

The Implications of Guidance

A problem of highest significance arises here. The teaching with regard to the prayer for being guided in the straight path is addressed equally to all men or all Muslims and to saints and prophets who have already received guidance and are even a source of guidance for other men. Why should these repeatedly pray for something they already possess? The answer to this question depends on knowing all that is implied by guidance. The answer would, at the same time, remove all difficulties and confusions which arise in the minds of those who, not being familiar with the true signification of guidance, begin to suspect that certain verses of the Holy Qur'ān were contradicting certain others.

The Meaning of *Hidāyah* or Guidance

The best explanation of the word, *Hidāyah* (guidance) has been offered by Imām Raghīb al-Isfahānī in his *Mufradat al-Qur'ān*, which can be summed up thus: *Hidayah* signifies leading someone towards his destination, gently and kindly; while guidance, in the real sense, issues forth from Allah alone, and it has several degrees.

The First Degree of Guidance

The first degree of guidance is general, and covers everything that exists in the universe -- minerals, plants, animals etc. It would surprise many to hear of guidance in relation to minerals. But the Holy Qur'ān makes it quite clear that all forms of existents in the universe, and every particle of dust possesses life, sensitivity, and even consciousness and understanding in its own degree and according to its own sphere of existence. Some of these existents possess more of this essence than others, and some less. Hence, those who have very little of it are considered to be inanimate and devoid of consciousness. The *Shari'ah* too has recognized this difference, and such creatures have not been made to bear the obligation of observing the injunctions of Allah. The creatures which show obvious signs of life but not those of consciousness and reason are considered to be living, but not rational; whereas, creatures showing the signs of consciousness and reason, along with those of life, are called rational beings. Because of these differences in the degrees of consciousness, men and jinn alone, of all the existents in the universe, have been made subservient to the

injunctions of the *Shari'ah* and accountable for their actions, for they alone have the necessary consciousness and understanding. But, it does not mean that other creatures or existents are totally devoid of life or sensitivity, or of consciousness and understanding. The Holy Qur'an is very explicit on this point:

وَإِنْ مِنْ شَيْءٍ إِلَّا يُسَبِّحُ بِحَمْدِهِ وَلَكِنْ لَا تَفْقَهُونَ تَسْبِيحَهُمْ

Nothing exists that does not celebrate His praise, but you do not understand their (mode of) praising. (17:44)

أَلَمْ تَرَ أَنَّ اللَّهَ يُسَبِّحُ لَهُ مِنْ فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَالطَّيْرُ طَبَّتْ كُلُّ قَدِّ عِلْمٍ صَلَاتَهُ وَتُسَبِّحُهُ وَاللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ بِمَا يَفْعَلُونَ ۝

Have you not seen that everything in the heavens and the earth proclaims Allah's purity, and the birds too that spread their wings? Each of them knows its prayer and its (mode of) praising. And Allah is aware of what they do. (24:41)

Evidently, one cannot extol and praise Allah without knowing Allah. It is equally evident that knowing Allah is the highest form of knowledge possible, and such a knowledge cannot be gained unless one possesses consciousness and understanding. These verses, therefore, show that everything that exists in the universe possesses life, sensitivity, understanding and consciousness, though it may not always be apparent to the ordinary observer -- a truth which has been endorsed by all the great religions, by certain ancient philosophers, and lately even by experimental science.

This, then, is the first degree of guidance which is common to minerals, plants, animals, men, jinns and all the forms of creation. The Holy Qur'an speaks of this primary and general guidance in these words:

قَالَ رَبُّنَا الَّذِي أَعْطَى كُلَّ شَيْءٍ خَلْقَهُ ثُمَّ هَدَى

He gave to everything its distinctive form, and then guided it. (20:50)

Or, as we find in another Surah:

سَبِّحْ اسْمَ رَبِّكَ الْأَعْلَى ۝ الَّذِي خَلَقَ فَسَوَّى ۝ وَالَّذِي قَدَّرَ فَهَدَى ۝

Celebrate the name of your Lord, the Most High, Who has

created all things, well proportioned them, and Who has determined and guided them. (87:1-2)

