

'ABDU'-BAHÁ

THE SECRET
OF DIVINE
CIVILIZATION

`Abdu'-Bahá
The Secret of Divine Civilization

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The Secret of Divine Civilization:*

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`Abdu'l-Bahá

The Secret of Divine Civilization

[Pages 1–20]

In the Name of God the Clement, the Merciful

Praise and thanksgiving be unto Providence that out of all the realities in existence He has chosen the reality of man and has honored it with intellect and wisdom, the two most luminous lights in either world. Through the agency of this great endowment, He has in every epoch cast on the mirror of creation new and wonderful configurations. If we look objectively upon the world of being, it will become apparent that from age to age, the temple of existence has continually been embellished with a fresh grace, and distinguished with an ever-varying splendor, deriving from wisdom and the power of thought.

This supreme emblem of God stands first in the order of creation and first in rank, taking precedence over all created things. Witness to it is the Holy Tradition, “Before all else, God created the mind.” From the dawn of creation, it was made to be revealed in the temple of man.

Sanctified is the Lord, Who with the dazzling rays of this

strange, heavenly power has made our world of darkness the envy of the worlds of light: “And the earth shall shine with the light of her Lord.”¹ Holy and exalted is He, Who has caused the nature of man to be the dayspring of this boundless grace: “The God of mercy hath taught the Qur’án, hath created man, hath taught him articulate speech.”²

O ye that have minds to know! Raise up your suppliant hands to the heaven of the one God, and humble yourselves and be lowly before Him, and thank Him for this supreme endowment, and implore Him to succor us until, in this present age, godlike impulses may radiate from the conscience of mankind, and this divinely kindled fire which has been entrusted to the human heart may never die away.

Consider carefully: all these highly varied phenomena, these concepts, this knowledge, these technical procedures and philosophical systems, these sciences, arts, industries and inventions—all are emanations of the human mind. Whatever people has ventured deeper into this shoreless sea, has come to excel the rest. The happiness and pride of a nation consist in this, that it should shine out like the sun in the high heaven of knowledge. “Shall they who have knowledge and they who have it not, be treated alike?”³ And the honor and distinction of the individual consist in this, that he among all the world’s multitudes

¹ Qur’án 39:69.

² Qur’án 55:1–3.

³ Qur’án 39:12.

should become a source of social good. Is any larger bounty conceivable than this, that an individual, looking within himself, should find that by the confirming grace of God he has become the cause of peace and well-being, of happiness and advantage to his fellow men? No, by the one true God, there is no greater bliss, no more complete delight.

How long shall we drift on the wings of passion and vain desire; how long shall we spend our days like barbarians in the depths of ignorance and abomination? God has given us eyes, that we may look about us at the world, and lay hold of whatsoever will further civilization and the arts of living. He has given us ears, that we may hear and profit by the wisdom of scholars and philosophers and arise to promote and practice it. Senses and faculties have been bestowed upon us, to be devoted to the service of the general good; so that we, distinguished above all other forms of life for perceptiveness and reason, should labor at all times and along all lines, whether the occasion be great or small, ordinary or extraordinary, until all mankind are safely gathered into the impregnable stronghold of knowledge. We should continually be establishing new bases for human happiness and creating and promoting new instrumentalities toward this end. How excellent, how honorable is man if he arises to fulfil his responsibilities; how wretched and contemptible, if he shuts his eyes to the welfare of society and wastes his precious life in pursuing his own selfish interests and personal advantages. Supreme happiness is man's, and he beholds the signs of God in

the world and in the human soul, if he urges on the steed of high endeavor in the arena of civilization and justice. “We will surely show them Our signs in the world and within themselves.”⁴

And this is man’s uttermost wretchedness: that he should live inert, apathetic, dull, involved only with his own base appetites. When he is thus, he has his being in the deepest ignorance and savagery, sinking lower than the brute beasts. “They are like the brutes: Yea, they go more astray... For the vilest beasts in God’s sight, are the deaf, the dumb, who understand not.”⁵

We must now highly resolve to arise and lay hold of all those instrumentalities that promote the peace and well-being and happiness, the knowledge, culture and industry, the dignity, value and station, of the entire human race. Thus, through the restoring waters of pure intention and unselfish effort, the earth of human potentialities will blossom with its own latent excellence and flower into praiseworthy qualities, and bear and flourish until it comes to rival that rosegarden of knowledge which belonged to our forefathers. Then will this holy land of Persia become in every sense the focal center of human perfections, reflecting as if in a mirror the full panoply of world civilization.

