



The Light — U.K. edition

June 2008

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Assalamu alaikum: Our next meeting —

Date: **Sunday 1st June 2008**

Time: **3.00 p.m.**

Speaker: **Mr Mustaq Ali**

Topic: **Islamic influence in modern
medicine**

Regular activities:

Darus-i Quran and Hadith:

Every Friday at 2.30 p.m.

Meetings of the Executive:

First Sunday of every month at 2.00 p.m.

Meeting of the Jama'at:

First Sunday of every month at 3.00 p.m.

The Role of the Ahmadiyya Movement in the Promotion of Interfaith Dialogue

*Talk at Darus Salaam, London,
Sunday 2nd March 2008*

by Dr Jawad Ahmad

The subject for today is very vast and has various facets touching on different religious and social aspects of present-day society. And therefore a lot can be said and quoted while dealing with each aspect of the subject. My knowledge is mostly based on what I hear from the talks of our elders or learn through articles in newspapers or by listening to talks on the radio and TV. That is why when I sit down to write on such a serious subject like this, a host of ideas converge on my mind and then I need someone to help me in providing authentic material to substantiate it.

Two important aspects of the subject which have come to my mind are: What is Islam's attitude towards other faiths and their followers,

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and what is the proper way suggested by the Quran and the practice of the Holy Prophet to promote inter-faith dialogue and understanding. The topic of my talk should not give the wrong impression that the Ahmadiyya Movement has innovated something new to foster inter-faith relationship which has no basis in the Holy Book of Islam and the precept of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (*saw*). May I also clear the prevalent misconception that the Founder of the Ahmadiyya Movement, Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, initiated an all out attack against Christianity to justify his own claim to be the Promised Messiah, and that his interpretation of the signs and prophecies of the Last Age are far-fetched and have been misinterpreted to suit the Founder's claims. It is not the occasion nor the time permits me to deal with this criticism against the Founder of the Ahmadiyya Movement. People interested to know the truth are recommended to

read *The Second Coming of Jesus* by Hazrat Maulana Muhammad Ali.

The well-known verse of the Holy Quran promoting inter-faith dialogue is verse 64 of Chapter *The Family of Amran*, which I recited at the start. Its English rendering is:

“Say, O Muhammad, to the People of the Book: Come to an equitable word between us and you, that we shall serve none but Allah, and that we shall not associate anything with Him, and that some of us shall not take others for lords besides Allah. But if they turn away, then say: Bear witness, we are Muslims.” (3:64)

It may be pointed out that the chapter *The Family of Amran* starts with a discussion of the Christian doctrines in particular. The persons addressed in particular in this verse are the members of the Christian deputation from Najran that came in the 10th year of Hijrah. It consisted of sixty men and was headed by Abdul Masih, the chief of the Najran Christians. The members of the deputation were lodged in the Prophet’s Mosque and were even allowed to hold their prayers in it.

Here I would like to give details of the discussion held between the deputation and the Holy Prophet Muhammad (saw). It will give you an idea of the contents of the discussion and the way the Holy Prophet conducted the dialogue and what happened at the conclusion of their meeting.

The leader of the Deputation opened the discussion and enquired from the Holy Prophet (saw): “What do you think of our Lord (*Sahib*)?”

The Messenger of God enquired: “Who is your Lord?”

They replied: “Isa. Do you take him to be a servant of God?”

The Messenger of God said: “Yes”.

They then asked: “Have you seen any one like him, or have you been informed of a man like him? He is God because he had no father, he raised the dead, he gave information of the unseen, he cured lepers and made birds from clay. Consider this superiority. Do you still call him a servant of God?”

The Holy Prophet did not answer at once, for at that very moment came the Divine revelation, and one of the verses revealed was:

“Surely the likeness of Jesus is with Allah as the likeness of Adam; He created him

from dust. Then said, Be, and he was.” (3:60)

The discussion goes further:

They questioned: “Who was his father?”

The Messenger of God replied: “Don’t you know that no child is born but has a likeness to its father in form and appearance?”