That is to say, Allah has given every creature a particular nature and function, and guided it in a way which should correspond to its station in the scheme of things. Thanks to this general guidance, everything in the universe is performing its allotted function with such marvellous efficiency. For example, it is the ears that hear a sound and not the eyes or the nose. Similarly, the nose smells but cannot see; the eyes see but cannot smell. In short:

إِنْ كُلُّ مَنْ فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ إِلَّا آتَى الرَّحْمَنِ عَبْدًا ۝

There is nothing in the heavens and the earth but comes to the All-Merciful as a servant. (19:93)

The Second Degree of Guidance

Unlike the first, the second degree of guidance is not general but particular. It is limited to those creatures which are considered to be rational, that is, men and jinns. This kind of guidance comes to every man through prophets and revealed books. Some accept this guidance, and become believers (*Muslims*): some reject it and become disbelievers (*Kāfirs*).

The Third Degree of guidance

The third degree of guidance is still more particular, being special to true believers (*Mu'minin*) and the God-fearing (*Muttaqin*). Like the first degree, the third kind of guidance too descends directly to the individual from Allah, and it is called, *Tawfiq*. That is to say, Allah's grace provides a man with internal and external means and circumstances which should make it easy, and even pleasant for him to accept and act upon the guidance of the Holy Qur'an, and difficult to ignore or oppose it. The scope of the third degree of guidance is limitless, and its levels indefinite.⁵ Here is the sphere in which man, not only can, but is required to make a progress in the veritable sense of the term. The agency of this progress is the performance of virtuous

5. Contrary to all the modern fictions about man's Evolution or Perfectibility or Progress which may pass for sound philosophy or science.

deeds⁶. All increase in virtuous deeds brings with it an increase in divine guidance. The Holy Qur'an itself gives us the promise of such increase:

وَالَّذِينَ اهْتَدَوْا زَادَهُمْ هُدًى

As for those who follow the straight path, Allah will increase their guidance. (47:17)

وَمَنْ يُؤْمِنْ بِاللَّهِ يَهْدِ قَلْبَهُ

And whoever believes in Allah, He guides his heart. (64:11)

الَّذِينَ جَاهَدُوا فِينَا لَنَهْدِيَنَّهُمْ سُبُلَنَا

Those who strive for (literally, 'in') Us, We will surely guide them in Our paths. (29:69)

It is in this field of progress that we see even the greatest prophets and men of Allah striving, and it is an increase in divine guidance and help that they keep seeking to their last breath.

A Cumulative view of guidance

Keeping in mind the three distinct degrees of guidance, one can easily see that guidance is a thing which everyone does possess in some way, and yet no one, not even the greatest, can do without wishing to attain more of its advanced and higher stages. Hence, of all the prayers man can address to Allah, the most important is the prayer for guidance, which has been taught to us in the very first Sūrah of the Holy Qur'an; and this prayer is as necessary for the greatest of prophets and men of Allah as for an ordinary Muslim. That is why the Sūrah Al-Faṭḥ (Victory), in enumerating the material and spiritual benefits of the conquest of Makkah in the last days of the Holy Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم, also says: *وَيَهْدِيكُمْ صِرَاطًا مُسْتَقِيمًا* (and to guide you on the straight path) (48:20). When these verses were revealed, the Holy Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم had already received guidance and was a source of guidance for others. The good tidings of receiving guidance can, in this situation, have only one meaning that he attained some very high station of guidance at the time.

Guidance: Some notes of caution

In concluding this discussion about the different implications of

6. As defined, it goes without saying, by the *Shari'ah* and not by individual or collective fancy, or by custom and habits, or by the fads or fashions of the day.

'guidance' (*Hidāyah*), we repeat points that would help the reader of the Holy Qur'an avoid certain confusions and errors:

1. The Holy Qur'an sometimes speaks of divine guidance as being general and common to believers and non-believers, in fact to all creatures, and sometimes makes it out to be particular and special to the God-fearing. So, the unwary may be led to sense a contradiction here. But once it is understood that one degree of guidance is common to all, whereas another degree is limited to particular cases, the doubt and confusion readily resolves itself.