All praise and honor be to the Dayspring of Divine wisdom, the Dawning Point of Revelation (Muḥammad), and to the holy line of His descendants, since, by the widespread rays of His consummate wisdom, His universal knowledge, those savage

⁴ Qur’án 41:53.

⁵ Qur’án 7:178; 8:22.

denizens of Yathrib (Medina) and Bathá (Mecca), miraculously, and in so brief a time, were drawn out of the depths of their ignorance, rose up to the pinnacles of learning, and became centers of arts and sciences and human perfections, and stars of felicity and true civilization, shining across the horizons of the world.

His Majesty the Sháh has, at the present time, [1875] resolved to bring about the advancement of the Persian people, their welfare and security and the prosperity of their country. He has spontaneously extended assistance to his subjects, displaying energy and fair-mindedness, hoping that by the light of justice he might make Írán the envy of East and West, and set that fine fervor which characterized the first great epochs of Persia to flowing again through the veins of her people. As is clear to the discerning, the writer has for this reason felt it necessary to put down, for the sake of God alone and as a tribute to this high endeavor, a brief statement on certain urgent questions. To demonstrate that His one purpose is to promote the general welfare, He has withheld His name.⁶ Since He believes that guidance toward righteousness is in itself a righteous act, He offers these few words of counsel to His country's sons, words spoken for God's sake alone and in the spirit of a faithful friend. Our Lord, Who knows all things, bears witness that this Servant

⁶ The original Persian text written in 1875 carried no author's name, and the first English translation published in 1910 under the title *The Mysterious Forces of Civilization* states only "Written in Persian by an Eminent Bahai Philosopher."

seeks nothing but what is right and good; for He, a wanderer in the desert of God's love, has come into a realm where the hand of denial or assent, of praise or blame, can touch Him not. "We nourish your souls for the sake of God; We seek from you neither recompense nor thanks."⁷

"The hand is veiled, yet the pen writes as bidden;
The horse leaps forward, yet the rider's hidden."

O people of Persia! Look into those blossoming pages that tell of another day, a time long past. Read them and wonder; see the great sight. Írán in that day was as the heart of the world; she was the bright torch flaming in the assemblage of mankind. Her power and glory shone out like the morning above the world's horizons, and the splendor of her learning cast its rays over East and West. Word of the widespread empire of those who wore her crown reached even to the dwellers in the arctic circle, and the fame of the awesome presence of her King of Kings humbled the rulers of Greece and Rome. The greatest of the world's philosophers marveled at the wisdom of her government, and her political system became the model for all the kings of the four continents then known. She was distinguished among all peoples for the scope of her dominion, she was honored by all for her praiseworthy culture and civilization. She was as the pivot of the world, she was the source and center of sciences and

⁷ Qur'án 76:9.

arts, the wellspring of great inventions and discoveries, the rich mine of human virtues and perfections. The intellect, the wisdom of the individual members of this excellent nation dazzled the minds of other peoples, the brilliance and perceptive genius that characterized all this noble race aroused the envy of the whole world.

Aside from that which is a matter of record in Persian histories, it is stated in the Old Testament—established today, among all European peoples, as a sacred and canonical Text—that in the time of Cyrus, called in Iranian works Bahman son of Išfandíyár, the three hundred and sixty divisions of the Persian Empire extended from the inner confines of India and China to the farthest reaches of Yemen and Ethiopia.⁸ The Greek accounts, as well, relate how this proud sovereign came against them with an innumerable host, and left their own till then victorious dominion level with the dust. He made the pillars of all the governments to quake; according to that authoritative Arab work, the history of Abu'l-Fidá, he took over the entire known world. It is likewise recorded in this same text and elsewhere, that Firaydún, a king of the Píshdádíyán Dynasty—who was indeed, for his inherent perfections, his powers of judgment, the scope of his knowledge, and his long series of continual victories, unique among all the rulers who preceded and followed him—divided the whole known world among his three sons.

