had not the Prophet himself sent an emissary named Amr Ibn Umayyah Al Damri to the Negus of Abyssinia to intercede in favour of the Muslim refugees there while he was yet a non-Muslim?. Some non-Muslims even held prominent positions in state service, like after Caliph Umar wrote to his governor in Syria: "*Send us a Greek, who could put in order the accounts of our revenues*". Thus it was that a Christian came to head the revenue department in Medina (Baladhuri).

There were even cases of Non-Muslims who had made a meaningful contribution to society being exempted from paying the Jizya, among them an Egyptian who came up with the idea of digging a canal from Cairo to the Red Sea to facilitate maritime trade. Caliph Umar rewarded him by exempting him from paying Jizya for his entire lifetime (Husn Al-Muhadarah, Suyuti).

This is the kind of tolerance Islam extended to those of other faiths. In contrast, one could not find a single Muslim community peacefully living amidst Christians in Europe before the French Revolution, for the simple reason that they were not allowed to exist. The fate of the Muslims that followed in the wake of the Spanish inquisition speaks much for the kind of tolerance Christian Europe extended to Muslims. They were either expelled, put to death or prohibited from exercising their religion. This never happened, and could never happen under Islamdom. Had the Muslim rulers chosen to impose Islam by means of force, they could have swept away Christianity as easily as Ferdinand and Isabella drove Islam out of Spain. The fact is that it was not until the Western World kept the church out of politics that they became tolerant. In fact, before the French revolution, religious tolerance was regarded as something Satanic and unthinkable.

Mediaeval Christendom, in spite of Jesus' teachings of love and compassion, simply did not know the kind of tolerance Islam did. Take for instance how Charlemagne, the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire forced the pagan Saxons to undergo baptism at the point of the sword, even declaring in his *Capitulatio de partibus Saxoniae* that any Saxon who refused to convert to Christianity was to be put to death.

And who can ever forget the cold-blooded massacres of the crusaders during the first crusade, when in 1099 AC, the entire Muslim population of Jerusalem, seventy thousand men, women and children were all put to the sword by around 20,000 crusaders led by knights such as Godfrey, Roland and Tancred. Raymond, Chaplain to the Count of Tolouse described the gory scene in gloating terms: "*When our men had possession of the walls and towers, wonderful sights rewarded our eyes. Some of our men, and they the more merciful, cut off the heads of the enemies; others shot them with arrows, so that they fell from the towers; others tortured them longer by casting them into the flames. Piles of heads, hands and feet were to be seen in the streets of the City*". The chroniclers related with savage joy how the streets were

filled with heads and mangled bodies, and how in the sacred area, the knights rode in blood up to the knees of their horses. The carnage did not stop there. The women and children who had escaped the initial fury were butchered next and even the three hundred to whom Tancred had promised safety were slaughtered in cold blood. This was by way of a *solemn sacrifice in the name of Jesus*. The slain as pointed out by historian J.M.Robertson included a *great multitude of every age – mothers with the infants in their arms, little children, youths and maidens, old men and women bowed with age*. This massacre took place about 460 years after the conquest of Jerusalem by Umar who had given security of life and religion to its Christian inhabitants and done injury to none.

Even in spite of these atrocities, the Muslim rulers of a later era who retook Jerusalem for Islam were sure to follow the Prophet's word to the letter. That's why we had Saladin sparing the lives of all Christians when he took back Jerusalem in 1187. When the Crusaders had taken the city 88 years earlier, they had killed all the Muslims inside it. However Saladin's army did not touch even a single Christian in the city. Only those Christians of Crusader origin who belonged to the Roman Catholic Church were told to leave, while native and orthodox Christians were allowed to remain and enjoy all the privileges they did under Islamic rule. When Saladin took Jerusalem, thousands of Christians of Crusader origin, mainly women, were unable to pay the ransom for their freedom as part of the terms of surrender.

The terms of surrender were very clear that those who did not pay would be reduced to slavery. As a way out, Saladin's brother Safadin who served in his army requested for a thousand of these unfortunates whom he promptly freed. The generous act was followed by others, both Muslim and Christian, resulting in the freedom of thousands more. This was despite the fact that the Patriarch Heraclius had so much wealth in his coffers that he could have paid their ransoms and still retained much of his wealth. In this sense the Muslims were far more 'Christian' than the Crusaders themselves who had taken Jesus' teachings of love and compassion with a pinch of salt if not less.

Saladin's contemporary Richard the Lionheart whom he would later go to war with did not even have the heart to reciprocate the Muslims' kindness. He massacred in cold blood as many as 2700 Muslim prisoners in Palestine who had surrendered, killing along with them their wives and children just because Saladin had delayed in paying their ransom. When he had defeated Richard, the Sultan not only let the Christians be, but also respected their churches and even gave those who chose to leave a guarantee that they could make pilgrimage to the Holy Land whenever they wished.

And who can ever forget the unspeakable atrocities of Vlad who was given the epithet Dracul, or dragon by the Holy Roman Emperor Sigismund for defending Christianity against the Ottomans. It was his title Bram Stoker immortalized as the name of his bloodthirsty vampire Dracula. This sick sadist, still regarded as a folk hero by Romanians was so brutal that he cared not whether one was a soldier or civilian. All alike were impaled, innocent men, women and children by the thousands. Had a Muslim ruler dared do such a crime he would have probably been killed by his own men or in the least not obeyed as it would have infringed the Islamic Law of War.

Before killed by the Turks he had taken about a 100,000 lives. Mostly of innocents, all in the name of Christ. It was not only Muslims he impaled, but anybody who earned his ire. He even impaled his own - women, children and old people because he felt they were useless in his war to save Christendom from the

Muslims. When the Turks were on their way to stop him in the winter of 1462, they were greeted by a forest of 20,000 dead or dying impaled corpses of innocent men, women and children before they could get to Vlad's capital of Targoviste. One can only imagine the feelings of the Turks going through this real time physical vision of hell with a fetid forest of impaled bodies blocking their path. It was only after a bloody blitz by the Ottomans that Vlad was killed and his head taken to the Sultan as proof they had killed the monster. The head, preserved in a jar of honey so that it would not rot on its way to Constantinople was then impaled in the centre of the city for all to see. The Muslims had at last killed Dracula, ending his tyrannical reign and bringing peace to that blood-splattered nation once again. Had Islam not made Jihad a religious duty, one can only imagine what kind of place the world would have been.

It is therefore clear that the Jihad of Islam was in fact a war for tolerance, to pave the pay for the peaceful spread of Islam sans oppression of any kind. Contrast this with the oppressive wars against Islam even well after the crusades from the Spainish inquisition of the 16th century to Srebrenica in the mid-1990s when as many as 8000 innocent Bosnian Muslim men and boys were massacred in cold blood execution-style by Serb militia, showing that the spirit of the crusades lingered with equal ferocity and ruthlessness long after those shameful days.

As such, it is sad to see some misled extremist groups purporting to fight in the name of Islam perpetrating all kinds of injustices against other religious minorities and especially Christians in our times. These misguided fools know nothing of Islam as you can see from how they take the very Word of God, the Qur'an in vain disregarding the tolerance it teaches us and how they dismiss the Prophet's teachings and the Caliphs' examples of tolerance. Rather these devils coming in the guise of Muslims have taken a leaf not from Islam, but from the Crusaders of old and from the Jewish Law of War that told its followers to kill everything that breathes.

In the Bible we read:

When the Lord, your God, brings you into the land which you are to enter and occupy, and dislodges great nations before you – the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizites, Hivites and Jesusites; seven nations more numerous and powerful than you- And when the Lord your God delivers them up to you and you defeat them, you shall doom them, make no covenant with them and show them no mercy
(Deuteronomy 7:1-3)

So just as the Crusaders of old were inspired by such Biblical passages that called for the wholesale slaughter of other peoples, so are the misled Jihadists of today. But theirs is not inspired by Islam, neither the Words of God in the Qur'an nor the teachings of our Noble Prophet. Theirs is a pervasion of the true faith. Do not think they are fighting for our faith. Nay, they are fighting for the devil. Just as the Crusaders of old killed innocents in total disregard to the true teachings of Jesus, so do these misfits kill in total disregard to the teachings of Islam. What they're doing is serving the Zionist agenda to give Muslims a bad name. But neither faith nor history is on their side. As Lacy O Leary observes in his Islam at the Crossroads:

History makes it clear that the legend of fantical Muslims sweeping through the world and forcing Islam at the point of the sword upon conquered races is one of the most fantastically absurd myths that historians have ever repeated

Any unprejudiced historian will contend likewise. Islam is, after all, the only faith where the conquerors adopted the faith of the conquered. That was when the Mongols who sacked entire cities like Baghdad in the middle ages gave up their animistic ways for Islam. Could these Mongols who were victors over the Arabs been forced to have become Muslim?

Then take Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country in terms of population with well over a hundred million people. How could it have been converted by force when not a single Saracen Soldier landed in any one of its over two thousand islands?

The truth is that it was a very peaceful affair made possible by dedicated missionaries who did all they could through peaceful means to win them for Islam. Within a very short period of time this Hindu nation had become Muslim. The same holds true of countries that were once Buddhist like Maldives and Bangladesh. This is not because it imposed itself by force, but because it endeared itself to the peace-loving Buddhists of these countries. Why because these folk saw in the Muslims the mercy and compassion the Buddha taught them.

Toleration is not a weakness of Islam. Rather it is its strength because it is the attitude of truth. And truth is by its very nature bound to prevail!

Finally let me end tonight's discourse with a quote by Duncan Greenless who observes in his Gospel of Islam:

The nobility and broad tolerance of this creed, which accepts as God-inspired all the real religions of the world, will always be a glorious heritage for mankind. On it could indeed be built a perfect world religion

38th Night

Johnny: Salams Sheikh, and thanks again for your lovely talk on tolerance last night. How little it is we in the west really know about your noble faith. If at all anybody imposed their faith on somebody else, it's us in the west, but that's not what we are told back there. Maybe they feel some things are best kept hidden. I have been asking you a lot of questions, and now you must forgive me for asking what may seem a rather trivial question, but this I need to know as I respect all forms of life:

What does Islam teach about animal rights?

