

Part 25 Surah 42 Al-Shura Verses 36-43

A Community Moulded by Faith

After they are made to know that whatever they possess of this life's riches, comforts and pleasures can always be taken away from them. The only thing that is stable in this present life is to maintain a close relation with God.

The surah takes another step forward, alerting them to the fact that whatever they have in life on earth is transient. The only lasting value is what God grants in the life to come to those who have believed and placed their trust in Him. Some of the distinctive qualities that make of true believers a separate community are then given: *Whatever you are given is but for the enjoyment of life in this world, but that which is with God is much better and more enduring. [It shall be given] to those who believe and place their trust in their Lord (36); who shun grave sin and gross indecencies; and who, when angered, will forgive (37); who respond to their Lord, attend regularly to their prayer, conduct their affairs by mutual consultation, and give generously out of what We have provided for them (38); and who, when oppressed, defend themselves (39). An evil deed is requited by an evil like it, but the one who forgives and puts things right will have his reward with God. He does not love wrongdoers (40). However, no blame attaches to those who defend themselves after having been wronged (41). Blame attaches only to those who oppress other people and transgress in the land against all right. For such, there is painful suffering in store (42). As for the one who is patient in adversity and forgives; this requires the exercise of a truly strong resolve (43).*

Earlier in the surah, we had a description of the conditions pertaining to mankind. We learnt that those given revelations divided into groups: and such divisions were caused by petty rivalries rather than any lack of knowledge of the Divine book and the faith God established for mankind from the times of Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus (peace be upon them all). It also pointed out that the generations that followed those who were in dispute entertained serious doubts about Divine revelations. Needless to say, the conditions of those who did not receive revelations and had no messenger to guide them along the right path were even worse. Therefore, mankind needed wise leadership to save it from the depth of ignorance into which it had sunk and to guide its footsteps along the way that leads man to God, his Lord and the Lord of all the worlds. Therefore, God revealed this Qur'an, in the Arabic tongue, to His servant Muhammad, (peace be upon him), incorporating in it what He had enjoined upon Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus. Thus all phases of the Divine message, from early history, are linked together. The path it follows and the goals it aims to achieve are the same.

There are plenty of attractive and pleasant things in the life of this world: offspring, wealth, desires and their fulfilment, high social standing, power, as well as other things to enjoy. These are granted by God as part of His bounty that is unattached to people's behaviour in this life, but He adds blessing to those who are obedient to Him, even though their share is little, and denies such blessing to sinners even though their share is great indeed. Yet none of this is permanent or enduring. It is all short-lived; it neither raises nor lowers anyone's standing. Nothing of it reflects anyone's position with God, or provides an indication of His pleasure or displeasure with anyone. It is all a fleeting enjoyment. *"That which is with God is much better and more enduring..." (36)* It is better in essence and longer lasting. Compared to what is with God, all life enjoyments are trifling and short-lived. Its maximum duration is the life of the individual or the life of humanity. Both are no more than a fleeting moment in God's measure.

Having established this true fact, the surah outlines the qualities of the believers who are destined to enjoy the enduring blessings God has in store for them. The first of these qualities is faith: *"That which is with God is much better and more enduring. [It shall be given] to those who believe and place their trust in their Lord."* (36) To believe is to recognize the first and basic truth without which man cannot know for certain anything in the universe. It is through believing in God that we begin to understand that the universe is created by Him. This is essential so that we know how to deal with the universe and learn about the laws that operate in it. We can then bring our lives into harmony with the universe, so as not to deviate from its laws. Such harmony will impart ease and comfort in our lives. We will then move, together with the universe, in a way that submits to God and seeks His acceptance. This quality is necessary for every human being, but it is most essential for the Muslim community that seeks to lead humanity.

Faith also imparts reassurance and confidence, and dispels doubt, worry, fear and despair. These are necessary throughout our life journey, but they are all the more essential for the leader who charts the way ahead.