They said: “Yes, we know”.

The Messenger of God said: “Don’t you know that our God is alive and will never die and Jesus had to die?”

They said: “Yes, we know”.

The Messenger of God questioned: “Was Jesus possessed of any of these powers?”

They replied: “No.”

The Messenger of God then asked: “Did Jesus know of any of these things except those of which God gave him knowledge?”

They answered: “No”.

The Messenger of God said: “Don’t you know that Our God neither eats, nor drinks, nor does He answer the calls of nature?”

They said, “Yes, we know”.

Then said the Messenger of God: “Don’t you know that Jesus was conceived by a woman just as any other woman conceives a child, he was then reared up like other children, then used to eat and drink and answer the calls of nature like other human beings?”

They said: “Yes, we know”.

The Messenger of God then enquired: “How can the Messiah be the One you take him to be (i.e. God)?”

The narrator Rabi’ further states that the Christians could not reply to this question, but would not agree either and insisted on their false belief. After having argued the question fully, and finding them still insisting in their false belief in the deity of Jesus, the Holy Prophet (saw) in accordance with the Divine revelation invited them to pray earnestly that the curse of Allah might overtake the party that insisted on falsehood.

The Christians wanted time to consider the challenge. So on the next day Abdul Masih and two of his companions informed the Holy Prophet (saw) that they had decided not to accept it, and that they will not pray against him nor invite him to pray against them. Thereupon an agreement was

entered into whereby they were given guarantee to practice their religion freely. The text of this agreement has been preserved in a book called *Political Agreements* compiled by Dr. M. Hamidullah, pp. 175–179, published by Darul Nafaais, Beirut.

The well-known critic of Islam of the 19th century, Sir William Muir, made the following comments about this Agreement:

“Their authority and rights shall not be interfered with, nor anything that is customary amongst them, so long as they conduct themselves peaceably and uprightly.”

The verse 64 of Ch. *The Family of Amran* lays down the basis of the study of comparative religion. Anyone who studies religious literature on a wide scale will find that the basic doctrines of Islam are the greatest common measure of the truth contained in different religions of the world. The Quran states this in the following verse:

“A Messenger from Allah, reciting pure pages, wherein are all right books” (98:3).

The doctrine of Unity as taught by Islam affords a universal truth. All higher religions start on the basis of Divine Unity which is thus common to all, but then each religious system has its peculiarities unknown to all others. Islam alone is free from all these additions to the basic doctrine, and it preaches Unity in its simplest form and rejects all additions.

The purpose of giving details of the discussion held with the Christian deputation, as mentioned earlier, is to show how an inter-faith dialogue should be conducted in a logical and conducive manner as outlined by the Holy Quran and practised by the Holy Prophet (saw).

It is a historical fact that, when the agreement was negotiated with the Christians of Najran, the Holy Prophet was in a dominant position. Moreover, the Christian deputation had a long discussion and failed to reply to the questions of the Holy Prophet, even then the Holy Prophet signed an agreement granting them complete religious and cultural freedom. So this agreement can rightly be considered as the first and paramount charter of religious freedom in the history of religions ever granted to a religious minority by a dominant power.

It will be interesting to mention here that in his recent lecture the Archbishop of Canterbury of the Church of England referred to “the foundation of the Pakistani state of Pakistan under Jinnah as “the

clearest articulation” of the “universal claims of the Quran.”

It reminds me of the historic words of Mr. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, when as the first Governor-General of the newly born state of Pakistan, he said:

“You may belong to any religion, caste or creed, that has nothing to do with the business of the state. In due course of time, Hindus will cease to be Hindus and Muslims will cease to be Muslims, not in the religious sense, because that is the personal faith of each individual, but in the political sense as citizens of the state.”

