

Spiritual Culture in Islam

Every religion and every ideology have in every age its great exponents who personify in distinguished manner the cause they cherish and uphold and whose labours for that cause form landmark in human history. One such great personality of recent times was His Eminence Maulana Shah Muhammad Abdul Aleem Siddiqui Al-Qaderi (R.A.). Born in India, his noble soul soared beyond the limitations of territory and race. Imbibing Islamic as well as Western education, he rose to combine the best in ancient and modern disciplines and became a distinguished exponent of the message orthodox Islam to modern humanity. With these great qualities, he travelled continuous for forty years from town to town, country to country and continent to continent, until his labours of love for the spiritual reform and uplift of humanity covered a major part of the world. Millions of human souls belonging to diverse races and nationalities in Asia, Africa; Europe and America received spiritual blessings through his dynamic and refulgent personality and numerous Islamic missionary societies, mosque schools, hospitals, libraries, infirmaries, orphanages and periodicals sprang up in the wake of his immortal missionary labours. He worked with single-minded devotion for the cause of Islam and humanity until his noble soul returned to Allah's Mercy in Medina in 1954.

The last wish expressed by one of the greatest philosophers of Greece, Aristotle, was: "O Man know thy self. He commanded his students to engrave these words on the walls of his schoolroom. It is obvious, therefore, that to know the reality of man was so important and at the same time so difficult a task that such a great intellectual genius devoted a whole life-time to the study of the problem but in the end found it impossible to arrive at any positive and clear idea and had, therefore, to adopt that course in the hope that someone from amongst the posterity might eventually succeed.

Commonsense, which is the starting point of all philosophy, is unanimously agreed that a human being is composed of two distinct constituents, the body, and the soul. There is such an affinity, such close relationship, between the two that we call this being a "person" only so long as the soul remains with the body; no sooner does that state obtain when it is realized that it has left the body, the term "person" ceases to be applied to it. However, despite there being such a correspondence between the two, no satisfactory explanation regarding the real nature of the soul has been so far placed before the world by the representatives of scientific thought.

The physiologists have left no stone unturned in exploring the body thoroughly. They have not only carefully observed the bones, the muscles, the nerves and the glands and have subjected even the tiniest parts to their lancets, but they have succeeded in photographing the complete human organism by means of the Xray. These researches and investigations have enabled them to establish the presence of life-germs in the blood. Accordingly, they have come to the conclusion that what we call life is due to the hormones, the corpuscles which carry the oxygen, taking it up from the air into the lungs and passing it on to the body-cells. But the discovery, however important it might be regard from the scientific point of view, does not carry far enough. The mystery of the soul remains unsolved.

Closely connected with physiology is the science of psychology. It deals with the mental phenomena and processes and has therefore a far greater than any other science for acting as our guide in solving the problem of the soul. But there again, we meet with nothing, which is conclusive and positive. The earlier exponents of modern philosophy, even the nineteenth century psychologists, felt satisfied with such vague definitions as this: "the soul is a plurality of psychical experiences comprehended into the unity of consciousness in a manner not further definable. We know nothing whatever of a substance outside of, behind, or under the ideas and feelings". (Paulsen). But the twentieth century has witnessed a more aggressive attitude among the psychologists. Consequently, there have cropped up several school of sciences, each one claiming infallibility and finality in method for its own self. But behind the smoke-screen of all their grand terminology, the naked fact stands that, in spite of the valuable contribution which they have made to human knowledge in many ways, they are unable to have penetrated behind the Face-view of the workings of the soul. They have still to traverse many a circuitous and lengthy path, they can hope of attaining a clear idea even of the right method of approach, not to speak of the formulation of exact conclusions and the denial or affirmation of the existence of the soul. In this connection, we may listen with advantage to the pertinent remarks of Dr. Robert S. Woodworth, an American historian of psychology. He says in his *Contemporary Schools of Psychology* (p. 2):

"The past thirty years have been remarkably productive of new movements in psychology, with result that we now see the curious phenomenon of schools differing radically from one another in their ideas as to what psychology should be doing how it should go to work. These schools remind one of schools of philosophy and are scarcely to be paralleled at present in the other natural sciences. Perhaps their existence in contemporary psychology sign of the youth of our science and of the vast number of unexplored possibilities that we have still examine.....".

However, it would be utterly wrong to infer because our scientists and philosophers have so far failed to find out the reality of the soul empirically, there has been none who has succeeded. The fact is that, to quote a Persian saying: "Everyone has been assigned a particular function and has been accordingly endowed with the requisite aptitude".

A logician may be a master of the art of controversy and fully conversant with the technique of debates. But that will not qualify him for analyzing the properties of elements; for, that is the task of the chemist. Again, a botanist may know every possible thing about plants, but surely, he can have no say in the sphere of physiology. Similarly, the right of speaking authoritatively on the problems relating to the soul goes to those who have specialized in what may be called spiritual science, both theoretically and practically. What I propose to do, therefore, at the present occasion is to put forward some important and basic facts in connection with the subject under discussion, in the light of the findings of these specialists, and to treat those facts in such a simple and plain language that even people of ordinary intelligence and education may be able to grasp them. I would also like to lay a greater emphasis on the practical aspect of the subject, and that because I believe in practice and not in idle theorization.