What faith gives to man is to free him from the pressures of personal desire, interest and gain. With faith, man's heart looks up to a goal that lies beyond his own soul. He realizes that he has no say in the course the Divine message takes; it is, after all, a message from God, while he is simply a worker employed by God. This realization is extremely important to the person who is in a position of leadership so that he does not allow despair to creep in should people turn away from him or should he suffer persecution. This realization also acts as a safeguard so that he does not become arrogant should he gain power. In every situation, he remains no more than a worker.

With this final message, the Muslim community comes into existence, assuming the leadership of mankind and setting a model of how the Divine faith functions in human life.

The present verses describe the distinctive qualities of this community that make it a community apart. Although these verses were revealed in Makkah, long before the establishment of the Muslim state in Madinah, we note that one of these qualities is that its affairs are conducted on the basis of mutual consultation. This suggests that consultation is more deeply ingrained in the life of the Muslim community than its being the basis of its political system. It is, thus, an essential quality of the Muslim community. It then had to be carried further to the state, which is a natural progression from that of Muslim community. Another quality to be noted is that Muslims defend themselves when they come under oppression. Yet the order given to the Muslims in Makkah was that they should endure with patience and not retaliate. It was only after they migrated to Madinah that a different order was given to them and permission to fight was granted: *"Permission to fight is given to those against whom war is waged, because they have been wronged. Most certainly, God has the power to grant them victory."* (22 Al-Hajj: 39) That this quality is mentioned in Makkan verses suggests that self defence against oppression is a permanent right of the Muslim community, while the instruction to remain patient and not to retaliate pertained to an exceptional and particular situation during the early period. The quality is mentioned here because an outline of the essential qualities of the Muslim community is given. Hence, this quality could not be overlooked, even though retaliation in self defence was not as then permitted.

The fact that these qualities are mentioned in this Makkan surah, long before the Muslim community had assumed practical leadership should be reflected upon. These qualities must be fulfilled by the Muslim community before it is fit to assume practical leadership. What are these qualities, and what value do they have in human life as a whole?

These qualities are: faith, placing our trust in God alone, refraining completely from grave sin and indecency, forgiving when angry, responding to God, attending regularly to prayer, conducting our affairs through proper consultation, giving generously in charity, resisting oppression, forgiving other people, putting things right and remaining patient in adversity. We need to reflect a little on each of these qualities in the order they occur in the surah.

The surah sets before us the Divine standard of values, showing us which of these are transitory and which are enduring and unalterable. Muslims will, thus, have a clear vision, one free of confusion. This standard is outlined first as a prelude to the qualities of the Muslim community: *"Whatever you are given is but for the enjoyment of life in this world, but that which is with God is much better and more enduring..." (36)"*

The first crop of Muslims accepted the faith in a way that remarkably influenced their mentality, morality and behaviour. Prior to Islam, the meaning of faith had been greatly weakened so that it no longer influenced people's morality and behaviour. Islam brought about a new model of faith, one that was alive and influential, enabling that community of believers to assume the task of leadership entrusted to it. Syed Abu'l Hasan Ali Nadwi writes about the effects of this character-moulding faith:

Once the Gordian knot of disbelief had been cut, it was easy to unfasten the other knots that bound them. And once the Prophet had opened their hearts to Islam, he did not have to struggle at each step to make them reject Wrong and accept Right. They entered into the new faith with heart and soul and submitted themselves without demur to what the Prophet decreed...

Thus, when they had attained to the highest pinnacle of moral development and become proof against the inducements of Satan and of their own baser self, when they had learned to prefer the future good to the immediate good and had been transformed into lovers of the Hereafter even while living in this world, when neither poverty could be a barrier in their path nor could riches make them vain, when they had become meek, yet unbending before power, and when they had come to be the dispensers of justice among men even though it might go against themselves, their own kith and kin, God made the whole world subservient to them and appointed them the Defenders of the Faith.¹

He also elaborates on the effect of faith on people's morality:

During the pre-Islamic era people generally worshipped inanimate objects which could neither help nor grant their petitions and had, in fact, been created merely to serve their needs.