As attested by the annals of the world's most illustrious

⁸ 2 Chronicles 36:22–23; Ezra 1:2; Esther 1:1; 8:9; Isaiah 45:1, 14; 49:12.

peoples, the first government to be established on earth, the foremost empire to be organized among the nations, was Persia's throne and diadem.

O people of Persia! Awake from your drunken sleep! Rise up from your lethargy! Be fair in your judgment: will the dictates of honor permit this holy land, once the wellspring of world civilization, the source of glory and joy for all mankind, the envy of East and West, to remain an object of pity, deplored by all nations? She was once the noblest of peoples: will you let contemporary history register for the ages her now degenerate state? Will you complacently accept her present wretchedness, when she was once the land of all mankind's desire? Must she now, for this contemptible sloth, this failure to struggle, this utter ignorance, be accounted the most backward of nations?

Were not the people of Persia, in days long gone, the head and front of intellect and wisdom? Did they not, by God's grace, shine out like the daystar from the horizons of Divine knowledge? How is it that we are satisfied today with this miserable condition, are engrossed in our licentious passions, have blinded ourselves to supreme happiness, to that which is pleasing in God's sight, and have all become absorbed in our selfish concerns and the search for ignoble, personal advantage?

This fairest of lands was once a lamp, streaming with the rays of Divine knowledge, of science and art, of nobility and high achievement, of wisdom and valor. Today, because of the idleness and lethargy of her people, their torpor, their

undisciplined way of life, their lack of pride, lack of ambition—her bright fortune has been totally eclipsed, her light has turned to darkness. “The seven heavens and the seven earths weep over the mighty when he is brought low.”

It should not be imagined that the people of Persia are inherently deficient in intelligence, or that for essential perceptiveness and understanding, inborn sagacity, intuition and wisdom, or innate capacity, they are inferior to others. God forbid! On the contrary, they have always excelled all other peoples in endowments conferred by birth. Persia herself, moreover, from the standpoint of her temperate climate and natural beauties, her geographical advantages and her rich soil, is blessed to a supreme degree. What she urgently requires, however, is deep reflection, resolute action, training, inspiration and encouragement. Her people must make a massive effort, and their pride must be aroused.

Today throughout the five continents of the globe it is Europe and most sections of America that are renowned for law and order, government and commerce, art and industry, science, philosophy and education. Yet in ancient times these were the most savage of the world's peoples, the most ignorant and brutish. They were even stigmatized as barbarians—that is, utterly rude and uncivilized. Further, from the fifth century after Christ until the fifteenth, that period defined as the Middle Ages, such terrible struggles and fierce upheavals, such ruthless encounters and horrifying acts, were the rule among the peoples of Europe,

that the Europeans rightly describe those ten centuries as the Dark Ages. The basis of Europe's progress and civilization was actually laid in the fifteenth century of the Christian era, and from that time on, all her present evident culture has been, under the stimulus of great minds and as a result of the expansion of the frontiers of knowledge and the exertion of energetic and ambitious efforts, in the process of development.

Today by the grace of God and the spiritual influence of His universal Manifestation, the fair-minded ruler of Írán has gathered his people into the shelter of justice, and the sincerity of the imperial purpose has shown itself in kingly acts. Hoping that his reign will rival the glorious past, he has sought to establish equity and righteousness and to foster education and the processes of civilization throughout this noble land, and to translate from potentiality into actuality whatever will insure its progress. Not until now had we seen a monarch, holding in his capable hands the reins of affairs, and on whose high resolve the welfare of all his subjects depends, exerting as it would befit him, like a benevolent father, his efforts toward the training and cultivation of his people, seeking to insure their well-being and peace of mind, and exhibiting due concern for their interests; this Servant and those like Him have therefore remained silent. Now, however, it is clear to the discerning that the Sháh has of his own accord determined to establish a just government and to secure the progress of all his subjects. His honorable intention has consequently evoked this present statement.