Coming back to the subject of inter-faith dialogue, you must have noticed that the Holy Prophet (saw), while discussing with the Christian deputation, was all the time inductive in his arguments. It means that he always referred to or presented to them a fact which they were aware of and they had no alternative but to reply in the affirmative. The same method has been pertinently adopted by the Holy Quran. In order to explain certain spiritual phenomena, it refers to the creation of man and his limited life on this earth, the earth and its vegetation, the universe and huge planets moving in it, the creatures living at the bottom of the sea or huge ships sailing over the waves of the sea carrying thousands of tons of provision for the sustenance of human beings living in far fetched countries. Thus it appeals to human understanding, observation and sense of deduction.

Allah refers to the Quran as full of wisdom in 36:2. Again Allah enjoins man to argue with people with wisdom and goodly exhortation:

“Call to the way of thy Lord with wisdom and goodly exhortation, and argue with them in the best manner. Surely thy Lord knows best him who strays from His path, and He knows best those who go aright” (16:125).

Another very important basis provided by the Quran for promoting inter-faith dialogue is that it is guardian of previous scriptures verifying pristine truths originally revealed therein and also corrects what has been added to them. The Quran says:

“And We have revealed to you the Book with the truth, verifying that which is before it of the Book and a guardian over it, so judge between them by what Allah has revealed, and follow not their low desires (turning away) from the truth that

has come to thee. For every one of you We appointed a law and a way” (5:48).

In this verse the Quran is called *muhammadin* or a guardian over all previous revelation, thus showing that whatever was of permanent value in the previous scriptures has been preserved in the Quran. The previous books contained a light and guidance for the people for whom they were meant, and they were commanded to judge by those books, but the Quran is now the Book which judges all truth, wherever it may have been, and therefore is the only Book which should be followed. As we find a somewhat similar statement given in the following verse of the Quran:

“We certainly sent messengers to nations before you... and We have not revealed to you the Book except that you may make clear to them that in which they differ.” (16:63–64)

As we have already seen, in the discussion with the Christian deputation from Najran the Holy Prophet (saw) followed the direction of the Quran appealing to the commonalities and then drawing logical conclusions which they could not deny. Similarly the founder of the Ahmadiyya Movement followed the same pattern and challenged the opponents of Islam to present from their own respective scriptures something better and superior to what has been revealed in the Quran.

In the late 19th century the British Raj was ruling the Indo-Pak subcontinent and greater part of Middle East and Africa. In a bid to perpetuate their rule, they organised missionary network throughout the country with huge man power and financial support. To have a glimpse of the British plan we quote some extracts from the reports published about the alleged success of their missionary activities.

The Prime Minister of England, Lord Palmerston, said:

“I believe we are all united in our purpose. It is not only our duty, but our interest is related to it also, that we should spread the preaching of Christianity as far as possible, and take it to every corner of India”.¹

A Report of the British Legislature, the House of Commons, published in 1873, said:

“The Government commends the noble efforts of 600 missionaries with feelings of deep gratitude. Their unsoiled example

and dedicated services are breathing a new spirit into the old lives of countless colonies of British subjects, and making them better men and preparing them to be the better citizens of this great empire in which they live.”²

The well-known missionary John Henry Burrows said in a lecture:

“Now I come to the daily increasing progress of Christianity in Islamic countries. As a result of this progress, today if the splendour of the Cross is casting its light in Lebanon, on the other side the mountain tops in Persia and the waters of Bosphorus are glittering with its brilliance. This state of affairs is a forerunner of the coming revolution when the cities of Cairo, Damascus, and Tehran will be populated by servants of the Lord Jesus Christ, till, piercing the silence of the Arabian desert, the splendour of the cross reaches even there. At that time, the Lord Jesus, through his servants, shall enter the City of Mecca and the sacred Ka’ba, and at last this truth shall be proclaimed from there that ‘eternal life is to know the one God and Jesus whom He sent’”.³

This was the situation when Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, all alone in the far off village of Qadian, having no formal education in any school or college and without any facilities of communication, set out on a stupendous task to face the religious crusade against the mighty empire of the time over which the sun never set. His greatest weapon of defence was the Quran and the Divine support. Besides writing scores of books, holding debates and facing cases maliciously initiated against him in the courts of law, he undauntedly tried to establish the truth of the Quran by holding inter-faith conferences to promote inter-faith understanding, and to bring peace and harmony among communities belonging to different religions.

Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, founder of the Ahmadiyya Movement, spent his whole life to uphold the honour and truth of Islam and its Holy Prophet (saw) and was sad and grieved at the foul and filthy language used by the opponents of Islam while criticising the teachings of the Quran and tarnishing the unblemished character of the Holy Prophet (saw). He always tried to find ways and

1. *The Missions*, Robert Clark, p. 234.

2. *History of Protestant Missions* by A. M. Shering, London.

3. Burrows Lectures, p. 42.

means to bring understanding between different religious communities. He had been inviting attention of leading scholars of various religions and even the British Government to enact a law whereby mud-slinging and maligning of founders of various religions should be stopped. He emphasised the need to adopt decency and tolerance and that advocates of each religion should try to convince others by bringing out noble ideas and behaviour from their respective scriptures.

When Christian priests and Arya pundits crossed all limits of decency and their abuses and baseless accusations became unbearable and as a result violent reaction became imminent, Hazrat Mirza Sahib wrote a detailed petition entitled: "Notice addressed to Arya pundits, Christian Priests and leading religious Opponents". In this Notice he put down suggestions and rules of conduct to be observed in debates and suggested that only those books and writings should be referred to which are considered as authentic in each religion. So that speakers and writers should not resort to sources which are either unauthentic or are authors' own views and interpretation. For instance for the Muslims, the Holy Quran, for Christians the Bible, for Hindus the Vedas, for Jews the Torah and for Sikhs the Granth Sahib are considered as revealed books. He took great pains to get signatures of thousands of people belonging to all these religions on this Petition and sent it to the Government on 22nd September 1895. Though no notice was taken at that time but many years later the Blasphemy Act was passed in India.

Again he repeated his demand to put a check on malicious publications by writing another memorandum to the Governor of Punjab on 4th May 1898. This time it was regarding a filthy publication written by a Christian Dr. Ahmad Shah maligning the noble character of the wives of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (saw). It was distributed freely among the Muslims. It caused so much distress and uproar among the Muslims that Anjuman Himayat-i Islam, Lahore, one of the largest Muslim organisations, had to write a memorandum to the Government of Punjab to ban the book. But Hazrat Mirza Sahib took a different stand on this issue. He wrote that as the book had already been distributed among the people and malicious information had been circulated, therefore it was essential that a proper reply to it should be published to clarify the misconceptions that the book had created in people's minds.

Hazrat Mirza Sahib was very keen that the Government should take stringent measures to stop filthy and baseless speeches and writings. He was

also of the strong view that inter-faith meetings should be organised where scholars from various religions should present beauties from their respective religions which will ultimately help to create mutual understanding, harmony and respect for each other. Luckily a well-known Hindu scholar, Swami Shogan Chandra, who became grieved to see the ills of society and the religious disputes prevalent among different groups creating hatred, was trying to find the remedy for the bickering between different societies. He happened to visit Hazrat Mirza Sahib in Qadian to find his views on certain questions in this regard which were baffling his mind. The Swami was impressed by his deep knowledge about various religions and his keen interest to promote inter-faith dialogue and apprised him of his efforts in this regard. He also told him that he had already organised one such inter-faith meeting in Ajmer in 1892. Thus his meeting with Hazrat Mirza Sahib proved fruitful and suggestions and plan to hold another inter-faith conference were agreed upon. Hazrat Mirza Sahib not only encouraged him but promised to participate in the forthcoming conference. He also agreed to give him moral and financial support. So a preliminary public notification about this conference was printed for him in Qadian. He also deputed one of his disciples to accompany him to help him in organising and publicising the conference.