Hence, there was no real moral enthusiasm, no genuine spirituality in their religions. The God of their conception was an artisan who had retired into a corner after finishing His job. They believed that He had bequeathed His kingdom to those whom He had adorned with the mantle of Divinity and now it was they who controlled the affairs of the universe. They lacked any spiritual understanding of God. They did not know of Him as the Creator of the universe, and any awareness was akin to the knowledge of an historian who, when he is asked who constructed a certain building, replies that it was built by such and such a king, but the mention of the king's name neither inspires awe in his heart, nor makes any solemn impression on his mind. They had no intimate consciousness of the Divine attributes and, consequently, their hearts did not bear the imprint of God's glory and love...

¹ Nadwi, Abu'l Hasan 'Ali, Islam and the World, Leicester, 2005, pp. 41-42. - Originally written in Arabic, this book has been heavily edited in its English version. I chose to include all quotations from it as they appear in its English version rather than provide a new translation that is more faithful to the original text. - Editor's note.

The Muslims in general and the Arabs in particular rejected this vague and sickly religiousness and attained a Faith which was at once incense and profound and which permeated through every fibre of their existence. They pledged their Faith in God Who has Excellent Attributes, Who is the Most Exalted, the Most Magnificent and the Master of the Day of Judgement. Says the Holy Qur'an: "*God is He besides Whom there is no other god; The Sovereign, the Holy One, the Source of Peace (and Perfection), the Guardian of Faith, the Preserver of Safety, the Exalted in Might, the irresistible, the Supreme; Glory to God (High is He) above the partners they attribute to Him. (23) He is the Creator, the Evolver, the Bestower of Forms and Colours. To Him belong the Most Beautiful Names; Whatever is in the heaven and on earth, doth declare His Praises and Glory; and He is the Exalted in Might, the Wise.*(24)" (59 Al-Hashr: 23-24) He is the God Who is the Creator and the Preserver of the universe, Who rewards with paradise and chastises with hell, Who swells or shrinks the subsistence of whomsoever He likes, Who is the Knower of all that is hidden in the heavens and the earth, and Who knows the stealth of the eyes and the secrets of the hearts, and is the embodiment of beauty and sublimity, strength and splendour, perfection and beneficence.

This solemn conviction produced a miraculous transformation among the early followers of Islam. Whoever affirmed his faith in the One Transcendent God and testified to 'La ilaha illallah' ² experienced a sudden change in himself. The innermost recesses of his soul were lie up with the sublime radiance of God- consciousness, the spirit and the flesh in him ceased to be the enemies of one another; he achieved equilibrium within himself and extraordinary feats of courage, endurance and faith were performed by the believer.

This faith was a wonderful source of moral training. It generated among its followers an amazing strength of will, self-criticism and justice, as nothing can help overcome the inducements of the self so successfully as living faith in the Omnipresence of God.

If anyone succumbed to evil or negative urges and fell into error, even unobserved, he would immediately confess to the Prophet and undergo the severest punishment willingly to save himself from Divine displeasure. ³

Virtues such as honesty and trustworthiness developed in the early Muslims as the natural fruits of a sense of living belief in the Omnipresence of the Absolute God. Even when alone and unnoticed, or in any other situation wherein they could easily transgress the bounds of religious conduct, fear of God kept the Muslims under rigid control. ⁴

² This phrase means, 'there is no deity other than God'. It is the first half of the declaration anyone who wishes to be a Muslim must make. The other half is, 'Muhammad is God's messenger.' - Editor's note.

³ Nadwi, *ibid.*, pp. 42-44.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

The unruly Arabs, who were so lawless in their ways, surrendered themselves so absolutely to the guidance of the Faith that it was impossible for them to infringe the Divine law. They accepted the Sovereignty of God in its fullest sense. In peace and in war, in joy and in sorrow, in every relationship of life, at each turn of affairs and in the minutest details of their concerns they looked to His guidance and help and carried out His commands without the slightest demur. ⁵