It is indeed strange that instead of offering thanks for this bounty, which truly derives from the grace of Almighty God, by arising as one in gratitude and enthusiasm and praying that these noble purposes will daily multiply, some, on the contrary, whose reason has been corrupted by personal motives and the clarity of whose perception has been clouded by self-interest and conceit; whose energies are devoted to the service of their passions, whose sense of pride is perverted to the love of leadership, have raised the standard of opposition and waxed loud in their complaints. Up to now, they blamed the Sháh for not, on his own initiative, working for his people's welfare and seeking to bring about their peace and well-being. Now that he has inaugurated this great design they have changed their tune. Some say that these are newfangled methods and foreign isms, quite unrelated to the present needs and the time-honored customs of Persia. Others have rallied the helpless masses, who know nothing of religion or its laws and basic principles and therefore have no power of discrimination—and tell them that these modern methods are the practices of heathen peoples, and are contrary to the venerated canons of true faith, and they add the saying, "He who imitates a people is one of them." One group insists that such reforms should go forward with great deliberation, step by step, haste being inadmissible. Another maintains that only such measures should be adopted as the Persians themselves devise, that they themselves should reform their political administration and their educational system and the state of their culture and

that there is no need to borrow improvements from other nations. Every faction, in short, follows its own particular illusion.

O people of Persia! How long will you wander? How long must your confusion last? How long will it go on, this conflict of opinions, this useless antagonism, this ignorance, this refusal to think? Others are alert, and we sleep our dreamless sleep. Other nations are making every effort to improve their condition; we are trapped in our desires and self-indulgences, and at every step we stumble into a new snare.

God is Our witness that We have no ulterior motive in developing this theme. We seek neither to curry favor with any one nor to attract any one to Ourselves nor to derive any material benefit therefrom. We speak only as one earnestly desiring the good pleasure of God, for We have turned Our gaze away from the world and its peoples and have sought refuge in the sheltering care of the Lord. “No pay do I ask of you for this... My reward is of God alone.”⁹

Those who maintain that these modern concepts apply only to other countries and are irrelevant in Írán, that they do not satisfy her requirements or suit her way of life, disregard the fact that other nations were once as we are now. Did not these new systems and procedures, these progressive enterprises, contribute to the advancement of those countries? Were the people of Europe harmed by the adoption of such measures? Or did they rather by these means reach the highest degree of material development?

⁹ Qur’án 6:90; 11:31.

Is it not true that for centuries, the people of Persia have lived as we see them living today, carrying out the pattern of the past? Have any discernible benefits resulted, has any progress been made? If these things had not been tested by experience, some in whose minds the light of native intelligence is clouded, might idly question them. On the contrary, however, every aspect of these prerequisites to progress have in other countries been time and again put to the test, and their benefits demonstrated so plainly that even the dumbest mind can grasp them.

Let us consider this justly and without bias: let us ask ourselves which one of these basic principles and sound, well-established procedures would fail to satisfy our present needs, or would be incompatible with Persia's best political interests or injurious to the general welfare of her people. Would the extension of education, the development of useful arts and sciences, the promotion of industry and technology, be harmful things? For such endeavor lifts the individual within the mass and raises him out of the depths of ignorance to the highest reaches of knowledge and human excellence. Would the setting up of just legislation, in accord with the Divine laws which guarantee the happiness of society and protect the rights of all mankind and are an impregnable proof against assault—would such laws, insuring the integrity of the members of society and their equality before the law, inhibit their prosperity and success?

Or if by using one's perceptive faculties, one can draw analogies from present circumstances and the conclusions arrived

at by collective experience, and can envisage as coming realities situations now only potential, would it be unreasonable to take such present measures as would guarantee our future security? Would it seem shortsighted, improvident and unsound, would it constitute a deviation from what is right and proper, if we were to strengthen our relationships with neighboring countries, enter into binding treaties with the great powers, foster friendly connections with well-disposed governments, look to the expansion of trade with the nations of East and West, develop our natural resources and increase the wealth of our people?