2. On the one hand, the Holy Qur'an reminds us again and again that Allah does not grant guidance to the unjust and the unrighteous; on the other hand, it repeatedly declares that Allah guides all. The misunderstanding which may arise here is also dispelled by a knowledge of the degrees of guidance. Now we can easily see that the general guidance is given to all without any distinction, but the third and very special degree of guidance is not granted to the unjust and the unrighteous.

3. The first and the third degrees of guidance pertain to a direct act of divine grace, and no prophet can have anything to do with it, for the function of the prophets is related only to the second degree.

Whenever the Holy Qur'an speaks of Prophets عليهم السلام as guides, it is always referring to this second degree, and to it alone. On the other hand, when the Holy Qur'an, addressing the noble Prophet ﷺ, says: *إِنَّكَ لَا تَهْدِي مَنْ أَحْبَبْتَ* (You cannot guide whom you please) (28:56), it is the third degree of guidance which is intended, that is to say, it is neither the function of a prophet nor is it in his power to provide *tawfiq* to anyone, in other words, to make it easy for anyone to accept guidance. ⁷

7. Translator's Note: In this context one should not overlook the popularity enjoyed in the West, since the rise of Protestantism, by the notion of a personal relationship with God on the part of the individual. This notion has in its turn produced a diffused yet very effective conviction that ethics can be made independent of religion, that the external or legislative aspect of religion is of no account, that prescribed rites are irrelevant to the so-called 'religious experience', and more monstrously still, that doctrines can be dispensed with altogether -- all of which betrays a total incomprehension of what constitutes a religion. The tendency has, in fact, begun to infect some of the modernist interpreters of Islam in one way or another, all of whom claim to be fulfilling the 'needs of the present age'. Attempts have been made even to exploit this notion for ulterior motives.

To sum up, the Qur'anic prayer *إِهْدِنَا الصِّرَاطَ الْمُسْتَقِيمَ* (guide us in the straight path) is most comprehensive, and certainly, one of the most important prayers taught to man. No member of the human family can claim not to need it. No success, no prosperity in this or in the other world can really come without being on the straight path. Particularly so, for man lost in the anxieties of mortal life, the prayer for the straight path is an elixir, though people do not realize it.

Which 'path' is 'straight'?

Now, to come to the meaning of the 'straight path', it is the path which has no turns and twists. The term signifies the particular way of Faith which equally avoids the two extremes of excess and deficiency. One who follows the straight path would, in matters of doctrine and practice both, neither go beyond the limits nor fall short of them.

The last two verses of the Sūrah Al-Fāṭiḥah define and identify that 'straight path', something man has been prompted to pray for immediately earlier. The verse says: *صِرَاطَ الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ* (The path of those on whom You have bestowed Your grace). As to who these people are, another verse of the Holy Qur'ān gives us details in the following words:

الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِمْ مِنَ النَّبِيِّينَ وَالصِّدِّيقِينَ وَالشُّهَدَاءِ وَالصَّالِحِينَ

Those whom Allah has blessed, namely, the prophets, the *Siddiqin*, the *Shuhada'*, and the righteous. (4:69)

Continued In persuading the Muslim countries to look upon themselves as 'the eastern-most part of the West', the London *ECONOMIST* argues that Islam 'also implies a one-to-one relationship between the believer and the God he believes in, a direct contact without intermediary and in this relationship, in which a single God speaks directly to the core of a single man, is the basis of individualism. The Protestant ethic is grounded on precisely the same concept.' (May 17-23, 1975, page 82 of the Special Survey).

In the light of the discussion regarding the three degrees of guidance, it should not be difficult to see that the direct contact with God without intermediary pertains only to the first and third degrees, and not the second degree where the mediation of the prophets is indispensable. To attain the third degree may be necessary for making a spiritual progress, but Islam, or for that matter any authentic religion, is born out of the second degree of guidance. One cannot, indeed, enjoy the benefits of the third degree without having accepted the guidance of the second degree -- or, to use the Islamic terminology, without following the *Shari'ah*.