Qualities of the Faithful

Such is the effect of true belief in God to which the surah refers. To place one's complete crust in God is something such a belief entails, but the Qur'an gives prominence to this quality: "*[It shall be given] to those who believe and place their trust in their Lord.*" (36) In the Arabic text, the inversion mode is used so as to make the sentence read, 'in their Lord they place their trust.' • This implies that they do not place their trust in anyone other than God. This is indeed the first practical manifestation of believing in God's oneness. A believer knows God's attributes, believes in them all and is certain that no one does anything unless He wills and nothing occurs without His sanction. Hence, his cruse in God is complete. Everything he does or refrains from doing is aimed at winning His pleasure. Such a feeling is necessary for everyone. Le enables man to stand with his head raised high, feeling inner certainty, reassured, fearing no one, able to withstand adversity, full of contentment in times of ease. Yet this feeling is far more necessary to a leader who is eager to fulfil his responsibilities.

"*Who shun grave sins and gross indecencies...*" (37) Purity of heart which ensures that behaviour is free of grave sin and indecency is a product of sound faith. It is also a necessary requirement for wise leadership. No one can maintain purity of heart and then indulge in grave sins and gross indecencies. A heart that lacks purity is totally unsuitable for leadership: its guiding light is obliterated by sin. Faith heightened the sensitivity of the first generation of Muslims enabling them to attain the standards described by Nadwi. It qualified them to provide a leadership of unprecedented and unequalled qualities. They remain the model to be emulated by later generations.

God is fully aware of man's weaknesses. Therefore, He has set the mark that qualifies people for the position of leadership at shunning grave sins and gross indecencies, not ordinary ones. His grace ensures that minor sins will be overlooked. This is an act of grace that He bestows on us which should arouse our feeling of humility before Him.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 49- 50.

"*And who, when angered, will forgive.*" (37) This quality, mentioned immediately after the implicit reference to God's forgiveness of man's errors and sins, encourages an attitude of mutual forbearance and forgiveness between people. le highlights a characteristic of believers which makes them forgive when something angers them. Again we see the Islamic approach to human weakness. le does not require man to do anything beyond what he is capable of. God knows that anger is a natural human reaction and that it is not always bad. Feeling angry at something committed against God, faith, truth or justice is commendable and can bring about good results. Therefore, Islam does not forbid anger or consider it a sin. le recognizes it as a natural feeling, thus preventing conflict between man's religion and nature. However, it takes man by the hand to help him overcome his anger, encouraging him to pardon and forbear. It further makes such forgiveness one of the important qualities of believers. It is well established that the Prophet was never angry at anything related to his own person. His anger, when it occurred, was only for God's sake and was overpowering. Yet such a high standard was set by Muhammad (peace be upon him) who attained a high standard of greatness. Hence, God does not make this a standard that believers should attain co, but rather sets it as an ideal to strive for. What they are required to do is to forbear and forgive when angry, rising above the desire to retaliate, as long as this remains within the personal sphere.

"*Who respond to their Lord...*" (38) They remove all impediments that prevent such response. These impediments are within the human soul, created by one's desires, aspirations and ambitions. When all these impediments are removed, man finds the way to God smooch and wide open. His response is then free of any restraint or impediment.

The type of response is then shown in detail. The first aspect is that believers "*attend regularly to their prayer...*" (38) Prayer is given great importance in Islam. le comes second only to the first rule of faith, which is the declaration of one's belief in God's oneness and in Muhammad as God's messenger. Prayer provides the bond between man and his Lord, and gives a practical example of human equality, with worshippers standing shoulder to shoulder in rows, with no distinction whatsoever between them.

Perhaps this is the reason why prayer is immediately followed, in this instance, by the quality of consultation within the Muslim community, giving it precedence over the payment of zakat which is normally mentioned together with prayer. Thus, believers "*conduct their affairs by mutual consultation...*" (38) As it is phrased, the statement makes consultation a characteristic that pervades every aspect of their lives. As we have already said, this is a Makkan statement made long before the establishment of the Islamic state. This means that this quality is characteristic of the Muslim community in all situations, even though no state or government had as then been

established. In fact, the state is only a natural byproduct of the Muslim community and its intrinsic qualities. The Muslim community incorporates the state and together they ensure the implementation of the Islamic code of life both at individual and society levels.