Would it spell perdition for our subjects if the provincial and district governors were relieved of their present absolute authority, whereby they function exactly as they please, and were instead limited to equity and truth, and if their sentences involving capital punishment, imprisonment and the like were contingent on confirmation by the Sháh and by higher courts in the capital, who would first duly investigate the case and determine the nature and seriousness of the crime, and then hand down a just decision subject to the issuance of a decree by the sovereign? If bribery and corruption, known today by the pleasant names of gifts and favors, were forever excluded, would this threaten the foundations of justice? Would it be an evidence of unsound thinking to deliver the soldiery, who are a living sacrifice to the state and the people and brave death at every turn, from their present extreme misery and indigence, and to make adequate arrangements for their sustenance, clothing

and housing, and exert every effort to instruct their officers in military science, and supply them with the most advanced types of firearms and other weapons?

Should anyone object that the above-mentioned reforms have never yet been fully effected, he should consider the matter impartially and know that these deficiencies have resulted from the total absence of a unified public opinion, and the lack of zeal and resolve and devotion in the country's leaders. It is obvious that not until the people are educated, not until public opinion is rightly focused, not until government officials, even minor ones, are free from even the least remnant of corruption, can the country be properly administered. Not until discipline, order and good government reach the degree where an individual, even if he should put forth his utmost efforts to do so, would still find himself unable to deviate by so much as a hair's breadth from righteousness, can the desired reforms be regarded as fully established.

Furthermore, any agency whatever, though it be the instrument of mankind's greatest good, is capable of misuse. Its proper use or abuse depends on the varying degrees of enlightenment, capacity, faith, honesty, devotion and highmindedness of the leaders of public opinion.

The Sháh has certainly done his part, and the execution of the proposed beneficial measures is now in the hands of persons functioning in assemblies of consultation. If these individuals prove to be pure and high-minded, if they remain free from the

taint of corruption, the confirmations of God will make them a never-failing source of bounty to mankind. He will cause to issue from their lips and their pens what will bless the people, so that every corner of this noble country of Írán will be illumined with their justice and integrity and the rays of that light will encompass the whole earth. “Neither will this be difficult with God.”¹⁰

Otherwise it is clear that the results will prove unacceptable. For it has been directly witnessed in certain foreign countries that following on the establishment of parliaments those bodies actually distressed and confused the people and their well-meant reforms produced maleficent results. While the setting up of parliaments, the organizing of assemblies of consultation, constitutes the very foundation and bedrock of government, there are several essential requirements which these institutions must fulfill. First, the elected members must be righteous, God-fearing, high-minded, incorruptible. Second, they must be fully cognizant, in every particular, of the laws of God, informed as to the highest principles of law, versed in the rules which govern the management of internal affairs and the conduct of foreign relations, skilled in the useful arts of civilization, and content with their lawful emoluments.

Let it not be imagined that members of this type would be impossible to find. Through the grace of God and His chosen ones, and the high endeavors of the devoted and the consecrated,

¹⁰ Qur’án 14:23; 35:18.

every difficulty can be easily resolved, every problem however complex will prove simpler than blinking an eye.

If, however, the members of these consultative assemblies are inferior, ignorant, uninformed of the laws of government and administration, unwise, of low aim, indifferent, idle, self-seeking, no benefit will accrue from the organizing of such bodies. Where, in the past, if a poor man wanted his rights he had only to offer a gift to one individual, now he would either have to renounce all hope of justice or else satisfy the entire membership.

Close investigation will show that the primary cause of oppression and injustice, of unrighteousness, irregularity and disorder, is the people's lack of religious faith and the fact that they are uneducated. When, for example, the people are genuinely religious and are literate and well-schooled, and a difficulty presents itself, they can apply to the local authorities; if they do not meet with justice and secure their rights and if they see that the conduct of the local government is incompatible with the Divine good pleasure and the king's justice, they can then take their case to higher courts and describe the deviation of the local administration from the spiritual law. Those courts can then send for the local records of the case and in this way justice will be done. At present, however, because of their inadequate schooling, most of the population lack even the vocabulary to explain what they want.