The Janissary: God's Mercy embraces not just humans, but the rest of His creation as well. Kind treatment to animals is part of Islam and has always been so. Animals are after all God's Creation. Like us they have a similar origin from the Divine Will and have to be respected as such. In fact, animals were here on earth before man. When God created man, He placed him as His Vicegerent on earth. As such, man's relation to that of the animal kingdom is only as a trustee, no more.

True, humans have a distinct origin from other creatures in that they descend from a primeval ancestor created from a quintessence of clay as distinct from other life forms created from water, still this difference in our physical states is not very significant when you stop to think that we all share a common origin in being created from water, for as the Qur'an says:

We created from water every living thing. Will they not then believe?
(The Prophets:30)

It is He Who has created man from water: then has He established relationships of lineage and marriage: for thy Lord has power (over all things)
(The Criterion:54).

Thus man and beast, bird and fish all have a similar origin from water which is in fact proven by modern science that tells us that protoplasm, the basis of all living matter, is largely made up of water.

In this sense all creatures are one large family. As our Prophet put it:

All creatures are like a family of God: and He loves most those who are the most beneficent to His family
(Mishkat al-Masabih)

Another saying of his has it:

If you want to be loved by your Creator, love His creatures
(Tirmidhi)

Humans, who have been endowed with greater intelligence than other creatures are obliged to be fair and just in their treatment of their fellow creatures. They are to take animal life only for their survival or in self-defence, but nothing else. In fact in Islam saving the life of an animal is a cause for entering heaven while cruelty to animals can be a reason for falling into the hellfire. Such is the stress Islam places on the value of animal life.

When one of his companions queried:

O God's Messenger! Is there a reward for us in serving the animals?

The Prophet replied:

(*Yes) There is a reward for serving any living being*
(Saheeh Muslim)

And to think these duties were laid down by Islam many, many centuries ago at a time when animals were mercilessly abused and exploited and well before the US or Europe ever thought of embracing the idea that animals too had rights, an idea that took root in the West from only about the beginning of the twentieth century.

Indeed Islam regards all of creation as Muslim, in the sense that they are all in a state of submission to God, following Divine laws throughout their lives:

Seest thou not that to God bow down in worship all things that are in the heavens and on earth,- the sun, the moon, the stars; the hills, the trees, the animals; and a great number among mankind?
(The Pilgrimage:18)

Seest thou not that it is God Whose praises all beings in the heavens and on earth do celebrate, and the birds (of the air) with wings outspread? Each one knows its own (mode of) prayer and praise. And God knows well all that they do.
(The Light:41)

These beautiful verses show that animals are in a constant state of submission to God, each even having its own mode of prayer which man with his limited intellect cannot comprehend. What is also interesting is that while we are told that all animals bow down to God, it is not all but 'a great number' among mankind who do so.

This is because unlike animals that follow the natural laws ordained by God, man, in view of his honoured position as Vicegerent of God on earth has been endowed with a certain amount of free will which he may use for better or worse. Thus a man or woman who listens to the call of the evil one and disobeys his or her Creator is even lower than the most seemingly insignificant creature on earth.

But that's not all. We are told that animals like humans form communities, which adds another dimension to man's relationship with them – their rights:

There is not an animal (that lives) on the earth, Nor a being that flies on its wings, but (forms) communities like you. Nothing have We omitted from the Book, and they (all) shall be gathered to their Lord in the end
(The Cattle:38)

The Prophet once related a story of another prophet in the past. This prophet was stung by an ant and in anger, he ordered the ants' nest to be burned. At this, God reprimanded this prophet with the words: *Because one ant stung you, you have burned a whole community which glorified Me* (Saheeh Muslim). It once happened that the Caliph Umar, in a fit of anger, ordered that a fighting cock be killed when he

saw two men wagering over it, only to have a companion tell him: "*Would you kill a creature that glorifies God*?" . So Umar let the creature be (Adab Al Mufrad).

Every community under God has certain rights, and animals being communities in their own right, also have rights. Animals are in a sense also 'persons' and God is concerned about their welfare, which is why though he has conceded man a certain authority over animals, allowing him to take animal life for his sustenance or in self defence, he has also laid down rules governing them.

True the Qur'an says of man:

He (God) it is Who made you vicegerents on earth
(The Originator of Creation:39)

But this does not mean that man has been given unconditional domination over all other creatures on our planet. It can in no way be likened to the Judeo-Christian tradition of man's relation to the rest of creation as told in Genesis:

And God said: Let us make man in Our Image, after Our Likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the cattle, and over all the wild animals and all creatures that crawl on the ground
(Genesis 1:26)

Rather, the Islamic view of the relationship between man and nature is one of custodianship, not dominance. In the Qur'an itself we are told:

And He it is who has spread out the earth for His creatures
(The Most Merciful: 10)

Here we are told that God has appointed the earth for all his creatures, and not just man. To humble man, God speaks of His providing sustenance to His other creatures even before mentioning man:

How many are the creatures that carry not their own sustenance?
It is God who feeds them and you
(The Spider:60)

But man by virtue of his dominant position and higher intellect has been entrusted by God Himself with the duty of looking after the rest of creation while taking care of his own needs. To abuse the power man holds by virtue of his physical and intellectual superiority over the rest of the animal world is to go against the trust God has placed upon us. As our Prophet put it:

The world is green and beautiful, and God has appointed you his guardian over it
(Saheeh Muslim)

That man has no arbitrary power over the rest of nature is also seen in the rights Islam gives our fellow creatures. Killing for any other purpose than food or self-defence, such as for sport or pleasure, is strictly prohibited in Islam. Such transgressors face Divine Retribution in the Hereafter. As the Prophet once told his followers:

A woman was punished because of a cat which she had imprisoned till it died. She entered the (Hell) Fire because of it, for she neither gave it food nor water as she had imprisoned it, nor set it free to eat from the vermin of the earth (Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

He also said in no uncertain terms:

There is no man who kills (even) a sparrow or anything smaller, without its deserving it, but God will question him about it (on the Day of Judgment). (Sunan Nasai)

If someone kills a sparrow for sport, the sparrow will cry out on the Day of Judgment, "O Lord! That person killed me in vain!" (Nasai)

Whoever kills a sparrow or anything bigger than that without a just cause, God will hold him accountable on the Day of Judgment

His companions asked:

O Messenger of God, what is a just cause?

He replied:

That he will kill it to eat, not simply to chop off its head and then throw it away (Nasai)

The Prophet taught us that every injustice will be recompensed on the Day of Judgment, even if were to just be one ram butting another with its horns:

In the hereafter you will render their rights to those to whom they are due. The hornless sheep even will receive its right by way of retaliation from a horned sheep that butted it (Saheeh Muslim)

Thus one can only imagine the kind of punishment that awaits us for harming our fellow creatures for no cause. Betray that trust God has placed on you, and you may have hell to pay! On the other hand, we are told that an act of kindness to an animal earns one the pleasure of God. The Prophet once said:

A prostitute was forgiven by God because, passing by a panting dog near a well and seeing that the dog was about to die of thirst, she took off her shoe, and tying it with her head-cover she drew out some water for it. So God forgave her because of that (Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

On another occasion he said:

A man saw a dog eating mud from (the severity of) thirst. So, that man took a shoe (and filled it) with water and kept on pouring the water for the dog till it quenched its thirst. So God approved of his deed and made him to enter Paradise.
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

Thus we find that even dogs, who are considered unclean on account of their saliva which is considered ritually polluting and who are not to be reared except as guard dogs or hunting dogs, are entitled to humane treatment, so much so that it is a cause for God to forgive a serious sin such as prostitution whose ill effects on family and society cannot be underestimated.

So concerned was the Prophet about the welfare of animals that when his 10,000-strong army was marching towards Mecca for the final conquest, he spotted a bitch by the side of the road to the city with a litter of newly-born puppies she was feeding. He promptly ordered that the creatures were not to be disturbed by the passing army and even posted a sentry, Ju'ayl of Damar, to ensure that his orders were carried out.

Besides the right to life except for purposes of food or self-defence, Islam also gave a number of other basic rights to animals. Like for instance to be free of bodily harm in any way. In the days of the Prophet people who used to cut off the limbs of animals for their meat while they were still alive. When the Prophet migrated to Medina he found the people there cutting off camels' humps and the fat tails of sheep, the idea here was that the juicy humps and fatty tails of the animals could be eaten while they remained alive for future use. The Prophet upon learning of this barbaric practice put a stop to it. A companion of his named Ibn Umar tells us:

The Prophet cursed the one who cut off the limbs or other parts of an animal while it was still alive
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

He also declared such meat prohibited with a simple statement:

Whatever is cut off an animal while it is still alive, is carrion and is unlawful to eat
(Tirmidhi)

In this modern day and age, you will of course think it's not possible that people can do such things, but do you know that even today fishermen in the Far East are in the habit of cutting off of the fins of sharks caught in the high seas and throwing them back so that they die a slow and lingering death at the bottom of the sea This is what goes to make the famous shark fin soup you will find being served in places like Taiwan and Hong Kong. A similar practice survived among some fisherwomen of Jaffna in Sri Lanka until quite recent times. They used to cut off parts off turtles while they were still alive to sell the flesh piecemeal while they underwent unspeakable suffering. Islam put an end to such barbarities well over a thousand years ago when people gave little thought to animal suffering.

Yet another barbarity which man has subjected his fellow creatures to is castration, ostensibly to fatten them for the table. Pigs and roosters are to this day made to undergo this barbaric mutilation at a very tender age with countries like France leading the way in capon production and consumption. Islam however put a stop to such barbarism long ago. The Prophet condemned the castration of animals (Al-

Bazzar). But that's not all, he prohibited that animals be mutilated in any other way as well:

Do not clip the forelock of a horse, for a decency is attached to its forelock; nor its mane, for it protects it; nor its tail, for it is, its fly-flap
(Aboo Dawood)

Why, because God has in his wisdom created animals in a way that will benefit them. He has given horses hooves to run with, birds wings to fly with and fish fins to swim with. To change the creation is to go against God and join the legion of the Devil.

Disfiguring animals is also prohibited in our faith. The Prophet forbade striking the face or branding the face of animals. Once he passed by a donkey with a branded face and said: "*Have you not heard that I have cursed anyone who brands an animal on its face or who hits it on its face*" (Aboo Dawood).

