

KNOWLEDGE AND THE SELF

The mission of Islam is conquest at three levels:

- conquest of the self
- conquest of the environment
- conquest of nature

It is important to remember that Islam as a way of life (dīn) is comprehensive; therefore, there is no distinction between worldly and other-worldly pursuits.

Tazkiyah (self- purification) is an important marker in the development of one's personality. It fully recognises the highs and lows or the conflicting impulses that reside in man. Several verses (āyāt) of the Qur'ān highlight the necessity of overcoming the baser self (*nafs al-ammārah*) in order to develop a holistic personality. This is no easy path to rightfully become *khalīfat-Allah* (custodian of Allah) as it requires rigorous discipline to conquer the baser self. On a broader level the instinctive self is dominant in man and desires wealth, power and pleasure. When it appears in the form of a raging storm, then man becomes a brute. Constant struggle and perseverance against these desires is termed as *jihad al-akbar* (the greatest striving).

The human personality has two facets: light and darkness, good and evil. The following *ayah* explains it fully:

He who permits his personality to become stunted or falls prey to evil, is a hopeless failure.

(91:10)

Therefore, the purpose of human life is to realise the potential of *khalīfat-Allah*. In other words, man has to follow the straight path as outlined in the Qur'ān and the noble example of the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.) and not deviate from it. This, in essence, is conquest of the self.

The second level is conquest of the environment. The

individual lives in a social order and has to interact with others in a conducive environment. Thus the purity of the environment which is free from toxic elements makes it possible for the individual to eradicate all types of moral and spiritual evils. The following āyah states clearly the function of the ummah:

You are the best community that has been raised for mankind. You enjoin what is right and forbid (eradicate) evil and you believe in Allah.
(3: 110)

The third level of conquest relates to nature. The cosmos points out to the vastness of space which requires knowledge and expertise to probe into the grand design of Allah's creation. Again, the Qur'ān reminds mankind to explore the universe in order to understand the deep meaning of *kehalifat-Allah*. In Islam the quest of knowledge, secular and religious, is emphasised. In the heyday of Islamic civilisation, distinguished Islamic scholars who made a mark in Islamic sciences had mastery over the various branches of secular knowledge. In fact, the madrasah was the site of holistic learning. Over the centuries this prestigious institution fell into decline; now this institution offers only Islamic education.

Islamic strongly advocates the fusion of faith and reason and the Qur'ān constantly reminds us of the importance of *`ilm* (knowledge). Sadly, the Muslim community is caught up in rituals where calculator reward has overwhelmed their mindset. As a result, intellectual stagnation has set in and offers no prospects of Islamic renewal. Education is no longer the prized possession of Muslims and they therefore suffer an inferiority complex. In fact, it will become a memory of the past and Muslims will remain debased.