Due to efforts of the learned Swami Chandra, representatives of Sanatan Dharam, Arya Samaj, Hinduism, Brahm Samaj, Theosophical Society, Religion of Harmony, Christianity and Sikhism and some leading Muslim religious scholars agreed to attend the Conference at Lahore in December 1896. Among the Muslim speakers, besides Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, there were Maulana Muhammad Husain Batalvi and Maulvi Sanaullah, leading religious scholars of Ahl-i Sunnat and also bitter opponents of the Ahmadiyya Movement. But by the grace of Allah, from the remarks of the moderators of the management committee and reports of the contemporary newspapers, it was evident that people very much liked the address given by the founder of the Ahmadiyya Movement and were spellbound throughout its delivery.

I would like to quote just one review out of many published in the daily and monthly journals of India. Journal Wigohar Asafi of Calcutta in its issue dated 24th January 1897 writes:

"If the article of Hazrat Mirza Sahib would not have been there, the Muslims would certainly have faced extreme humiliation

and disgrace in front of people of other religions. But God's powerful hand saved the sacred religion of Islam from falling down. And because of this article it achieved such a commanding victory that supporters as well as opponents spontaneously in response to their true inner enthusiasm declared that 'the article has superseded all, it has superseded all'."

And even the great Russian philosopher, author and novelist, Count Leo Tolstoy (1823–1910), appreciated its two articles in these words:

"I approve very much two articles, 'How to get rid of sin' and 'the life to come'. The idea is very profound and very true."

The organisers while publishing a comprehensive report of this Great Conference of Religions considered it as the "most Memorable Event of the 19th Century." Hazrat Mirza Sahib in his introductory remarks before presenting his marvellous lecture entitled *Philosophy of the Teachings of Islam* in Lahore in December 1896, wrote the following:

"In this auspicious meeting, which has been convened with the object that the advocates of the different religious systems should, so far as the limits of the questions set allow, set forth the beauties of their respective religions, I, as an advocate of the faith of Islam, will dwell upon its beauties. Before I start with the proper object, I take leave to state that all my assertions and arguments shall be based upon and drawn from the Holy Quran. I deem it a matter of the first importance that every body, who believes in any sacred scripture as the revealed Word of God, should so set limits to his advocacy of the religion he supports as not to go out of the holy book or depend upon arguments other than those which the book furnishes. For, if he does not observe this rule, he, as a matter of fact, makes and advances a new book and not the one which he professes to support. Therefore, as it is my object to show the beauties of the Quran and to establish its exclusive excellence over all other books, I shall bind myself by the rule above stated and depend solely upon the Quran for every assertion and argument, stating only that which is contained in it in plain words, or what may be reasonably inferred from its words. As the other gentlemen are also expected to set limits to their discourses by

this reasonable rule, there will be a good opportunity for judicious minds to form a judgement as to the comparative value of the different books claimed to be revealed. For the same reason, I shall avoid all reference to the authorities containing the reported words of the Holy Prophet and not go outside the Word of God as revealed in the Quran." (pp. 1, 2)

In order to hold such deliberations on a regular basis, the Founder of the Ahmadiyya Movement wrote a Notification dated 28th May, 1900 about the *Minarat-ul-Masih* (Minaret of the Messiah) which was proposed to be constructed in Qadian. He concluded it with the following note:

"O my friends! I would like to draw your attention to a very important issue. My intention in building this minaret also involves that within the minaret there should be a circular room or some sort of a hall which can accommodate at least 100 people and that it should be used for delivering sermons and religious lectures. It is my intention that such religious meetings in this hall should be held once or twice a year. And in such meetings any Muslim, Hindu, Arya, Sikh or Christian can describe the beauties of his religion. But the condition is that no one shall attack the other religions. Every one will be allowed to say any thing in support of his religious belief within the norms of decency."

In 1902 Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad undertook yet another very significant step for the promotion of inter-faith awareness and understanding. It was the publication of a monthly in English viz. *The Review of Religions*. Its first editor was Maulana Muhammad Ali. To manage this project a society had already been formed by the Founder in March 1901 under the name of Anjuman Isha'at-i Islam.

Here are some views of non-Muslim scholars about this Journal.