Another abuse animals have been subjected to throughout the ages is being hunted for sport or for target practice which still exists in certain parts of the west such as the US where shooting birds or squirrels for sport is a popular pastime among some trigger-happy Americans of the Republican mould who think that because the Bible teaches that men have dominance over other creatures they could do as they please with them. Islam prohibited this barbaric practice very early in its history. When Ibn Umar saw some people practicing archery using a hen as a target, he told them: *The Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) cursed anyone who made a living thing into a target*. When another companion Anas saw some boys shooting at a tied hen, he said: *The Prophet has forbidden the shooting of tied or confined animals* (Saheeh Al-Bukhari).

Another barbarity to which animals have been subjected to over the ages is bloodsport - training animals to fight one another until one is killed or fatally wounded. Cocks for instance are known to be rather pugnacious by nature and so metal spurs are attached to their feet to do greater injury to their opponent. They are then put to fight each other, notwithstanding the suffering to the birds concerned. The cocks, once let loose, fight to the last, fighting on even when totally blinded or completely beakless. Even in a Buddhist country like Sri Lanka which prides itself in its animal loving tradition, one still finds people who wager on fighting cocks, the owner of the cock that loses putting an end to its life at the end of the fight if its not already dead. This practice too was forbidden by Islam. The Prophet forbade that animals be incited to fight one another (Tirmidhi & Aboo Dawood) since people would goad animals into fighting each other until one of them was pecked or gored to death or else grievously injured as usually happens.

Over-burdening or under-feeding animals is also strongly condemned in our religion. Whenever our Prophet saw an over-burdened or ill-fed animal he would pull up alongside the owner and say, *"Fear God in your treatment of animals"* (Aboo Dawood).

Once when the Prophet was in a garden of a companion there was a camel there started tearing. He went to it, patted its head and told its owner:

Are you not afraid of God who entrusted you with this camel?
It complained to me that you beat it!

On another occasion, when he saw a scraggy-looking camel, he said to its owner:

Fear God for these dumb animals. Do not let them stay hungry?
(Aboo Dawood)

He also forbade his followers from unnecessarily burdening them by mounting them and casually sitting on them as if they were chairs instead of riding them:

Do not use the backs of your animals as seats. God has made them subject to you, so that by them you can reach places that you would not otherwise be able to reach except with great fatigue.
(Aboo Dawood)

Anas ibn Malik, a well known Companion of the Prophet tells us:

"Whenever we arrived at a stopping-place, we would never start the prayers until we had removed the loads from the pack-animals (and let them free to rest)"
(Aboo Dawood)

But that's not all. Islam even went on to recognize the feelings of animals, especially towards their young and prohibited that they be taken away from their parents and be deprived of their affection. It once happened that the companions went on a journey with the Prophet. *He* left them for a while and in his absence, they saw a bird called hummara with its young and took the little ones. The mother bird was soon circling above them in the air, beating its wings in grief. When the Prophet returned, he asked: "*Who has hurt the feelings of this bird by taking its young? Return them to her"* (Saheeh Muslim). On another occasion a companion of the Prophet came to him carrying baby chicks in his clothing and mentioned that the mother bird had hovered over them all along. The Prophet directed him forthwith to return the chicks (Mishkat, Aboo Dawood). On yet another occasion, someone travelling with the Prophet gathered some birds' eggs from a nest. The mother bird's painful cries and commotion attracted the attention of the Prophet who immediately told the man to return the eggs to the nest (Saheeh Al-Bukhari).

Indeed if we are to take Islamic teachings on animals to its logical conclusion, we would have to conclude that even locking up animals and birds in little cages and confining fish to little fish tanks is unislamic. How we may ask can we imprison members of a community that in its own way worships God just for our entertainment. Not only are such creatures confined to a very small area in cramped up conditions to waste away their life, but they are also often deprived of mates to procreate their species, their sad existence ending only with their death. So I think I'll go along with that great poet William Blake who said: "*A robin redbreast in a cage puts all heaven in a rage*". Indeed, one wonders how people could commit such a crime against their fellow creatures when they themselves would not want such a fate to befall them or their children. Such is the folly of arrogance man falls victim to in his desire to live his way without a consideration for his dumb co-creatures. If nothing else, the fear of God will spur him to do the right thing!

Islamic teachings on kindness to animals was reflected in the kind treatment its followers gave their fellow creatures, like the Turks who even founded special hospitals and pious foundations to take care of our animal friends which Western writers like Montaigne remarked on with marvel. There was even a hospital in Damascus, then part of the Ottoman Empire that treated not only sick cats, but also dogs of all descriptions while foundations established by well meaning people fed homeless animals. There was even a special area allocated for the grazing of sick or superannuated beasts of burden whose owners left them there to live in peace till their dying day, acts that would have been laughed at by their European

contemporaries. This is what prompted the famous French poet Lamartine to remark:*Muslims have good relations with all creatures, animate and inanimate: trees, birds, dogs, in short, they respect all the things God has created. They extend their compassion and kindness to all the species of wretched animals which in our countries are abandoned or ill-treated. In all the streets at specific intervals they leave bowls of water for the dogs of the district. Some Muslims found pious foundations at their deaths for the pigeons they have fed throughout their lives, thus ensuring that grain will be scattered (for the birds) after they have departed.*

One only has to look at the West's track record of animal abuse to realize how much of its values it has lost in forgetting God. By this I mean the one True God who takes cognizance of everything and avenges the wrong done to even His teeniest creation, not the 'god' whom men like Paul made out to be, that Christ sacrificed himself for us to wipe out our sins.

Take bull fighting, the national pastime of Catholic Spain which continues to this day in spite of the immense suffering it causes the creature, a slow, torturous death for the pleasure of the maddening crowd. For all its macho association, the fight is not even a fair one. It is not the man versus ferocious bull fight one is often told about. So let's see how it's done. First, to weaken the bull before the coup de grace at the hands of the *Matador*, the bull, once let loose into the arena, is stabbed by a person known as the *Picador* just behind the *morillo*, a mound of muscle on the fighting bull's neck, weakening the neck muscles and leading to the animal's first loss of blood. In the next stage, three more persons known as the *banderilleros* charge the bull with each one of them planting two *banderillas*, sharp barbed darts into the bull's shoulders which further weaken it while at the same time provoking it further. The *matador* using his cape to attract the bull would then maneuvers it into a position to administer it the final thrust with his sword, plunging it through the heart.

In the Spanish festival of Toro De La Vega, a horde of barbarians calling themselves men chase a bull through the streets armed with sharp lances, falling upon the poor creature and piercing its flesh before cutting off its testicles while still alive. At the Brazilian festival of Farra Do Boi, people torture oxen to death, prolonging it for hours so that they suffer the most agonising death possible including hacking off the legs and slitting the chest open among other things. During the festival of Ukweshwama in South Africa, a terrified bull is set upon by a mob of youth who torment and kill it slowly by ripping out its tongue, gouging out his eyes, and mutilating its genitals.

It's not only for sport that animals are unnecessarily killed in the West, but also for trivial reasons, like when wild animals go out of the way to be nice to humans. In countries like the US and Canada animals in wildlife parks like elk or deer are put down for simply being friendly to people. Recently, a little buck was killed for rubbing its head against the boy at the Kalamalka Lake in Canada and in the Great Smokies National Park in the US a young elk was put down because he was seen playfully head-butting a photographer.

That's not all. Animals are also needlessly killed for the sake of the West's capitalist economy, as a price control mechanism. In countries like the US, culling or wholesale destruction of livestock to control market prices still takes place with not a single cry raised against this wasteful practice. Say there is a glut in poultry production, the poultry producers would then agree among themselves to destroy their excess livestock rather than putting it to the market which could bring prices down. So rather than going along with a situation created by supply and demand they control market prices by artificial means, reducing animals to the status of a

commodity or even less so since the animals concerned here are not even allowed to benefit humanity but treated as mere production material, their carcasses being buried or burned in mass graves.

And then take dissection, that barbaric destruction of harmless animals in the name of science to study their anatomy, internal structure or bodily functions while they are still alive. This still happens at educational institutions such as schools and universities where millions of animals like cats and frogs are dissected in biology classes. This needless to say is a futile exercise in animal suffering since no new knowledge comes from it, being merely done to show students how the biological systems of lower animals function in spite of the fact that such knowledge is widely available in textbooks.

Another area in which animals are severely abused is in animal experimentation. Did you know that every year millions of animals are infected, injected, gassed, burned and blinded in laboratories on college campuses and research facilities in countries like the U.S. in the name of science. In many such experiments man does not benefit at all despite the immense suffering it causes the animals involved. Take the case of some sick scientists of Illinois University who blinded newborn chimps by surgically removing their eyes just to find out how long it took them to locate their mother using the senses of smell and sound rather than sight. Like it or not, your hero, Thomas Alva Edison, the inventor of the light bulb, gramophone and countless other inventions was no kindly man, but a ruthless businessman who not only patented his inventions to make money but even went to the extent of sponsoring public circus-like spectacles involving electrocuting to death animals like cats, dogs and old horses to prove the dangers of his rival Westinghouse's Alternating Current as opposed to his Direct current model, The exercise gave rise to the word electrocution!

Animals are also often used to test the safety of cosmetics and other vain consumer products. Such animals are often put down at the end of the experimentation *The Laboratory Animal Euthanasia guidelines of the Australian National University* goes to the extent of laying down that *dependent neonates (newborns) of animals being killed must also be killed.*

Yet another Western practice that disregards animal life is *euthanasia* or *mercy-killing*. the act of putting an animal to death painlessly when it falls ill. This procedure commonly referred to by euphemisms such as *put down* or *put to sleep* involves killing domestic animals by lethal injection on such flimsy pretexts like the owners not wanting to look after a pet anymore or relocating elsewhere. Not only are disabled or sick animals destroyed in this manner, but also entire litters of unwanted pets. Horses who injure a leg and are no longer able to run in the races are often put down as maintaining such a horse does not make economic sense. The Spanish go one worse, kill their greyhounds once the hunting season is over as they do not wish to take care of them. It is customary for these barbarians to hang the poor creatures from a tree where they die a slow, agonizing death. There is even a statue in Spain celebrating these sick sadistic schweinhund.

One has only to compare this attitude with the example of the Prophet who was so concerned about a donkey who served him that he made special provision for its upkeep when aged from the public treasury.

