THE QURANIC DESCRIPTION OF THE PROPHETIC MOVEMENT AND ITS RELEVANCE TODAY

(Irfan Ahmad Khan)

1. The Tawhidic[1] Concept of One Community[2]:

The Quran asserts that before its revelation to Muhammad (be peace upon him), prophets and messengers of God were sent throughout the human world. They received similar revelations and conveyed to their people essentially the same message that this Divine Book delivers to Mankind today. The question arises as to what was this message and what was the goal toward which the efforts of these prophets were directed? What was the Divine purpose in sending these prophets and messengers? The prophets of God affirmed that Almighty God Who alone is their Creator and Sustainer is the Sovereign _ everyone else is His servant and is as such accountable to Him. The Quran makes it quite clear that the strivings of these prophets were directed toward turning the divided human family into one community of God's servants (`ibad) - after the primordial **one community** became divided by mutual exploitation and corruption[3]. The prophets of God were striving against shirk i.e. lordship of other than God. Originally the Lordship of One God made Mankind **one community** but when some human beings became, virtually, lords of other human beings, division resulted. Human beings' becoming fellow servants of God involved mutual sustenance within the Human Family and its regaining economic and social justice. As co-ibad (fellow servants), fellow

human beings were mutually **concerned** with each other; they had mutual **respect** and **regard** and **shared** their resources together. In fact, this was the social implication of their becoming together servants of their Merciful Lord.

They knew that when God blessed them with some of His favors in, seemingly, an in-proportionate way He was only testing them[4]. He gave to some of His servants (e.g.) more material resources, because He wanted to see how far they could succeed in using these resources for the benefit of those **fellow** human beings (i.e. their co-ibad), who were also in need of these or needed these even more severely. The same was true of His other special favors like political power or prestige in society or some other kind of authority or position, or even ability or skill. In fact, whatever God placed at Mankind's disposal on earth, human beings are responsible for its proper use and care[5]. Natural resources and human potentialities should not be wasted and proper care should be taken for their best possible development. On the Day of Judgement every one will stand before God to account for one's performance. Every individual will be questioned (e.g.) how he/she manipulated with the resources at his/her disposal and how successfully one did one's duties to his/her fellow beings. The prophets of God encouraged their people to correct themselves (i.e. to repent or make tawbah) and seek His Forgiveness. They said to the unjust people that God is very forgiving but if they did not crrect themselves His Punishment might follow and then no one would be

able to help them. God, the Almighty, alone is the Creator, Sustainer and Sovereign - **everyone else is His servant.**

2. The Epistemic Dimension of Tawhid

In the above we outlined the social implications of the tawhidic message. But the prophetic movement had another equally important concern.

The tawhidic mission of the prophets aimed at giving humans their true **freedom** and **dignity.** The prophets and messengers of God liberated human minds and spirits from all kinds of slavery - including the mental slavery of so-called religious leaders. They emphasized the use of reason (`aql) and invited their people to think with their own minds. According to them, everyone was responsible for the use of the intellectual faculties with which God had blessed him\her and following the ways of their forefathers blindly[6] was totally unjustifiable.

However, in some ways, the prophets of God were unlike other persons. They had some kind of direct communication with God.They received Revealed Guidance in Divine Words and it was in its light that they encountered the prevailing situation. They explained this Divine Text to their people **in their own words. With the cooperation of their believing community they applied this Revealed Guidance in Divine Words to the human life and succeeded in making humans one family again, with perfect justice and mutual concern.**

In spite of the fact that prophets were human beings, there was a sense in which they were above mistake. They were working

under direct Divine Supervision. Whenever it was needed God would intervene and correct them; so that, subsequently, what they would deliver to their people was free of any mistake.

However, the prophets were very different from those unjust and cunning leaders who could even misuse people's religious concerns and who exploited their illiterate masses that blindly followed them. Contrary to them the prophets of God helped the people in thinking rationally and in taking care of their moral development and self- purification. Of course, the greatest help for these concerns came from the Divine Text (RGDW) itself. The inspiration which the believers received as they built their direct relationship with the Book, was instrumental for their intellectual liberation. As they followed the prophetic guidance reflecting over the Divine Words which he recited to them, they developed in themselves an ability to think clearly with their own minds and thereafter all their confusions were dispelled.

3. However, in leading the evolution of human society God has been working on two planes.

God, Who was leading a gradual moral and spiritual development of Mankind by sending His prophets and messengers according to a systematic plan, has also been leading the intellectual evolution of Mankind through the scientific and technological progress as well as through the developments in philosophy, literature and fine arts. In a way this was preparing human minds to understand and interpret Revealed Guidance in Divine Words just as it was creating

in human beings ability and skill to put into practice the program of action which would emerge from this study.

God continued sending various versions/editions of basically the same Divine Guidance, preparing Mankind for that stage when no further editions of RGDW and no more prophets of God (i.e. persons who would claim a sort of infallibility because of their special relationship with God) would be required.

4. Unlike angels men create corruption and cause bloodshed! What is the Divine Wisdom in creating such a creature?

In the light of the above the story of Man's creation as related in the Quran can be well understood[7]. Human beings are persons. They have reason, freedom of will and moral consciousness. Among creations of God, persons have a status which is higher than that of non-persons. Consider many things of the world that are non-persons and which God has created for the benefit of Man. However, angels are another kind of persons. Unlike men, angels never fail to do their duty to God. They never disobey Him - never commit a sin. They do not have those impulses which motivate men to commit sin. Obviously there is something in the nature of Man due to which all this progress in science and culture became possible - something which earlier, angels and jinn (the two other kinds of persons the Quran mentions), could not achieve.