As to those persons who, here and there, are considered leaders of the people: because this is only the beginning of

the new administrative process, they are not yet sufficiently advanced in their education to have experienced the delights of dispensing justice or to have tasted the exhilaration of promoting righteousness or to have drunk from the springs of a clear conscience and a sincere intent. They have not properly understood that man's supreme honor and real happiness lie in self-respect, in high resolves and noble purposes, in integrity and moral quality, in immaculacy of mind. They have, rather, imagined that their greatness consists in the accumulation, by whatever means may offer, of worldly goods.

A man should pause and reflect and be just: his Lord, out of measureless grace, has made him a human being and honored him with the words: "Verily, We created man in the goodliest of forms"¹¹—and caused His mercy which rises out of the dawn of oneness to shine down upon him, until he became the wellspring of the words of God and the place where the mysteries of heaven alighted, and on the morning of creation he was covered with the rays of the qualities of perfection and the graces of holiness. How can he stain this immaculate garment with the filth of selfish desires, or exchange this everlasting honor for infamy? "Dost thou think thyself only a puny form, when the universe is folded up within thee?"¹²

Were it not our purpose to be brief and to develop our primary subject, we would here set down a summary of themes from the

¹¹ Qur'án 95:4.

¹² The Imám 'Alí.

Divine world, as to the reality of man and his high station and the surpassing value and worth of the human race. Let this be, for another time.

The highest station, the supreme sphere, the noblest, most sublime position in creation, whether visible or invisible, whether alpha or omega, is that of the Prophets of God, notwithstanding the fact that for the most part they have to outward seeming been possessed of nothing but their own poverty. In the same way, ineffable glory is set apart for the Holy Ones and those who are nearest to the Threshold of God, although such as these have never for a moment concerned themselves with material gain. Then comes the station of those just kings whose fame as protectors of the people and dispensers of Divine justice has filled the world, whose name as powerful champions of the people's rights has echoed through creation. These give no thought to amassing enormous fortunes for themselves; they believe, rather, that their own wealth lies in enriching their subjects. To them, if every individual citizen has affluence and ease, the royal coffers are full. They take no pride in gold and silver, but rather in their enlightenment and their determination to achieve the universal good.

Next in rank are those eminent and honorable ministers of state and representatives, who place the will of God above their own, and whose administrative skill and wisdom in the conduct of their office raises the science

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of government to new heights of perfection. They shine in the learned world like lamps of knowledge; their thinking, their attitudes and their acts demonstrate their patriotism and their concern for the country's advancement. Content with a modest stipend, they consecrate their days and nights to the execution of important duties and the devising of methods to insure the progress of the people. Through the effectiveness of their wise counsel, the soundness of their judgment, they have ever caused their government to become an example to be followed by all the governments of the world. They have made their capital city a focal center of great world undertakings, they have won distinction, attaining a supreme degree of personal eminence, and reaching the loftiest heights of repute and character.

Again, there are those famed and accomplished men of learning, possessed of praiseworthy qualities and vast erudition, who lay hold on the strong handle of the fear of God and keep to the ways of salvation. In the mirror of their minds the forms of transcendent realities are reflected, and the lamp of their inner vision derives its light from the sun of universal knowledge. They are busy by night and by day with meticulous research into such sciences as are profitable to mankind, and they devote themselves to the training of students of capacity. It is certain that to their discerning taste, the proffered treasures of

kings would not compare with a single drop of the waters of knowledge, and mountains of gold and silver could not outweigh the successful solution of a difficult problem. To them, the delights that lie outside their work are only toys for children, and the cumbersome load of unnecessary possessions is only good for the ignorant and base. Content, like the birds, they give thanks for a handful of seeds, and the song of their wisdom dazzles the minds of the world's most wise.

Again, there are sagacious leaders among the people and influential personalities throughout the country, who constitute the pillars of state. Their rank and station and success depend on their being the well-wishers of the people and in their seeking out such means as will improve the nation and will increase the wealth and comfort of the citizens.