There are however two exceptions where Islam permits taking animal like, that is for food and in self-defense. In killing animals for food, man follows the rest of the animal world for survival and nourishment. Animals hunt for food and men kill for food and this follows the natural order of things. It is killing for anything other than

food that goes against the natural order just as homosexuality goes against the natural order that helps perpetuate the species. Man's very dentition, his canine teeth bear witness to his intrinsically carnivorous nature though his molars suggest that he is also herbivorous.

Thus man is omnivorous, needing both animal and vegetable food for his nourishment. It has been shown again and again that strict vegetarians suffer from protein deficiencies due to lack of meat. Although Soya meat has been made out to be a cheap source of vegetable protein, nutritionists today are becoming increasingly worried of its over-consumption which could be injurious to human health. Like all beans, they lack the amino acids Methionine and Cystine needed for good health. Studies also show that soy products increase the risk of breast cancer in women, brain damage in men and women and abnormalities in infants, Soy products also contain phytates, which block the body's uptake of minerals, enzyme Inhibitors which hinder protein digestion and haemaglutin, which causes red blood cells to clump together and inhibits oxygen take-up and growth. So man needs both plant and animal matter to survive and enjoy good health. That's the way he has been created.

However at the same time Islam lays down strict rules to be followed in slaughtering animals for food. For one thing, the knife has to be exceedingly sharp so that the slaughter would be quick and as painless as possible for the animal. Further, one animal should not be slaughtered in front of another, so as to cause any animals witnessing the spectacle unnecessary distress. As the Prophet instructed his followers:

God has ordained kindness (and excellence) in everything. If the killing (of animals) is to be done, do it in the best manner, and when you slaughter, do it in the best manner by first sharpening the knife, and putting the animal at ease
(Saheeh Muslim)

Another saying of the Prophet has it:

When you set your dog (for the chase), mention the name of God, if he catches the game, and you reach it while it is still alive, cut, its throat quickly (so it won't suffer)
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

Besides food, Islam permits us to take the life of harmful animals in defence of oneself or one's family or community. Taking animal life to prevent a greater harm befalling the community is based on the saying of the Prophet:

Five kinds of animals are mischief-doers and can be killed even in the Sanctuary: They are the rat, the scorpion, the kite, the crow and the rabid dog
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

One simply cannot allow a rabid dog to roam about and infect people and animals with its virulently fatal bite. The only option would be to shoot it at sight. The same holds true of harmful animals such as the scorpion whose poisonous sting can cause people much suffering and even death. The same may well be applied to other noxious creatures such as venomous snakes and mosquitoes that cause disease. But even then the killing has to be done as swiftly and mercifully as possible, without causing the animal concerned any pain. Such is our concern for our fellow creatures, a concern that the West with all its needless talk of gay and other rights cannot match even in this modern age.

39th Night

Johnny: Salams Sheikh, and thanks again for giving me another satisfying answer last night. It's so nice to know how much Muslims respect animal life. That's something we in the west need to learn more about. As you might have realized, I am very concerned about the world we live in. So my next question is:

Does Islam care for the environment?

The Janissary: There is no faith on the face of the earth that cares so much for nature as Islam. In our faith, caring for the environment is not just a passing fad to save the future; it's a religious duty we live and practice in our day to day lives.

Everything in nature is, after all, God's Creation. The earth we walk, the air we breathe, the scents we smell, the fruit of the earth we eat of, the blue dome of the sky which at nightfall opens out to reveal the stars like a gigantic planetarium, the vast pools of the oceans that caress our shores with their waves and kiss it with foam; the verdant earth studded with rolling hills and carpeted with lush green flora, the gushing rivers and the cooling breezes, the boughs and the blooms, and the bees, birds and butterflies, all of it a work of art like no other, works of art the hand of man can only imitate, not create. They are the very Signs of God by which we know him and the Mirror that reflects as it were His Countless Mercies upon us. All of creation points to the Creator behind it all:

Verily in the heavens and the earth, are signs for those who believe. And in the creation of yourselves and in the fact that the beasts are scattered are Signs for those of assured Faith. And in the alternation of Night and Day and the fact that God sends down sustenance from the sky, and revives with it the earth after its death; and in the change of the winds- are Signs for those that are wise
(The Kneeling Down:3-5)

Such verses instill in us a deep love for the ways of nature. Nature is not to be exploited but loved and groomed and looked upon with wonder as the Signs of God. But that's not all. As Muslims we hold that all of creation, be they animals or trees, glorify God in their own way and in this sense are themselves Muslim:

Seest thou not that to God bow down in worship all things that are in the heavens and on earth,- the sun, the moon, the stars; the hills, the trees, the animals; and a great number among mankind?
(The Pilgrimage:18)

Man is only a humble member of this universal family of God, one among the many communities He has created:

There is not an animal (That lives) on the earth, Nor a being that flies on its wings, but (forms) communities like you. Nothing have We omitted from the Book, and they (all) shall be gathered to their Lord in the end
(The Cattle:38)

God very often speaks of nature and animals in the Qur'an in very endearing terms, showing how much he loves his creation to the tiniest ant. In one passage we have him drawing our attention to the Days of David, bringing in his creatures to sing along with him like a symphony resounding with His Glory:

We bestowed Grace aforetime on David from ourselves (saying) "O ye mountains! Sing ye back the praises of God with him and ye birds!"
(Sheba: 10)

On another occasion He speaks of David's son Solomon's encounter with an ant, when it relates with relish how when Solomon's army was on the march, they came to a valley of ants and one of them said: "*O ye ants, get into your habitations, lest Solomon and his hosts crush you without knowing it*" . All Solomon could do was smile, amused at her wise words, and thank God for His Favours. An entire chapter of the Qur'an titled The Ant or *Al-Naml* takes its name from this incident.

Prophet Muhammad like the Prophets before him also had his animal friends. Which Muslim can forget how when the Pagan Meccans announced a boycott of Muhammad and his family in the early years of his mission, and hung the proclamation in the Holy Temple of the Ka'ba, the white ants got to work to reduce it to naught. Who can forget how when the Prophet and his companion Abu Bakr sought refuge in the Cave of Thawr from a mob of assassins from Mecca on their way to Medina, a spider wove a web at the entrance to the cave, leading the pursuers to believe there was no one inside. Who can ever forget that at the very spot where a man would have had to put his foot to climb into the cave was a rock dove which seemed as if she were sitting on her eggs further misleading the disbelievers. And who can ever forget, how when he finally reached Medina, the Prophet built his mosque, that famous mosque you see in Medina today, at the very spot where Qaswa, the she camel he rode fell on her knees outside a date store belonging to two orphan brothers and refused to budge.

The Prophet ensured that nature would be sustained by his followers and that it would be not be disturbed in any way. One of his companions tells us:

We were on a journey with God's Messenger when we came across a bird the size of a sparrow with two chicks. We seized the chicks, whereupon the hen started beating its wings and screeching. God's Messenger turned and when he saw what we had done, asked: 'Who separated those chicks from their mother? Return them at once!' So we left them free.
(Aboo Dawood)

But we have a duty by God to protect not only the creatures He has created but also the very ecosystems that preserve this vast array of life forms, each unique in its own way and each contributing to the balance of nature. Thus environmental protection is not a call to just save the future, but a sacrosanct religious duty.

The Qur'an speaks of man as *Khalifa* or God's Vicegerent on earth. He told the angels so even before creating Adam:

Behold thy Lord said to the angels: "I will create a viceregent on earth"
(The Heifer:30)

Man in his special role as *khalifa* or Custodian of the Earth has a special mission in safeguarding nature. As the Prophet put it:

The world is green and beautiful, and God has appointed you as His stewards over it
(Saheeh Muslim)

So if we are God's vicegerents on earth. It follows that this world has been given to us on a trust, a sort of long lease. Thus we are not the masters of the world. We are only trustees of this good earth God has given us and as such must discharge this trust in all good faith by preserving and protecting the rest of creation. To betray that trust will only hurt us and earn the Wrath of God.

But there's another reason why we need to protect the environment. And that is the foretaste of Paradise it gives us. If paradise, the ultimate reward we are promised, is described as 'gardens beneath which rivers flow' by God Himself, then should not this earth created by that very God give us a foretaste of Paradise? Should we not strive to make the earth a vast garden where God's Glory and His Timeless Beauty is reflected in all its splendour - under the cooling shade of trees where roses bloom and rabbits frolic, where nightingales sing their songs in gay abandon and the patter of rain could be heard now and then?

This is exactly why Muslims have come to regard gardens as reflections of heaven on Earth; places where we can count God's blessings and where our souls can connect with nature so that we all become one under God. One has only to visit Islamic lands and see for themselves how lovingly the Muslims of old have tended their gardens since the earliest times, from the exotic Shalimar Gardens of India to the Hesperian Gardens of the Alhambra in Spain. Horticulture as we know it today was in a sense a Muslim contribution. Did you know that the tulip was actually introduced to Europe by the Turks and so were Garden summerhouses which have their origins in the Turkish koshk like the Cinili koshk found in the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul. It was this Turkish term which gave us the English word kiosk. Modern-day tents used to observe nature in the wild also have their origins in Turkish camps and have been a part of Western culture ever since Louis XIV had ceremonial tents a la torque set up on his estate.

So you see it's a Muslim's duty to spread the green message of Islam far and wide and to make the earth one big beautiful garden.

In fact, Islam places much emphasis on growing trees. As the Prophet said:

If any Muslim plants any plant and a human being or an animal eats of it,
he will be rewarded as if he had given that much in charity.
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

Whoever reclaims and cultivates dry, barren land will be rewarded by God
for the act. So long as men and animals benefit from it
He will record it for him as almsgiving
(Majmu al-Zawaaid, Haythami)

Here we are told that even if an animal eats from a plant which has been planted by a human, it will count as an act of charity and that such reward will continue to accrue to him even after his death, so long as such plant benefits the rest of creation. Indeed the Prophet taught that even in the end days one should not hesitate to plant a tree on account of its great reward:

If the Hour (Doomsday) were to come and someone had a sapling in his hand and were able to plant it, then let him do so
(Fayd al-Qadir, Al-Munawi)

It is only today that science has discovered the importance of planting trees for the wellbeing of our environment and indeed of ourselves. Trees not only give us shade and fruit, but also play an important role in the delicate balance of nature, even to the extent of absorbing pollutants released to the environment by man in the course of what he calls modern civilized living.