A prolific writer and critic of the Ahmadiyya Movement, Mr. H. A. Walter in his book, *The Ahmadiyya Movement: The Religious Life of India*, published in 1918, writes the following about the *Review of Religions*:

"One of the cleverest of Ahmad's followers, Maulvi Muhammad Ali, M.A., LL.B., was called to the editorship of this periodical, and at one time he was assisted by Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din ... This paper

was well-named, for it has given its attention to a remarkably wide range of religions and to a great variety of subjects. Orthodox Hinduism, the Arya Samaj, the Brahmo Samaj and Theosophy; Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism and Zoroastrianism; Bahaism, Christian Science and Christianity have all received attention, as well as Islam in all its ramifications, both ancient and modern, such as the Shi'ites, Ahl-i-Hadis, Kharijites, Sufis and such representative exponents of modern tendencies as Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and Syed Amir Ali."

Similarly another critic of the Ahmadiyya Movement, Mr. Spencer Lavan, in his book *Ahmadiyya Movement: Past and Present* (1976), writes:

"Considering the times and the context in which it was first written and published, *The Review of Religions*, was a remarkable publication." (p. 45)

The literary legacy of the Founder of the Ahmadiyya Movement in the field of research and critical analysis of other religions was carried on by the scholars and writers of the Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement under the able, and himself a renowned and prolific writer on Islam, Maulana Muhammad Ali. But the person who earned distinction for his knowledge, linguistic skill and extensive research in Hinduism and Christianity was Maulana Abdul Haq Vidyarthi, whose book *Muhammad in World Scriptures* is the first and unique contribution on comparative study of religions and can rightly be regarded as a trend setter for future studies in this field.

It is no exaggeration to say that it was the Founder of the Ahmadiyya Movement who not only urged his followers to seek knowledge and guidance from the Quran but to vindicate the truths mentioned therein through research.

Let me quote two couplets of the Founder to show how intensely he loved the Quran and the treasure of knowledge and guidance contained in it.

The elegance and beauty of the Quran is the life of every Muslim. The full moon may be source of resplendent light for others but to be honest our moon is the Holy Quran.

One thought which has possessed my soul is that I should kiss Thy Scripture and go round and round the Quran because that is my Ka'bah, the sole shrine of my life. ■

The Legal Position of Women in Islam

by the late Rt. Hon. Syed Ameer Ali

[*Editor's Note:* This is a booklet published in London in 1912, written by the distinguished Indian Muslim judge, Islamic law expert, reformist and author, Syed Ameer Ali (d. 1928), who moved from India to England in 1904 and was a member of the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in London. The first half of this booklet was reproduced in our April issue. It is continued below from that point.]

The whole history of Islam from its promulgation down to the present time is replete with the records of distinguished and brilliant women who have left their impress ineffaceably marked on the annals of their times. Fatima, our "Lady of Light" — the daughter of the Prophet — preached to mixed assemblies of men and women.

Obaidah, the tambourinist (*at-tamburia*), who lived in the reign of the Caliphs Mamum and Mutasim, is described by the author of the *Kitab ul-Aghani* as a woman of great beauty, virtue and talent.

"She was," says the author of the *Kitab ul-Aghani*, one of the most virtuous women of former times, and her worth and accomplishments have been testified to by Ishak" (the famous musician), "and Abu Khashisha used to honour her and acknowledged her superiority and genius."

Fazl the poetess flourished under Mutawwakil, in whose palace she appears to have lived for a while. After her enfranchisement by Mutawwakil she married and lived in Bagdad. Her poetry is considered equal in merit to that of the foremost poets of the time.

The Shaikha Shuhda, who flourished in the sixth century of the Hegira, lectured in Bagdad on history and *belles lettres*, and was renowned for the excellence of her handwriting. One of the most famous lady-jurists was Zainab Umm ul-Muwayyid, who lived about the beginning of the twelfth century of the Christian Era, and the middle of the sixth of the Hegira. She was born A.H. 524 (1146 A.C.) and died A.H. 615 (1237).

She had received from some of the prominent doctors of the age diplomas of competency, and was licensed to teach law. In the time of Saladin flourished Takieh, daughter of Abu'l Faraj, the historian who lectured on the traditions; she also was a poetess of eminence.