For this reason, consultation was an early quality of the Muslim community and applied to a far greater area than the political arena. It is an essential aspect of Islamic life and a distinctive quality of the community entrusted with the role of leading mankind. Needless to say, it is a fundamental quality of sound leadership.

The way to conduct consultation is left for every generation and environment to decide. It is not cast in a rigid form that must always be followed. No Islamic system is outlined in a text that must be literally followed or set in a particular model that cannot be modified. They are first and foremost a product of a process that begins with the truth of faith taking root in man's heart so as to mould his thought and behaviour. Discussion about the details of an Islamic system while giving little attention to the truth of faith that gives rise to them is a futile exercise. What we are saying here may appear to anyone who is unaware of the truth of Islamic faith a theoretical discourse without firm basis. To suppose so is certainly wrong. A careful examination of its pure concepts of belief will show that Islam contains psychological and intellectual facts that have a profound effect on man, preparing the way to the rise of certain systems and situations in human society. The Qur'anic and Hadith texts then indicate the form that such systems and situations should take. Thus, the texts do not initiate the systems, but merely organize them. For any Islamic system to be established and functioning, it is necessary that a Muslim community should be in existence in which faith is actively working. Otherwise, no form is good enough to produce a system that can be described as Islamic. When a Muslim community is truly in existence, where people feel the truth of faith deep in their hearts, the Islamic system will naturally develop, taking a shape and form that suits that particular community, its environment and circumstances, working within the framework of the basic Islamic principles and effectively implementing them.

"*And give generously out of what We have provided for them.*" (38) This is again a requirement that preceded the determination of the different rates of zakat, according to the type of property held. These rates were set in the second year after the Prophet migrated to Madinah where he established the first Islamic state. However, the idea of allocating a portion of what God has given us to be spent in what serves the Islamic cause came in the early stages of the life of the Muslim community. It goes back to the early days of its inception.

For Islam to be properly advocated it is necessary that Muslims should be ready to allocate money for its cause. This purges their hearts of greed and helps them rise

above the instinctive desire to own. It demonstrates their reliance on God and what He has for them. All these are necessary for faith to be complete and firmly rooted. Moreover, it is necessary for the Muslim society. To advocate Islam is to be committed to strive for its cause. It is imperative that the community should demonstrate complete solidarity in such striving, whatever the outcome. At times, such solidarity needs to be complete, leaving no one any property that is considered his own. An example of this took place in the early days of Islam, when the Makkan Muslims migrated to Madinah where they were given warm hospitality. When their situation became less acute, a permanent zakat system was put in place. Be that as it may, the very concept of spending for the cause is an essential quality of the Muslim community.

"And who, when oppressed, defend themselves." (39) As we stated earlier, that this quality is mentioned in a Makkan surah is significant. It means that rising against oppression and injustice is in the very nature of a community that is moulded to be the best among human communities. It enjoins what is right and fair, forbids what is wrong, and ensures that right and justice are implemented in human life. It is an honourable community that derives its honour from God: "All honour belongs to God, and to His messenger and those who believe [in God]." (63 Al-Munafiqun: 8)

In the early history of Islam, there was a period, when the Muslim community was still in Makkah, during which the Muslims were ordered not to fight, but to concentrate on attending to prayer and paying zakat. This, however, was due to certain local reasons and to achieve a particular disciplinary objective that was especially relevant to the first Muslim Arab community. It should be emphasized that this was a temporary measure that does not contradict the essential qualities of the Muslim community.

There were, indeed, particular reasons behind this choice of a peaceful and patient approach during the Makkan period. One was that the persecution the Muslims suffered at the time was not because of any recognisable authority holding sway in Arabian society. Instead, the tribal structure then pertaining made it rather loose politically and socially. Hence, a Muslim who belonged to a family of distinction could come to harm only at the hands of other members of his own family. No one else dared take any measure against him. A collective assault on a Muslim individual or on Muslims generally was a rare event. In addition, masters could torture or otherwise pain their slaves and weaker tribal elements if they chose to adopt Islam. Over time many of these were bought and set free by Muslims, and thus largely became immune to persecution. Furthermore, the Prophet did not wish to see a battle flaring up in every home between a Muslim and his family who had not as yet accepted Islam. It was, thus, a question of trying to soften hearts rather than harden them.