But hold on. We are warned again and again in the Qur'an not to take God's blessings for granted:

See you the water which you drink? Do you bring it down (in rain) from the cloud or do We? Were it our will, We could make it salt (and unpalatable); then why do you not give thanks? See you the fire which you kindle? Is it you who grow the tree which feeds the fire, or do We grow it? It is We Who make it a means to remind (you of Us), and an article of comfort and convenience for the denizens of deserts. Then celebrate with praises the name of your Sustainer, the Supreme!
(The Inevitable:62-74)

That's not all, God tells us point blank that whatever corruption takes place on earth, it is because of man's doing and to reverse such disastrous impacts on our surroundings we ourselves have to take responsibility and make some hard choices even at a personal level:

Corruption doth appear on land and sea because of (the evil) which men's hands have done, that He may make them taste a part of that which they have done, in order that they may return
(The Romans:41)

Wastefulness is particularly condemned by God. For one thing, it shows callous disregard for God's bounties by taking his blessings for granted, and for another, it harms the environment we live in, making it unsustainable for future generations.

O children of Adam! Wear your beautiful apparel at every time and place of prayer; eat and drink, but waste not by excess, for God loves not the prodigals
(The Heights:31)

It is He Who produces gardens, with trellises and without, and dates, and tilth with produce of all kinds, and olives and pomegranates, similar (in kind) and different (in variety); eat of their fruit in their season, but render the dues that are proper on the day that the harvest is gathered. But waste not by excess;for God loves not the wasters
(The Cattle:141)

It once happened that the Prophet came by while his companion Sa'd was taking his ablutions. Seeing that Sa'd was using a lot of water, he said: '*What is this? You are wasting water*." Sa'd replied: "*Can there be wastefulness while taking ablution?*" Pat came the Prophet's response: "*Yes, even if you take it on the bank of a rushing river*"(Musnad). Thus we could see that conservation which we think of as a modern

idea, has been known to Muslims for ages past and honoured as such as a religious obligation.

God also draws our attention to the balance of nature, urging us not to transgress this beautiful balance He has created:

The sun and the moon follow courses (exactly) computed; And the herbs and the trees - both (alike) bow in adoration. And the firmament He has raised high, and He has set up the balance, In order that you may not transgress (due) balance.
(The Most Merciful:5-9)

And commanding us to keep it that way:

Do no mischief on the earth, after it hath been set in order
(The Heights:56)

God, has after all, played His Role. He has ensured balance and order in the good nature He has created, even to the extent of ensuring that it would be kept clean day after day till the end of days, from the rain that washes away animal carcasses to the bacteria that break up rotting matter to our very own white corpuscles that cleanse the blood of germs and impurities. Yes, God had done his part, but have we done ours? Are we prepared to do the little we can for the environment by simply letting it be and taking from it only what is necessary in a sustainable way?

We don't have far to look. The way we have taxed our environment is already telling on us. Little do we stop to think that if we upset the ecological balance it is we who have to pay the price for it. I need recall just one instance where this folly even turned to famine. That was when that fat fool Chairman Mao in his greed to have all the harvest for his countrymen and grudging the little birds that ate a small percentage of the grain, ordered that all sparrows be killed in his infamous kill the sparrow campaign. Millions of the innocent little birds were killed, some shot down by Mao's people's army while they were flying and others killed by other means like when brainwashed peasants kept on banging their pots and pans at dusk, sustaining the commotion for days on end till the exhausted birds fell down and littered the ground, whereupon the fools would rush to wring their little necks. They even broke the eggs and ruthlessly killed the nestlings. And so the Chinese mercilessly slaughtered the birds in hundreds of thousands.

But what happened as a result is sadder. The birds ate only about five percent of the harvest, and with it they ate the pests that plagued the harvest. In the absence of the birds, swarms of locusts proliferated and ate into the harvest resulting in the Great Chinese Famine where twenty million people perished through mass starvation.

God had in His wisdom created animals the way they are and it is folly for man to attempt to change it according to his whims and fancies. As God Himself tells us there can be no change in the Work of God:

So set thou thy face steadily and truly to the Faith. God's handiwork according to the pattern He made mankind; no change (let there be) in the Work (wrought) by God
(The Romans:30)

Thus new-fangled scientific breakthroughs like biotechnology or genetic modification where plants or animals are manipulated at the genetic level to change their traits can have no place in Islam. Very often this process involves gene splicing

where the genes of one species of animal are transferred to another. Across countries like the USA nature is being deliberately manipulated so that nowadays we find animals even being patented as inventions.

Private biotechnology companies, universities, and individual bioentrepreneurs have been granted hundreds of patents on animals such as chimpanzees, rabbits, dogs and cats who have been genetically altered in some way or other. Such animals are often used for research purposes in painful experiments to satisfy man's curiosity about the way nature operates. In the case of plants, it is also ostensibly done to confer traits thought to be desirable like improved nutrition and pest resistance with companies like Monsanto taking the lead. But what of the impact of these organisms?

To give one example, take the case of genetically modified corn which has incorporated the gene of the *Bacilius Thuringiensis*, a natural pesticide to make it resistant to the corn borer. However it has been scientifically proven that such corn, when eaten by the larvae of the Monarch Butterfly, killed nearly half and stunted the rest. Now, the Monarch Butterfly is the natural protector of the corn since it feeds on pests injurious to the corn plant. But what the modified corn does is wards off the pest and kills the butterfly. The pests could evolve strains resistant to the corn in less than a decade, while the butterfly which could control the pest would be wiped out, posing a threat not only to our food security, but also the larger environment.

Interestingly, Muslims were warned against these developments in the Qur'an revealed more than 1400 years ago. Here we are told that Satan, the arch foe of mankind had vowed to tempt man to change the nature created by God:

I (Satan) will take of your (God's) servants a portion marked off. I will mislead them and I will create in them false desires. I will order them to slit the ears of cattle and to change the (fair) nature created by God.
(The Women:119)

It is evident today more than ever before that the latest developments in biotechnology we see today is Satan's work, who has seduced man to think that unbridled science is the cure for all his ills and even resorted to a misplaced Judeo-Christian notion of subjugating nature to serve man's ends to cajole men into this mischief. Perhaps there will come a day when it will be left to the lot of the world's Muslims to fight for and protect the natural order in all its beauty and variety at a time when the rest of the world is being led astray by evil men whom the devil has driven mad by his touch. Muslim nations have already done a lot here besides just avoiding biotechnology. Take for instance Masdar City in Abu Dhabi which is the world's first true zero-carbon city.

It was also in this spirit that a sixteen year old Muslim girl from Alexandria in Egypt, Azza Faiad discovered a revolutionary *trash to fuel formula*, an inexpensive way of turning plastic waste into fuel by using a cheap and plentiful catalyst known as aluminisilicate to converts plastic waste into gases like methane and propane, which can then be turned into ethanol or biofuel. Why, because the organic chemicals from plastic polymers so extracted are precisely the same chemicals extracted by biofuel producers who have to ferment food crops to produce ethanol. So with one stroke, this beautiful young lady has not only shown the world a way to address the environmental impact of discarded plastics, but also turn it into a viable, eco-friendly fuel source.

40th Night

Johnny: Salams, Sheikh and thanks very much for last night's talk on the environment. Now I'm sure if there's really going to be anybody who'll be fighting to preserve nature as we know it, it'll be the Muslims. I must say I'm already quite convinced that Islam is the way the world needs to go, and in my heart I feel I'm already a Muslim. The time has come for me to return home and I have only a couple of days more left here. Now to my last question, which many back home ask rather negatively:

What has Islam contributed to the development of science?

The Janissary: Would you believe it if I were to tell you that Islam laid the very foundations for modern science as we know it today. The Qur'an which we Muslims take to the very Word of God incessantly called upon its readers to meditate on the marvels of creation and to explore the laws of nature.

We will show you (O mankind) Our signs in the universe and in yourselves until you are convinced that the revelation is the truth
(Expounded:53)

That's not all, it challenged man to discover the secrets of the universe as much as he can, even to the extent of highlighting phenomena then unthought of by man:

Do not the unbelievers see that the heavens and earth Were joined together (as one Unit of Creation), before We clove them asunder? We made from water Every living thing. Will they not believe?
(The Prophets:30)

Thus Islam from its very onset recognized the validity of reason, not only in knowing God, but also the world around us. No other faith put before its followers such a fresh revolutionary idea, that to know God, we need to use reason and reflect on His Signs around us in order to realize His Existence and to acknowledge His Presence. Such hints in their Holy Book were not taken lightly by its readers, for it enhanced their curiosity and fueled their thirst for new knowledge. It was the stepping stone to what we call science today; it laid the foundation for the pillars we know as the sciences to be built on. This is what prompted Hartwig Hirschfeld to remark:

We must not be surprised to find the Qur'an the fountain-head of the sciences. Every subject connected with heaven or earth, human life, commerce and various trades is occasionally touched upon, and this gave rise to the production of numerous monographs forming commentaries on parts of the Holy Book. In this way the Qur'an was responsible for great discussions, and to it was indirectly due the marvelous development of all branches of science in the Muslim world

That's not all, God's Prophet made the pursuit of knowledge mandatory on every Muslim man and woman when he declared:

Seeking knowledge is a duty on every Muslim
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

And pronounced that those who sought knowledge traveled in the way of God:

If anyone travels on a road in search of knowledge, God will cause him to travel on one of the roads of Paradise. The angels will lower their wings in their great pleasure with one who seeks knowledge
(Aboo Dawood)

Though a religious figure, the Prophet himself did not shy away from deducing facts based on scientific observation, like when he stated: "*I was about to prohibit sexual intercourse with lactating women, but I observed the Byzantines and Persians, and saw them do it, and their children suffered no harm*" (Muwatta).

The example set by their Prophet himself no doubt contributed to the evolution of a scientific mindset among his followers. Let's hear what Professor Huston Smith had to say about it in his Religions of Man:

The heavenly bodies holding their swift silent course in the vault of heaven, the incredible order of the universe, the rain that falls to relieve the parched earth, palms bending with golden fruit, ships that glide across the seas laden with goodness for man-can these be the handiwork of gods of stone? What fools to cry for signs when creation harbours nothing else! In an age of credulity, Muhammad taught respect for the world's incontrovertible order which was to awaken Muslim science before Christian.