Observe the case when an individual is an eminent person in his country, zealous, wise, pure-hearted, known for his innate capacity, intelligence, natural perspicacity—and is also an important member of the state: what, for such an individual, can be regarded as honor, abiding happiness, rank and station, whether in the here or the hereafter? Is it a diligent attention to truth and righteousness, is it dedication and resolve and devotion to the good pleasure of God, is it the desire to attract the favorable consideration of the ruler and to merit the approval of the people? Or would it, rather, consist in this, that for the sake of indulging in feasts and dissipations by night he should undermine his country and break the hearts of his people by day, causing his God to

reject him, and his sovereign to cast him out and his people to defame him and hold him in deserved contempt? By God, the mouldering bones in the graveyard are better than such as these! Of what value are they, who have never tasted the heavenly food of truly human qualities, and never drunk of the crystalline waters of those bounties which belong to the realm of man?

It is unquestionable that the object in establishing parliaments is to bring about justice and righteousness, but everything hinges on the efforts of the elected representatives. If their intention is sincere, desirable results and unforeseen improvements will be forthcoming; if not, it is certain that the whole thing will be meaningless, the country will come to a standstill and public affairs will continuously deteriorate. "I see a thousand builders unequal to one subverter; what then of the one builder who is followed by a thousand subverters?"

The purpose of the foregoing statements is to demonstrate at least this, that the happiness and greatness, the rank and station, the pleasure and peace, of an individual have never consisted in his personal wealth, but rather in his excellent character, his high resolve, the breadth of his learning, and his ability to solve difficult problems. How well has it been said: "On my back is a garment which, were it sold for a penny, that penny would be worth far more; yet within the garment is a soul which, if you weighed it against all the souls in the world, would prove greater and nobler."

In the present writer's view it would be preferable if the

election of nonpermanent members of consultative assemblies in sovereign states should be dependent on the will and choice of the people. For elected representatives will on this account be somewhat inclined to exercise justice, lest their reputation suffer and they fall into disfavor with the public.

It should not be imagined that the writer's earlier remarks constitute a denunciation of wealth or a commendation of poverty. Wealth is praiseworthy in the highest degree, if it is acquired by an individual's own efforts and the grace of God, in commerce, agriculture, art and industry, and if it be expended for philanthropic purposes. Above all, if a judicious and resourceful individual should initiate measures which would universally enrich the masses of the people, there could be no undertaking greater than this, and it would rank in the sight of God as the supreme achievement, for such a benefactor would supply the needs and insure the comfort and well-being of a great multitude. Wealth is most commendable, provided the entire population is wealthy. If, however, a few have inordinate riches while the rest are impoverished, and no fruit or benefit accrues from that wealth, then it is only a liability to its possessor. If, on the other hand, it is expended for the promotion of knowledge, the founding of elementary and other schools, the encouragement of art and industry, the training of orphans and the poor—in brief, if it is dedicated to the welfare of society—its possessor will stand out before God and man as the most excellent of all who live on earth and will be accounted as one of the people of paradise.

As to those who maintain that the inauguration of reforms and the setting up of powerful institutions would in reality be at variance with the good pleasure of God and would contravene the laws of the Divine Law-Giver and run counter to basic religious principles and to the ways of the Prophet—let them consider how this could be the case. Would such reforms contravene the religious law because they would be acquired from foreigners and would therefore cause us to be as they are, since “He who imitates a people is one of them”? In the first place these matters relate to the temporal and material apparatus of civilization, the implements of science, the adjuncts of progress in the professions and the arts, and the orderly conduct of government. They have nothing whatever to do with the problems of the spirit and the complex realities of religious doctrine. If it be objected that even where material affairs are concerned foreign importations are inadmissible, such an argument would only establish the ignorance and absurdity of its proponents. Have they forgotten the celebrated hadíth (Holy Tradition): “Seek after knowledge, even unto China”? It is certain that the people of China were, in the sight of God, among the most rejected of men, because they worshiped idols and were unmindful of the omniscient Lord. The Europeans are at least “Peoples of the Book,” and believers in God and specifically referred to in the sacred verse, “Thou shalt certainly find those to be nearest in affection to the believers, who say, ‘We are Christians.’”¹³ It is therefore quite

¹³ Qur’án 5:85.

permissible and indeed more appropriate to acquire knowledge from Christian countries. How could seeking after knowledge among the heathen be acceptable to God, and seeking it among the People of the Book be repugnant to Him?