"He does not love wrongdoers." (40) This statement reconfirms the rule that an evil act is requited by a similar one. It also implies that one should not exceed the wrong done when repelling evil.

We then have another confirmation, which is more detailed: "However, no blame attaches to those who defend themselves after having been wronged. (41) Blame attaches only to those who oppress other people and transgress in the land against all right. For such, there is painful suffering in store. (42)" A wronged person who retaliates against injustice, repays an evil act with its like, and who makes sure not to transgress his limits, is simply exercising his legitimate right. Hence, no blame attaches to him. No one should prevent him from exacting justice. The ones to be stopped are those who oppress and encroach on others.

Human life cannot be set on a right basis while injustice continues unchecked and its perpetrators go about freely, fearing no consequence. God warns all perpetrators of injustice that they will be severely punished, but people must also rise against those responsible and prevent them from committing further injustice.

The surah again refers to the need for self restraint, patience in adversity and forgiveness in personal cases, when such forgiveness is exercised as an act of magnanimity taken from a position of strength and ability to retaliate: "As for the one who is patient in adversity and forgives; this requires the exercise of a truly strong resolve." (43)

When we take these verses and similar texts together, we clearly see how they ensure balance between the two directions. They want a Muslim to be free of grudge, anger, weakness, servility, as also of injustice and oppression. A Muslim should always seek God's pleasure, aware that patience is his mainstay as he continues his life journey.

Together, these qualities which believers should have impart a distinctive character to the Muslim community, the community that is assigned the task of leading mankind.

Another reason behind this peaceful approach was that the social environment encouraged support to anyone who was unjustly wronged or physically harmed. By being patient in adversity and holding to their faith despite persecution, Muslims could benefit by such support. This is what actually happened when the Hashimite clan, to which the Prophet belonged, were subjected to a social and economic boycott. The natural Arabian sense of justice rebelled against this wrongful boycott, enforcing its abrogation, despite the fact that it was originally solemnized by a written agreement which was then hung inside the Ka'bah.

Yet another reason was that resort to force and the use of arms was a characteristic of the Arabian social environment. People were always on edge, with little to enforce discipline. To ensure proper balance in the Muslim personality, this tendency needed to be restrained. People needed to rein in their feelings by setting themselves definite goals. It was also necessary that they should get used to being patient, despite adversity, and that they could control themselves and their actions. It was also necessary to make them feel that their every whim, desire and gain were secondary to their faith. Therefore, the requirement that they should remain patient in such adversity was consistent with the system that sought to educate them and bring about proper balance in their Islamic character.

It was for these and similar reasons that a policy of peaceful coexistence and perseverance was followed during the Malekan period, while the permanent nature of the Muslim community based on self defence when oppressed was also clearly stated: "And who, when oppressed, defend themselves." (39) This rule is further confirmed as a permanent aspect of human life: "An evil deed is requited by an evil like it..." (40) Thus, justice requires that an evil act should be answered with an act of similar nature. Otherwise, evil would be left to triumph and expand; there would be no force to check it. Forgiveness is encouraged so that believers seek reward from God and at the same time purge themselves of the desire to retaliate; this also ensures that society does not harbour grudges: "But the one who forgives and puts things right will have his reward with God..." (40) This is indeed an exception from the rule. It should be borne in mind that forgiveness can only be exercised by one who is able to requite evil with its like. It is only in such a case that forgiveness brings its desired results in both the perpetrator and the person who is wronged. When the perpetrator realizes that he has been pardoned out of the goodness of the other person, and not because of any weakness or inability to retaliate, he feels ashamed and appreciates that his opponent has scored a moral victory. Similarly, a strong person who forgives feels that he has the higher moral ground. Thus, forgiveness is better for both parties. This, however, does not apply in the case of weakness and inability to retaliate. Indeed, forgiveness does not exist in such a situation; it only encourages the aggressor and brings further humiliation to those wronged.