Islam did not ask men to leave the realm of reality. Rather, it invited them to contemplate and meditate on the world around them and on workings of the universe and its laws, fully knowing that man will, by this means, realize the truth of God's existence. And the deeper he probed, the more he was likely to believe in the Wonderful God behind it all. Thus from its very inception, Islam, Unlike the church fathers of old, Islam did not look at science as something Satanic. Rather, scientific discoveries and inventions that benefit man were seen as nothing but the unfolding flow of knowledge that God chose to give man from time to time depending on the need. This is what inspiration that figures so prominently in scientific exploration is all about. It is a blessing of God which we ought to use for our good. It is precisely the reason why God are created people with different sets of skills and different kinds of intelligences, some linguistic, some mathematical, some spatial, all of which are vital for the progress of human society over the ages.

Have you not pondered how as man progresses his every need to advance is already provided in nature. Take for instance petroleum, a worthless substance if not for modern science's discovery of it as a source of fuel to power our vehicles and give us plastic. Then take water which gives us hydro-electricity to meet our domestic energy requirements like lighting our homes at night and mineral deposits to meet our fertilizer requirements to grow bounteous harvest of crops and even simple sand to give us silicon chips for an eco-friendly paperless world. Yes this world is so blessed with resources that one can only wonder who put it all there for us to make use of it. It's as if it were all waiting to happen. like the spore of the hyssop mould, the penicillin notatum that settled in Alexander Fleming's dish of Staphylococci and gave rise to an entire spectrum of antibiotics to fight disease.

Thus Islam looked upon science not as an instrument of the devil as the Church did until recently but as a tool to learn about God's creation and further the progress of man within it. As you know the Church in the Middle Ages thrived on maxims like "*Ignorance is the mother of devotion*" with pontiffs like Pope Gregory burning libraries and driving scientists underground with threats of burning at the stake. This

is not hard to believe when one remembers how as recently as 1633 so acomplished a scientist like Galileo was compelled to abjure the 'detestable heresy' that the earth moved round the sun on pain of death. This reactionary worldview did not even stop with the Reformation, for was it not the founder of Protestantism Martin Luther who himself decried medical treatment for women by crying out in all the misogynistic zeal he could muster "*If they become tired or even die, that does not matter. Let them die in childbirth--that is why they are there".*

Islamdom never cultivated such an attitude because it simply couldn't. Its faith would simply not allow it to. Rather it actively encouraged scientific findings that could benefit man, with the full backing of the religious authority. It allowed men and women of science to freely pursue their dreams, to reflect upon matters of scientific interest with open minds without being stifled by religious authority as in the West.

Islamdom which did not have a priesthood or religious hierarchy with vested interests as the West did, thus broke down the barriers of conditioned thinking that had stunted man's intellectual progress throughout the ages and eventually paved the way for the spectacular scientific feats of our times. The Muslim Arabs introduced objective experiments to the world centuries before Roger Bacon formulated his much hyped scientific method the West so proudly boasts of today.

This is why Robert Briffault observed in his Making of Humanity:

"*It is highly probable that for the Arabs, modern European civilization would never have arisen at all; it is absolutely certain that but for them, it would not have assumed the character which has enabled it to transcend all previous phases of evolution. For although there is not a single aspect of European growth in which the decisive influence of Islamic culture is not traceable, nowhere is it so clear and momentous as in the genesis of that power which constitutes the paramount distinctive force of the modern world and the supreme source of its victory- natural science and scientific spirit*".

The only part of Europe that could rival the Middle East in scientific studies was Spain, and that too was a Muslim country at the time going by the name of *Al Andalus*. In fact Islamic civilization in Spain was the most developed civilization in Europe in the Middle Ages and remained so until Ferdinand and Isabella drove Boabdil and his Muslim subjects out of Iberia in the fifteenth century. But for all that time, for over seven hundred years from 711 to 1492 Spain shone like a light to the rest of Europe.

Christendom could not contribute to science in any real meaningful way due to the power of its religious establishment which saw every new scientific discovery as an affront to God and punished it as heresy, even things that did not have anything to do with religion like holding that the earth was not the centre of the universe. Yes, Christians in both east and West, Rome and Byzantine remained steeped in ignorance for over a thousand years, which is why the modern West calls those times of the Middle Ages *The Dark Ages*. They emerged from this long, dark night of ignorance only when they saw the light of learning that emerged from Muslim centres of knowledge in Spain, Turkey and the Middle East. As the Marquis of Dufferin observed: "*It is to Mussulman science, Mussulman art and to Mussulman literature that Europe has been in a great measure indebted for its extrication from the darkness of the Middle Ages*". Yes, even today, the entire world accepts that the end

of the Dark Ages in Europe came in 1453 when Christian Constantinople fell to the Muslim Turks. That single event ushered in the modern age. Ask any historian, he'll tell you!

Much of these discoveries and inventions took place during what may well be called the *Golden Age of Islamic Science* from the 8th to the 13th centuries, that is until the Fall of Baghdad to the Mongol hordes in 1258. However even afterwards the Arab scientific spirit was not altogether lost and showed now and again, only to be taken up by other non-Arab Muslim peoples like the Turks.

In fact it were the Muslims who pioneered university education to further the cause of science. It was a Muslim woman living in the 9th century, princess Fatima who founded the first degree-granting university in Fez, Morocco. That was in 859 AC. Her sister Miriam founded a mosque next to it and together the complex became the famous Al-Qarawiyyin Mosque and University which exists to this day. What this shows is that science and religion went hand in hand in the Islamic world and that even young women contributed to it. The idea of awarding degrees spread from Fez to Andalusía in Islamic Spain, and eventually to the Universities of Bologna in Italy and Oxford in England so that you never hear of a university nowadays that does not confer a degree. Spanish Islamic universities in Cordoba, Granada and Seville, not only had Muslim students, but also brilliant Christian and Jewish students learning science from Muslim savants.

These early Muslims opened their minds to knowledge from all parts of the then known world. They looked both east and west to glean whatever gems of scientific wisdom they could find, gathering knowledge from as far as Greece, Persia and India which had hitherto remained separate and distant to synthesize into a composite whole as they did with medicine. Caliph Mamun, the son of the celebrated Harun Al Rashid of Arabian Nights fame set up the *Bayt Al Hikmah* or House of Wisdom, the greatest collection of accumulated knowledge in the world then, which among other things translated ancient Greek works into Arabic such as those of Aristotle, Ptolemy and Euclid, thus preserving them to this day.

By this means the Arabs kept up the torch of science that had been extinguished in Europe during the Dark Ages. That's not all. These scholars did not keep such knowledge to themselves but freely transmitted it. By this means ancient Greek knowledge which was then little regarded in Europe even in Greece itself was preserved and embellished upon with fresh inputs from the Arabs before being passed on to Europe, spurring the Renaissance.

Indeed the use of paper in the West, which revolutionized the spread of knowledge in the Age of Enlightenment, and which still benefits us by way of books, magazines and newspapers was influenced by the Muslims who transmitted the knowledge of paper-making from the Far East to the West. That was when they captured some Chinese prisoners versed in the then secret art of making paper in the Battle of Tallas in 751. Soon the paper mills of Baghdad got started eventually reaching the West 1293 when Europe's first paper mill was set up in Bologna. Ask yourself *What use would Gutenberg's printing press been in disseminating knowledge and making the western world as we know it today if not for the paper upon which it was printed.* Imagine Gutenberg printing his Bibles on parchment!

Like it or not, it were the early Muslims, and especially the Arabs, who more than any other nation made the greatest contribution to science, spanning disciplines as diverse as astronomy, botany, chemistry, mathematics, physics, optics, surgery and zoology.

It was, after all, the Muslims who introduced Arabic numerals to Europe, making mathematical calculations so much easier. This decimal system included the *zero* which in fact takes its English name and its name for the symbol *cipher* from the Arabic *sifr*. It was only after 1500 AC that the Arabic numerals with its concept of Zero became widespread in Europe, making math so much easier. Try figuring out a simple calculation like XXVI percent of CCXV without using zero and you'll know why. Even variables like *x* to express an unknown quantity were first formulated by them. It were the Muslims who invented advanced instruments like the astrolabe, sextant and quadrant which were useful not only in astronomy, but also helped in oceanic navigation, which in turn led to Western Europe's much talked of Age of Exploration. It were the Muslims who established the modern medical system with advanced hospitals, clinical studies and diagnostics, devised advanced surgical instruments and anaesthetics and evolved the ancient art of alchemy into the science of chemistry with processes like distillation and laid the foundation for our plastics and rubber, soaps and perfumes among a thousand other things that make modern living such a convenience. It were they who laid the ground for modern technological developments like the camera which has its roots in a rudimentary pinhole camera in a dark room in 10th century Cairo.

In Islam, seeking medical treatment for one's ailments was not a sin but rather a duty. God's Benevolence after all is manifested in His Creation and to make the best use of created things is to recognize His Mercy to mankind. Islam tells us that there is a cure for every disease. It is up to man to make the best use of creation to realize this. As the Prophet said

There is no disease that God has sent down save that He has also sent down its cure (Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

The Prophet did not stop at that. He prescribed Black Seed as a panacea for all ills. "*There is healing in black seed for all diseases except death*" (Saheeh Al-Bukhari). He also recommended the water of truffles for eye diseases: "*Truffles*" he said "*are a kind of manna (sent down by God to the Children of Israel during their wanderings in Moses time) and their juice is a medicine for the eyes*" (Tirmidhi). True to the Prophet's words, black seed or Nigella Sativa has been shown to have curative properties including immunity boosting and anti-carcinogenic properties while truffles, a fleshy fungus that grows under the soil have now been shown to cure many eye diseases such as trachoma, an infectious disease that can cause damage to cornea cells.

The early followers of the Prophet in keeping with his dictum, developed medicine to a very high standard and in this they were considerably influenced by the Greek medical tradition of the likes of Galen and Hippocrates, so much so that an important branch of medicine incorporating herbal medicines came to be called *Yunaani* after the Arabic name for Greece *Yunaan.* However the Arabs did not merely borrow, but improved upon the Greek system by incorporating medical remedies from Persia and India into this system.