Furthermore, in the Battle of the Confederates, Abú Súfyan enlisted the aid of the Baní Kináneh, the Baní Qahtán and the Jewish Baní Qurayzih and rose up with all the tribes of the Quraysh to put out the Divine Light that flamed in the lamp of Yathrib (Medina). In those days the great winds of trials and tribulations were blowing from every direction, as it is written: “Do men think when they say ‘We believe’ they shall be let alone and not be put to proof?”¹⁴ The believers were few and the enemy attacking in force, seeking to blot out the new-risen Sun of Truth with the dust of oppression and tyranny. Then Salmán (the Persian) came into the presence of the Prophet—the Dawning-Point of revelation, the Focus of the endless splendors of grace—and he said that in Persia to protect themselves from an encroaching host they would dig a moat or trench about their lands, and that this had proved a highly efficient safeguard against surprise attacks. Did that Wellspring of universal wisdom, that Mine of divine knowledge say in reply that this was a custom current among idolatrous, fire-worshipping Magians and could therefore hardly be adopted by monotheists? Or did He rather immediately direct His followers to set about digging a trench? He even, in His Own blessed person, took hold of the tools and

¹⁴ Qur’án 29:2.

went to work beside them.

It is moreover a matter of record in the books of the various Islamic schools and the writings of leading divines and historians, that after the Light of the World had risen over Hījáz, flooding all mankind with Its brilliance, and creating through the revelation of a new divine Law, new principles and institutions, a fundamental change throughout the world—holy laws were revealed which in some cases conformed to the practices of the Days of Ignorance.¹⁵ Among these, Muḥammad respected the months of religious truce,¹⁶ retained the prohibition of swine's flesh, continued the use of the lunar calendar and the names of the months and so on. There is a considerable number of such laws specifically enumerated in the texts:

“The people of the Days of Ignorance engaged in many practices which the Law of Islām later confirmed. They would not take in marriage both a mother and her daughter, and the most shameful of acts in their view was to marry two sisters. They would stigmatize a man marrying the wife of his father, derisively calling him his father's competitor. It was their custom to go on pilgrimage to the House at Mecca, where they would perform the ceremonies of visitation, putting on the pilgrim's dress, practicing the circumambulation, running between the

¹⁵ Jāhiliyyih: the period of paganism in Arabia, prior to the advent of Muḥammad.

¹⁶ The pagan Arabs observed one separate and three consecutive months of truce, during which period pilgrimages were made to Mecca, and fairs, poetry contests and similar events took place.

hills, pausing at all the stopping-places, and casting the stones. It was, furthermore, their wont to intercalate one month in every three-year period, to perform ablutions after intercourse, to rinse out the mouth and snuff up water through the nostrils, to part the hair, use the tooth-stick, pare the nails and pluck the armpits. They would, likewise, cut off the right hand of a thief.”

Can one, God forbid, assume that because some of the divine laws resemble the practices of the Days of Ignorance, the customs of a people abhorred by all nations, it follows that there is a defect in these laws? Or can one, God forbid, imagine that the Omnipotent Lord was moved to comply with the opinions of the heathen? The divine wisdom takes many forms. Would it have been impossible for Muḥammad to reveal a Law which bore no resemblance whatever to any practice current in the Days of Ignorance? Rather, the purpose of His consummate wisdom was to free the people from the chains of fanaticism which had bound them hand and foot, and to forestall those very objections which today confuse the mind and trouble the conscience of the simple and helpless.

Some, who are not sufficiently informed as to the meaning of the divine Texts and the contents of traditional and written history, will aver that these customs of the Days of Ignorance were laws which had come down from His Holiness Abraham and had been retained by the idolaters. In this connection they will cite the Qur’ānic verse: “Follow the religion of Abraham, the

sound in faith.”¹⁷

¹⁷ Qur’án 16:124.

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