[Listening to the Divine Call (the one in RGDW) virtuous people started arraying behind the prophets of God. These people care for human values and were concerned with human beings. Their strivings were directed toward the creation of an ideal world. According to the Quran a counter movement is also started by Satan. His anti-humanistic movement soon gained momentum. Around the other pole gathered persons who had their vested interests with the unjust system. I mean, those who did not repent in spite all efforts for this purpose. They became so blind in the pursuit of their (selfish) immediate gains that they did not see their own long term gains in the Hereafter. They rationalized all their wrongdoings and did not hesitate in acting inhumanely against the prophets and their virtuous followers who were advised to return good for evil. However, the unjust powers even planned the eradication of the movement of the virtuous people.]

6. In the light of the above elaborations the meanings of the surah # 103 of the Quran should become quite clear.

The first ayah (verse) which is apparently a swearing refers to the missions of the prophets of God in history whose stories are repeatedly related in the Quran[12]. The ayah wants the readers to learn a lesson from these stories and do it before it is too late. Time is running out!

(Then the lesson is stated in ayah two and three.)

The second ayah states that today also Man is heading toward destruction - the way the addressees of the prophets (who instead

of correcting themselves stood against the prophetic movements) were doing.

The third ayah says something about the future - as compared to first and second ayahs which were speaking of past and present. All of a sudden the gloomy tone of the earlier part of the surah is changed. This ayah presents a bright future for humanity. The ayah, in fact, answers the questions: how will the purpose of Man's creation be fulfilled and how will human beings attain al-Falah (true happiness/success)? Even a cursory look at the overall wordings of the surah will make it clear that the gloomy tone of the earlier part of the surah was intended only to divert the attention of the addressee by way of warning.

The following is a brief explanation of the four-point formula for success of Mankind (al-Falah) which the surah presents:

1. The first requirement is iman or belief, that is, commitment to tawhid which is briefly explained above in section one and two. Thus the surah is inviting all human beings to respond positively to the call of the prophets.

[However, mainly to all those who already possess a sense of belonging to the prophets this surah would suggest that they must develop true iman (belief) within themselves. All the followers of the prophets are called to become **One Community** of God's servants and salient features of this community are also underlined. My own suggestion is that those who profess to be followers of the prophets of God, at least, develop a step by step process to attain this oneness.]

2. The second requirement is al-salihat or righteous actions.

That is, the commitment or faith must find its expression in practical action. The word which is used for, righteous actions is salihat, that is, healthy actions - those actions which lead to peaceful and healthy development of human world. This would include proper use and care of the earth resources.

[Please note that the antonym of salih is fasid ie. that is corrupt or wasteful.]

Now the surah adds that though the above two steps are necessarily required they are not sufficient. A mutual support system is also a must for the future progress (even continuance) of the **One Community.**

3. It is required that if some elements (e.g. some individuals) of this community fall short of their duty then others remind them.

(This implies that this kind of reminding should be welcome by each other.)

4. Likewise it is required that when some elements are put to test (e.g. face hardship in the way of Truth and Justice) then others should give moral support.

Obviously, in a world where forces of evil are united the virtuous people can not afford to remain separated - each group or individual only concerned with itself.

Endnotes:

1.Tawhid is the principle that One God alone is worthy of worship and there should be no lordship of Man over Man. All are servants (`ibad) of One God only.

2.For the occurrence of "One Community" i.e. ummah wahidah in the Quran please see the following nine explicit references:
It is hard to count large number of implicit references of this theme in the Quran. 2:213; 5:48; 10:19; 11:118; 16:93; 32:92-93; 23:51-53; 43:8; 43:33.

3. Just consider 2:13 which is further explained in 10:19 and 11:118.

4.See how 89:15-16 is being further explained through 90:17-20.

5. Just consider 2:28-29.

6. Please consider mainly 2:165-176; 9:31-33 and 32:9. Also consider very frequent use of **aql** (reason) and tafakkur (reflective thinking) in the Quran.

7. The story is discussed at length in 2:30-39 and 7:11-35. But it is also mentioned at 15:26-44; 17:61-65; 18:50; 20:115-123; and 38-71-85.

8. This was very clearly the case with Jesus and Moses as the Quran relates their story see e.g. 3:51-54 and 40:25-28.

9. See e.g. 2:253.

10. Concerning the followers of Jesus the Quran mentions explicitly that they became victorious with Divine Help (61:14). Earlier there is a promise from God to Jesus that his followers will always have an upper hand over those who disbelieve him. Support of God to followers of Moses and their subsequent victory is mentioned at many places in the Quran e.g. 2:49-50; 10:89-93.

11. Karl Marx did not see that only through a sincere commitment to the Hereafter the efforts of some persons (i.e. the believers in the Hereafter) will be rightly directed toward the realization of this true ideal of which he had a clear intuition. Perhaps the corrupt life of some so-called religious leaders made him prejudiced against religion as such.

12. See, for example, 7:59-171; 10-71-93 and 11:25-110.