That's not all, they made their own independent contributions which by far had the biggest impact including in Europe. This was particularly so in the fine art of surgery where they showed exceptional skill. Every Muslim was required to undergo a basic surgery in the form of circumcision, but they did not confine it to this ritual alone, but expanded it to other applications. As early as the tenth century, the renowned

Arab physician Al Zahrawi known to the West as Abulcasis from his first name Abul Qasim, introduced the use of modern surgical instruments such as scalpels, bone saws, forceps, and fine scissors for eye surgery and dissolving catgut to stitch wounds at a time when sutures had to removed physically by a second surgery which was quite discomforting to the patient. Mindful of the pain that could be caused to his patients during surgical procedures he came up with a variety of anaesthetics including inhalational anaesthetics and the anaesthetic sponge. He also invented capsules by encasing powder drugs in catgut parcels and getting patients to swallow them. His comprehensive encyclopedia on surgery, the *Kitab al-Tasrif* or Concession which showed 200 surgical tools was translated and widely used as a reference work in Europe until about 1500 AC.

Then there was his Persian contemporary Ibn Sina known to the West as Avicenna whose work written in Arabic, *Qanun Fit Tibb* or *Canon of Medicine* was translated into Latin, the lingua franca and academic language of Europe and remained as a standard textbook in European universities well up to the 17th century, describing among other things contagious diseases, experimental medicine, clinical trials and a comprehensive pharmacology covering over seven hundred drugs. Al Razi better known in the West as Rhazes also made an immense contribution to medicine through his celebrated work *Al-Hawi* known in Latin as *Continens*. It was by far the most comprehensive encyclopedia on medicine ever written and covered among other things gynecology, obstetrics and ophthalmology. The treatment of the eye also received due attention with men like Ammar ibn Ali of Mosul who about the year 1000 wrote a breakthrough book on ophthalmology, describing among other things cataract surgery and his invention of a hollow metallic syringe with which he successfully extracted cataracts through suction.

It was not only men, but also women who practiced medicine. Women were especially needed for treating female patients and to serve as gynaecologists and obstreticians. Even in the Prophet's time there was a lady surgeon of sorts, Umm Attiyyah who used to circumcise girls and a nurse Rufaydah who took care of the wounded following the Battle of the Trench fought in the Prophet's day. The tradition continued to Ottoman times when we hear of a lady doctor Meryem Kadin who in the early part of the 19th century successfully cured prince Abdul Mecid, the heir to the Ottoman and was rewarded with a monthly salary by the Palace.

The first hospital proper with wards and advanced medical treatment also had its origins in the Muslim world. That was when the Tulun Hospital was set up Cairo in 872. It was also the first public hospital, giving free medical care to all those who needed it and accessible by anyone irrespective of age, sex or creed . It was also the first hospital to care for the mentally ill. Before long hospitals sprang up in many parts of the Islamic World, some of them specialized in treating particular diseases. The largest such hospital throughout the Middle Ages was built in Cairo in 1285 by Sultan Qalaun al-Mansur. It could accommodate thousands of patients and had separate wards for male and female patients, as well as for different kinds of ailments with the staff comprising of physicians, surgeons, pharmacists and attendants of both sexes. All this while the Europeans of the day still had to resort to handy medicine men and charlatans of various kinds for want of medical treatment.

Even inoculation, the process of introducing weakened germs into the body to stimulate antibody production, was a Muslim introduction. Lady Mary Montagu, the wife of the English Ambassador to Istanbul noticed it being practiced by the Ottoman Turks who used to obtain cowpox microbes from cattle to inoculate their children against small pox when she lived there for a couple of years from 1716-1718. She

introduced it to England around 1724. That was well before Edward came up with the idea after infecting little James with cowpox taken from the milkmaid Sarah in 1796. So again it were the Muslims who really played the pioneering role in this preventive medicine that has saved countless lives.

Another major area where Muslims made a very meaningful contribution was in alchemy, itself from the Arabic word *al-kimiya* and its successor chemistry. Although primarily concerned with transmuting baser metals to gold, Arabian alchemists led by the the Iraqi scientist Jabir ibn Hayyan transformed this ancient discipline into what we call chemistry around the eighth century. Jabir, better known to the West as Geber, has been rightly called '*the father of chemistry'* since he introduced many of the basic chemical processes we use to day including distillation, evaporation, crystallisation, sublimation, purification, filtration and oxidisation. He even invented the alembic still for the making of alcoholic spirits, which by the way gets its name of *alcohol* from the Arabic *al-kuhl* and discovered corrosive acids including sulphuric and nitric acid much used in industry today, all this at a time when the world knew of no more powerful acid than the acetic found in vinegar.

That's not all, among other things he discovered new metals like antimony, bismuth and mercury and some essential elements such as sulphur. He also invented luminescent ink that could be read at night and fireproof paper. And to think he preceded men like Antoine Lavoisier to whom Europeans are fond of attributing the foundations of chemistry by almost a thousand years.

There were many others who contributed to this field, among them Al Razi who lived in Baghdad in the 10th century described how kerosene could be produced from the distillation of petroleum He also wrote about *naffatah* or kerosene lamps used for lighting in his *Kitab al-Asrar* or Book of Secrets and also wrote a recipe for the world's first true soap. The Arabs were soon mixing oil such as olive oil with a salt-like substance called *al-kali* - the roots of the modern word alkali - to make soap, which they boiled, left to harden and used in their *hammams* or public baths.The Arabs also pioneered the extraction of essential oils from flowers like rosewater, done by men like Al Kindi who lived in Iraq in the 9th century. The perfume industry today has its origins in Al Kindi's laboratory in Iraq.

Yet another important discipline to which Muslim scientists contributed was in optics. The tenth century Arab Physicist Al Haytham known to the West as Alhazen is in fact known as the '*Father of modern optics'* His *Kitab Al Manazir* was translated into Latin as *Opticae Thesaurus* and passed on to Europe to stimulate the growth of the science there. Al Haytham showed that humans see objects by light entering the eye, debunking Ptolemy's long held theory that light was emitted from the eye itself. It was also his observations that led to the invention of the modern camera. He noticed how light came through holes in window shutters and concluded that it travelled in a straight line and that when the rays were reflected off a bright subject they passed through the small hole but did not scatter and instead crossed and formed as an upside-down image on the surface, so that the smaller the hole was, the clearer the picture.

Using this principle Al Haytham went on to devise the world's first pinhole camera, the *Camera Obscura*, a light-proof box with a small hole in one side where the light from a scene passed through this point to project an inverted image on the opposite side of the box. He called it the *qamara*, which in Arabic means 'dark room'. This needless to say laid the very foundations for the camera as we know it today. So next time you click away inside this mosque, you'll know where its roots ultimately lie.

The contribution Muslim peoples like the Arabs and Persians made to mathematics in inestimable. They introduced Arabic numerals into Europe and taught Western scholars how simple it was to do arithmetic using the zero, which was further popularized by men like Leonardo Fibonacci of Pisa, who was taught by a Muslim master named Sidi Omar in Bougie in Algeria and published a work which spoke of the merits of Arabic numerals that led to its introduction and widespread adoption in Europe. The use of x to denote an unknown number was also introduced by the Arabs who used the Arabic *sheen* meaning 'a thing' to solve their mathematical equations.

Algebra that gave a whole new dimension to mathematics with numerous applications having far-reaching consequences was also invented by Muslim mathematicians. The very word itself comes from the title of the 9th century Persian mathematician Al Khwarizmi's treatise *Kitab Al Jabr Wa'l Mugabala* (The Book of Reasoning and Balancing). In fact it was Khwarizmi's work translated into Latin that brought the study of mathematics as a discipline to Europe via Spain. Khwarizmi also contributed to trigonometry by formulating tables for sine and cosine and coming up with tangent tables. He also invented the quadrant, known by the Arabs of old as *Rubul Mujayyab* which helped in astronomical observations and made oceanic navigation all that more easier.

That's not all. He also founded the algorithm which is basically a set of instructions to be followed to achieve a predictable end-state. In fact the principle takes its name after him- *algorithm* from *al-khwarizmi*. This laid the foundations for more complex mathematical breakthroughs including the computer. Every computer program, after all, is simply a series of instructions, varying in complexity, and listed in a specific order to perform a specific task. Just imagine a world without computers today? Next time you use your laptop, remember the man who ultimately made it possible.

Another area where Muslims played an important role was in Geometry, which figured prominently in their centres of learning since geometrical designs were seen as an acceptable art form for adorning mosques given the prohibition on animate art in Islam. Other aspects of Islamic architecture developed as a result of mathematical skills of the Arabs were soon influencing Christendom. Take for instance the minarets of Islamdom, those high towers to call the faithful to prayer which went on to become the spires you see in old Christian churches and palaces. If you were ever to set your eyes on the Prophet's Mosque in Medina you will notice how closely the minarets resemble the spires in the Neuschwansteinberg Castle built by King Ludwig of Bavaria. Likewise the bulbous, onion shaped domes such as you see in the Kremlin actually have their origins in our mosques. Muslim mathematicians also greatly contributed to Trigonometry which has since helped modern man to solve complex problems in cartography and navigation.

And who can ever forget the Muslim contribution to that stellar science astronomy. In fact, astronomy like medicine has a religious basis in Islam. Both sun and moon play an important role in the daily life of a Muslim. The sun determines the times for prayer and fasting while the moon determines the beginning and end of the months of the Islamic lunar calendar that tells us when to start our fasts and when to stop. Wherever they be, devout Muslims must find the precise direction of the Qiblah, the temple in Mecca before offering their prayers facing it. It was astronomy that helped Muslims all over the world fulfill their religious obligations.

A little more than a hundred years after Islam had established itself, around 796, Al Fazari devised the astrolabe, a multi-purpose astronomical gadget that could tell time, show the position of the stars and help find the direction of the Qiblah. In fact

there was even a female maker of astrolabes, Al Ijliyah and was employed at the court of the Syrian ruler Sayf al-Dawlah in the tenth century. Astrolobes were in the olden days like the pocket watches of astronomers. It solved problems relating to the position of the celestial bodies like sun and stars, helped determine the exact time of a celestial event like sunrise or sunset and even tell the time during day or night. The idea was further improved by Al Battani known to the West as Albetagnius who developed a celestial globe to record celestial data and gave details of how to plot the co-ordinates of over a thousand stars. That was way back in the tenth century.