Nature has allotted distinctly defined functions to all the organs of the body, which they cannot interchange with each other. For instance, the eyes can see and not hear; the ears can listen and not look; the tongue can taste and speak but not smell. In the same way, the brain can know and understand material objects and phenomena only, and this because its constitution is through and through of a material (physical) character. If, however, an idea of something immaterial (nonphysical) enters its orbit, it is explainable and understandable only through analogies drawn from material things, because its real nature must necessarily be beyond its scope.

What about the knowledge of the soul, then? We saw just now that the physiologists have ransacked the whole body, but they could not trace it in any material substance to which they could assign the name of the soul. But we know also that a belief in the existence of the soul is held universally by mankind, in one form or the other, even though none can claim to be able to see it, or touch it, or feel it through the physical senses. The natural conclusion to which these two facts, when viewed together, lead us is not that the soul does not exist, but that it is something immaterial, something above and beyond physical reality. That being the case, it becomes evident that a knowledge relating to the soul cannot be acquired through material or physical means. On the other hand, we must fall back upon the soul itself and seek enlightenment from it.

Now, what course should we adopt to attain this end? Or, in other words: what is the way of spiritual illumination, of spiritual knowledge? The way is open and clear. Just as schools, accurately planned courses of study, and teachers are necessary for training our intellect, ultimately with a view to acquire the knowledge of the physical reality, it is similarly indispensable to have a spiritual teacher for the attainment of spiritual knowledge.

Before, however, we proceed in our search to locate such a spiritual school, etc., let me refer to an important connected fact, and it is this:

Just as the scientists and philosophers, after making a comprehensive study of all the visible and experienceable aspects of life, have even affirmed that behind the intricate mechanism of the complex machinery that goes to make a human being, there is some intangible force or energy that is called soul, they have similarly found it impossible not to postulate an Ultimate Principle behind the universe in some form or the other. And not only that. Several eminent scientists of our days, like Eddington, White-head and James Jeans have come forward to affirm confidently that there is some changeless eternal Reality behind the everchanging experiences of this mortal life, some Being who is solely responsible for the creation of the universe and all that it implies.

One of the distinguished living scientists is Dr. Michael Pupin. He is the President of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, a Professor of Electro-mechanics at the Columbia University, and an inventor of high standing. In an article, which appeared in the American Magazine for September 1927, he wrote:

"Wherever science has explored the universe, it has found it to be a manifestation of a co-coordinating principle. It leaves us no escape from the conclusion that at the back of everything there is a definite guiding principle, which leads from chaos to cosmos. We are faced with two alternatives. We can either believe that cosmos, the beautiful law and order, is simply the result of haphazard happening; or, that it is the result of a definite intelligence. Now which are you, as an intelligent being, going to choose?

"Personally, I choose to believe in the co-coordinating principle, the Divine Intelligence, Why? Because it is simpler. It is more intelligible. It harmonizes with my whole experience. The theory that intelligent beings like ourselves, or intelligent processes like the movements of the stars, are the outcome of unintelligent, haphazard happening, is beyond my understanding. And why should I accept such a theory when I observe the evidence of a direct Intelligence every day?

"When you see the stars, each moving in its own pathway, or see a seed grow after a definite plan into a tree, or see a baby develop into a full-grown, self-directing human individual, can you conceive of all that taking place as the result of haphazard happening? Well, I cannot. It seems obvious that there is some directing Intelligence behind all things. And not a single discovery that science has made tends in the least to contradict this innate feeling that a definite Intelligence is at the back of everything. Indeed, the more deeply science penetrates the laws of the universe, the more it leads up to a belief in an Intelligent Divinity."

The question now arises as to who and what this Being is, whom the scientists and philosophers identify with the First Cause or the Ultimate Principle, and whom in religious terminology we know as God, the Creator of the universe and the Fountain-head of all life and light and perfection?

In connection with this query also we find ourselves compelled to adopt the same line of approach as the one relating to the reality of the soul. It is admitted that there is some Being behind the total physical reality. It is also admitted that no physical experience of Him has been possible in spite of carrying out the most profound investigations and searchings' with the help of all those material means with which our latest advances in the fields of the natural sciences have equipped us. The only inevitable conclusion, then at which we can arrive in the light of these two facts is that the Being in question is also immaterial like the soul and an approach to Him is possible only through means other than material or physical.

When we place these two conclusions side by side, it becomes clear to us that this Being, the First Cause or God, and the soul possess a similarity in one respect, which is that they both are non-physical in their natures. Hence the school that instructs us about Him must also enable us to get a clue to the true nature of the soul. And such a school, I may be allowed to say, is the school of Faith of Religion.