The pages of Ameer Osama give a very vivid picture of the high position occupied by women among the Arabs. In the midst of the great turmoil of the eleventh century, when the social and political fabric of Western Asia was almost in a state of dissolution, woman was still, especially at Shaizar, the object of chivalrous adoration, and of delicate care and attention. Marriage was regarded as a solemn act, the domestic hearth a sanctuary, and the birth of children, especially sons, a blessing from Heaven. To the mother belonged the training of her sons and daughters; the sons were brought up by her until they passed into the hands of tutors; the daughters were trained to be virtuous, pure-souled women — the future ‘mothers of men’.

But this lecture will hardly be complete without reference to two matters which are usually treated as flaws in the social and legal system of Islam with regard to the status of women.

One is polygamy, and the other the practice of seclusion observed in Muslim countries by ladies with any pretension to rank or position — for it must be observed that women in the lower walks of life are not subject to this aristocratic custom. Neither of these institutions affect the legal position of women, but the totally false idea that they somehow form part of the Islamic system often influences the attitude of Western peoples towards Muslim nations.

Now, let me state as emphatically as I can that polygamy is not a part of Islam; or, to put it a little differently, it is as much a part of the Islamic System as any other disagreeable institution common in the West is a part of Christianity. The custom of plurality of wives, just like the converse custom of plurality of husbands, has been known to the world from the earliest times. It came into existence from the necessities of primitive life, and will disappear only when moral ideals accord with economic conditions. In Central Africa, where the extent of a man’s tillage depends on the assistance of his wives, the problem is one of some difficulty. Perhaps you may have heard how one of the indigenous inhabitants solved the Problem for himself. He had gone to a neighbouring Christian missionary to be baptized; but was told he could not receive baptism until he had put away all his wives excepting one. He is said to have retired very unhappy. But he returned with his request a few days later, and on being asked the natural question what he had done with his wives, he proudly answered he had eaten them. Well, that is rather a drastic solution of a burning question which cannot be recommended outside Central Africa.

Polygamy was practised almost without exception among all the nations of antiquity. It was in vogue among the Athenians, the Persians, the Hebrews and the pre-Islamite Arabs, who recognized no limitation or restriction regarding the number of wives a man might marry. Even in Christendom, in spite of the edict of Justinian, the practice was common, and morganatic and left-handed marriages were not confined to the aristocracy. And is the practice quite unknown in our own time ?

Let us see what the founder of Islam did to change and raise the moral ideas of his people. He fixed an absolute limit on the number of contemporaneous marriages, and he subjected the permission, which was mere toleration of an existing and extravagant custom, to a condition so stringent that it virtually amounted to a prohibition. He declared that “you may marry two, three or four wives, but not more; if you cannot deal with equity with all, you shall marry only one”. “Equity” in this passage of the Koran does not signify mere equality of treatment in the matter of “lodgement and maintenance,” as some of the archaic schools of law have construed, but also complete equality in love, affection and esteem. This view was propounded as early as the eighth century of the Christian Era by the Mutazalite doctors, who laid down that, as absolute equality in matters of feeling was impossible, the Koranic prescription amounted to a prohibition of more than one contemporaneous marriage. And this view is gaining ground even among the followers of other sects. In India hardly more than two percent of men have more than one wife; in Persia it is about the same, whilst in Turkey polygamy is extremely rare.

The practice of polygamy is thus falling into desuetude, if not disrepute, even among those sects who considered that it was permissible within the limits laid down by the Founder of Islam. With the progress of thought, with the ever-changing conditions of the world, the necessity which brought about the practice of polygamy disappears, and its practice is tacitly abandoned or expressly forbidden. But where, as in Central Africa, let us say, in the country of our cannibal candidate for baptism, conditions still exist which explain its retention, can we say it is immoral? The numerical superiority of women in unadvanced communities, their inability to support themselves by their own exertions, the very absence of vocations to enable them to obtain a livelihood, make a plurality of marriages a necessity of existence.