In fact, centuries before Europeans took it for fact that the earth was a sphere, Muslim astronomers were already confident of it, like Ibn Hazm and his peers who lived in the 9th century who argued very logically that since the sun was always vertical to a particular spot on earth, it had to be spherical. That's not all, they even went on to calculate the Earth's circumference, and guess what, it turned out to be 40,253 km while today we know it to be precisely 40,068 km through the equator, less than 200 km off the mark. When about 300 years later Cartographer Al-Idrisi took a silver globe of his own making, the first of its kind, to the court of King Roger of Sicily, the idea spread westward and could have even influenced Galileo, who knows? Even then poor Galileo had to recant his belief that the earth revolved round the sun. Had he not, he would have been burnt alike at the stake for heresy by the Church of his day.

Muslims were also the first to develop 'observation tubes' the forerunner of the telescope. Although they didn't have magnifying lenses they helped the observer focus on the sky by eliminating light interference. The earliest such tube was mentioned by Al-Battani way back in the tenth century and it were probably these that when introduced to Europe influenced the development of the telescope as we know it.

Muslims also pioneered the building of observatories for studying the heavenly bodies. Over a thousand years ago, in 828, the Abbasid Caliph Al Ma'mun founded an astronomical observatory in Baghdad leading to the establishment of similar but larger observatories in the Middle East. These preceded the first European observatories by several centuries. The first observatory in Christian Europe was built only in 1558 in Kassel, Germany.

They also compiled impressive works like when in the mid-10th century Al-Sufi wrote the *Book of Fixed Stars*, a stellar compendium illustrated with descriptions of the stars, their positions, magnitudes and colour. He was also the first to notice the Andromeda Galaxy. To this day the nightly heavens bear testimony to the contributions of the Arabian stargazers with well over a hundred stars scattered across our known universe bearing Arabic names. Like *Fomalhaut* the brightest star in the constellation Pisces from the Arabic *fam-al-hut* 'mouth of the fish' or *Izar* in the constellation Andromeda from Arabic *Al Izar* 'the veil or covering', or *Pherkad* in Ursa Minor from Arabic *Al Farqad* 'the calf'. Some of these names are not very obvious like *Vega*, the brightest star in the constellation Lyra from *Nasr Al Waqi* 'the falling vulture' or *Altair* from the Arabic *al-tayr* meaning 'bird. Other well known stars of Arabic origin include *Algol*, *Betelgeuse*, *Deneb* and *Rigel* to name just a few.

That's not all, many common technical terms used in astronomy today are of Arabic origin, like *nadir* which is from Arabic *nazir*, a point on the celestial sphere directly below the observer and diametrically opposite the *zenith*, the point of culmination or peak which itself is from Arabic *samt*. *Azimuth* likewise comes from the Arabic *as-sumut*. Arab astronomers also compiled *almanacs* which itself is an Arabic term.

Geography was another area in which the early Muslims excelled. In fact geography has a very close relationship to our faith. Each and every Muslim is supposed to have at least a minimal knowledge of geography to determine the direction of the *Qiblah* to face when praying. Thus those to its east had to face west and those to its west had to face east. Undertaking the journey to Mecca for the Islamic pilgrimage known as Hajj which every Muslim had to perform at least once in their lifetime required a better grasp of geography as did the Islamic requirement for the believers to spread their faith, prompting missionaries to reach out to all corners of the then known world. As millions traveled from the furthest reaches of the world to Mecca in fulfillment of this obligation, one can only imagine how it could have contributed to the development of not only geographical knowledge of the various countries they passed, but also of its peoples, lands, languages, customs and even novel ideas that would have been gathered on the way.

This Muslim interest in geography led in turn to cartography or map making In the 12th century, Al-Idrisi produced the *Tabula Rogeriana*, the most detailed world map of the time. It laid the foundation for better maps eventually leading to the great explorations that marked Europe's *Age of Discovery*. Little wonder European explorers like Magellan and Vasco De Gama had Muslim navigators on board their ships.

The compass, without which oceanic navigation could not have been possible was also a Muslim introduction. Baylak Al Qibjaki in his Book of Treasure for Merchants described the use of a rudimentary compass as an iron needle charged with a magnetic stone placed in a bowl of water during a sea voyage from Tripoli to Alexandria as far back as 1242.

The Muslims of old also made great strides in technology including aeronautics.The first real attempt at manned flight was in fact made by a Muslim. That was way back in 875 AC or so when Andalusian Abbas ibn Firnas devised a flying machine, a winged apparatus resembling a bird and took off from a hill in the outskirts of Cordoba. He was able to fly upwards for about ten minutes before making landfall and who knows it was his designs that would have inspired Leonardo da Vinci's attempts to design such machines centuries later. And to think he lived a thousand years before the Wright Brothers started their work at Kitty Hawk.

Yes, believe it or not, it were the Muslims who first pioneered manned rocket flight. That was in 1633 when the Turkish rocketeer Hasan Celebi blasted off in a skyrocket by attaching seven rockets to a larger rocket powered by gunpowder paste. He flew 300 metres over the Bosphorus before safely descending in what is thought to be the world's parachute, a sort of hang glider that opened out several wings as he came down. Before launching off he had joked that he was taking the Sultan's Greetings to Jesus whom Muslims believe to be in the heavens. That was three hundred years before Von Braun devised his V2 that devastated London and subsequent Saturn V that took us to outer space. His kinsman, Hazarfen Ahmet Celebi, invented the world's first glider using eagle feathers stitched onto his wings. He succeeded in crossing the Bosphorus by gliding from the top of the Galata Tower on the European side to the Anatolian side in 1638. That's not all. Ottoman engineer Ibrahim Efendi invented a submarine called the Tahtel in 1720 which is said to have resembled an alligator.

Al Jazari who lived in the 12th century invented the crank shaft allowing the conversion of rotary motion to linear motion, which enabled lifting heavy objects with much ease. This far-reaching mechanical invention soon spread across the then

known world and formed the very basis of automatics we know today from the simple bicycle to the immensely complex internal combustion engine seen in automobiles today. His magnum opus, the *Book of Knowledge of Ingenious Mechanical Devices* is a veritable treasure trove of mechanical inventions including valves and pistons, mechanical clocks and surprisingly the first-ever programmable robot. Little wonder he is called '*The father of robotics'*. And who can ever forget the far-famed Banu Moosa brothers who in 850 wrote their own *Book of Ingenious Devices*, in which they described their inventions such as the valve, automatic control, fail-safe system, feedback controller, clamshell grab, gas mask and hurricane lamp. They even described mechanisms for fountains like navel valves, worm gearing and water and wind turbines and even made fountains that could change shape from shield to lily.

The Islamic world also knew of windmills which were used for grinding grain tapping the only energy source the desert offered at the time –the wind – through six or twelve sails covered in fabric. Tradition holds it was the idea of a Persian who lived in the times of Caliph Umar. That was in the 7th century long before Europe adopted them five hundred years later when the Crusaders introduced them to Europe after seeing them in operation in Islamic countries.

The Arabs also applied gunpowder and fireworks which they had borrowed from the Chinese to military applications. True it were the Chinese who discoverede gunpowder, but they did not use it in explosions, confining it only to fireworks as they had not come up with the right proportion to give it a bang and had not purified its main ingredient potassium nitrate well enough. The Syrian military scientist Hassan Al Rammah in his Book of Ingenious War Devices written in 1295 gave recipes for making exploding gunpowder which was very close to its modern composition.

This laid the foundation for cannons which were used as far back as 1453 in the siege of Constantinople by the Ottomans. Muslims also used rockets and torpedoes against the Crusaders who were awed by its efficacy in battle. Al Rammah for instance described the torpedo as a cleverly modified rocket designed to skim on the surface of the seawater to deliver naphta and explosives to enemy ships. The first firearms loaded with gunpowder, a sort of hand cannon that would later evolve into the gun as we know it today, was also a Muslim invention. It was used by the Egyptian Mamluks as far back as 1260 to fight off the Mongol hordes at the Battle of Ain Jalut.

Thus you will see that Muslims made a very significant contribution to science, especially in the Middle Ages. In fact, much of the inventions we take for granted today have as their underlying basis the principles enunciated by Muslim scholars during those times. However the fall of Baghdad to the Mongols and the rise of Western colonialism took its toll on Muslim scholarship and before long, the centre of science shifted to the West.

The West that had thus far rejected science altogether under the rigid purview of the church, suddenly took an about-turn, not really a U but rather a V turn, a totally opposite path, following the French Revolution. They dethroned the church and in its place enthroned science as the New God, so to say. Modern science was now looked upon as the new religion as the West sought to harness its full potential to exploit nature and benefit man. Thus science became a law unto itself, its full force being unleashed to conquer nature and subdue her, the very nature that had in the first place given it birth.

But just as the glutton enjoys his food but doesn't respect it, and just as the lecher enjoys his whore, but does not respect her, the new man in the West wanted to enjoy nature without respecting her. He ravished her and raped her and sliced her open to feast off her lifeblood. And so today we have monstrosities of science like cloning and gene splicing that seek to change nature as we know it. Thus modern science as we know it today has in a sense been hijacked by Satan serving as his tool to create mischief on earth through vehicles such as evolutionary theory with its battlecry of *survival of the fittest*.

Not just that. Western man now placed so much trust in the new god of science that he denied himself other means of knowledge other than through empirical observation. This needless to say, had its flaws, for it was now only matter that mattered. It limited man's knowledge as it could not explain many things such as the very act of creation itself, or the prophecies the prophets of old made or the miracles Jesus performed and even such phenomena as the poltergeist some growing up girls experience to this day. Worst of all, this perverted science prevented man from acquiring a better understanding of the ultimate reality behind it all. Just because science cannot explain certain things. It doesn't mean that they don't exist. To think so would be arrogance of the highest order.

But all is not lost. Though science is a bad master, it is a good servant so long as it is employed in consonance with the God-given nature it was born out of. it is this sort of science that Islam seeks to foster and has in fact been nurturing for ages past – a science that is at peace with nature and at peace with God.

Johnny: God bless you Sheikh, and thank you for all your wonderful answers, for each and every one of them. May God smile on your face and reward you as much as there are stars in the sky. I am finally convinced yours is the faith I always wanted to embrace. In fact I wonder why I did not do so earlier. God forgive me for that!

The Janissary: Why delay any more, my friend, give me your hand and recite after me: *La ilaha illallah Muhamadur Rasoolullah*

The mosque resonated with Johnny's Kalima and he felt as if he were floating in the air on the wings of angels. At last he knew he had found peace with himself and Peace with God.