

The burden of duty on prophets of God and their followers

Friday Khutba by Dr Zahid Aziz, for Lahore Ahmadiyya UK, 21 January 2022

قُلْ أَغْيِرَ اللَّهُ أْبْعِي رَبًّا وَهُوَ رَبُّ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ ۗ وَلَا تَكْسِبُ كُلُّ نَفْسٍ إِلَّا عَلَيْهَا ۗ وَلَا تَزِرُ وَازِرَةٌ وِزْرَ أُخْرَىٰ ۗ
ثُمَّ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكُمْ مَرْجِعُكُمْ فَيُنَبِّئُكُمْ بِمَا كُنتُمْ فِيهِ تَخْتَلِفُونَ ﴿١٦٤﴾

“Say: Shall I seek a Lord other than Allah, while He is the Lord of all things? And no soul earns (evil) but against itself. Nor does a bearer of burden bear another’s burden. Then to your Lord is your return, so He will inform you of that in which you differed.” — ch. 6, v. 164.

This verse contains the expression which I discussed in the last *khutba*, that a bearer of burden does not, and cannot, bear the burden of another. God is the Lord of “everything”, *kullu shai’-in*. Why look for others to relieve you of the burden of your wrongdoings? It is His law that the burden of a person’s wrongdoings falls only on himself, not on anyone else, and He is the One to whom you will return for judgment.

Today I want to notice another point about the words in this expression. These do not simply say that *a person* cannot bear another’s burden. They say: Someone who is himself *a bearer of burden* cannot bear another’s burden. You cannot shift your burden to someone else because that person has his own burden to bear. A prophet, holy man, or *pir* cannot take your burden because he has his own burden to bear.

A prophet had no burden of his own **sins** to bear, as prophets cannot commit sin. Still, the very thought of committing a sin or a shortfall in their duty weighed heavily on their minds. Also, the duty of delivering the message of God to their people and being an example to them was a burden upon them. The Quran says to people about the Holy Prophet: “... he is responsible for the duty imposed on him, and you are responsible for the duty imposed on you” (24:54). In another place we are told: “Then certainly We shall question those to whom messengers were sent, and We shall question the messengers” (7:6). Indeed, the questioning of Jesus by God in the after-life is

mentioned: “And when Allah will say: O Jesus, son of Mary, did you say to people, Take me and my mother for two gods besides Allah? He will say: Glory be to You! It was not for me to say what I had no right to (say). If I had said it, You would indeed have known it. You know what is in my mind, and I do not know what is in Your mind. Surely You are the great Knower of the unseen. I said to them nothing but what You commanded me: Serve Allah, my Lord and your Lord; and I was a witness of them so long as I was among them, but when You caused me to die You were the Watcher over them. And You are Witness of all things” (5:116–117).

There is a well-known short chapter in the Quran in which God says to the Holy Prophet: “Have We not expanded for you your breast (with Divine light), and removed from you your burden, which weighed down your back?” (94:1–3). The word for “burden” here is again *wizra*. This revelation came to the Holy Prophet at the beginning of his mission. Removing his burden here means that he has been granted the internal strength of heart and the light with which to carry out his duty of delivering the message that came to him from God and bringing about the reform of people. Removing the Holy Prophet’s burden does not, of course, mean that the responsibility has been lifted from his shoulders. Later on, the Holy Prophet was reminded in the Quran: “O Messenger, deliver what has been revealed to you from your Lord; and if you do not, you have not delivered His message. And Allah will protect you from people” (5:67). Of course, there was no actual possibility that he would not deliver the message. This verse simply stresses that it is his duty to take the message to the people, and it promises that God will protect him against his enemies.

In connection with the battles that the Muslims had to fight in self-defence, we read this instruction to the Holy Prophet: “Fight then in Allah’s way — you are not responsible except for yourself; and urge on the believers. It may be that Allah will restrain the fighting of those who disbelieve” (4:84). First I point out that the last words show that Muslims were being urged by the Holy Prophet to fight in self-defence because it says that if Muslims fight then this might restrain their enemies. A non-Muslim translator of the Quran, Edward Palmer, translates these words as: “restrain the violence” of the disbelievers. Some others have it as: “restrain the fury”

of the disbelievers. But leaving that aside, this verse states that the Holy Prophet is only responsible for himself in acting on the command of God. He can urge the believers to do so as well, but he is not held responsible if they do not obey God's command.

So, prophets were bearers of their own burden. Therefore, they could not bear the burdens of anyone else, or of their followers. In this matter, Christians have gone to one extreme and Buddhists to the opposite extreme. Buddha is said to have taught: "To depend on others for salvation is negative, but to depend on oneself is positive." And a Buddhist writer, who has quoted this, writes that the Buddha is **not**: "a saviour who freely saves others by His personal salvation. The Buddha exhorts His disciples to depend on themselves for their deliverance. ... Dependence on others means a surrender of one's effort" (*Buddhism in a Nutshell*, ch. 1). And he goes on to write: "In Buddhism there is not, as in most other religions, an Almighty God to be obeyed and feared. ... In Buddhism there are no divine revelations or divine messengers.... [Buddhism] teaches that man can gain deliverance from suffering by his own efforts independent of divine help or mediating priests" (ch. 3).

This is the opposite extreme to that of the Christian religion which teaches that, to enter heaven or *jannah*, you must believe in Jesus having suffered the punishment for your sins, and just this belief will make you enter heaven. Islam has taken a middle approach, and we believe that the founders of other faiths had originally taught the same approach, which their followers took to one extreme or the other extreme. Islam also teaches, like Buddhism, that a person has to make the effort for self-improvement himself, and he cannot rely on the Holy Prophet Muhammad or any saint or religious leader to take him to heaven just by being their blind follower. But he has to be taught by God how to make that effort and he needs a human model whose example he can act upon. He has to measure himself against a yardstick and a standard. That is what is provided by God and His Messenger in the form of the Quran and the Sunnah.

I think it is obvious that, no matter how much Buddhists may claim that they don't depend on the Buddha but only on their personal effort, the fact that they call them-

selves Buddhists and hold Buddha up as their example, does actually make them dependent on him. The Buddhist scholar that I mentioned above also writes that Buddha clarified his relationship with his followers, and emphasized the importance of self-reliance and individual striving, by his saying: “You should exert yourselves, the Tathagatas are only teachers”. This title ‘Tathagata’ is one of the titles of the Buddha, and it has been given several meanings, for example, ‘One who has become perfect’ and ‘One who has discovered truth’. This is like what we in Islam call prophet. Compare this statement of the Buddha with the following verse of the Quran, in which the Holy Prophet Muhammad is told by God to say to people: “I am only a mortal like you — it is revealed to me that your God is one God. So whoever hopes to meet his Lord, **he should** do good deeds, and **make no one** a partner (with God) in the service of his Lord” (18:110). The Holy Prophet therefore said to people: You must make the effort to do good deeds and worship God alone, by your belief, by your prayer, and by your deeds, without making anyone else a partner with Him; I myself am only a mortal who has come to teach you that God is One.

Buddha lived about four to five centuries before Jesus, and Jesus lived six centuries before the Holy Prophet Muhammad. Buddhism is regarded, especially by its Western admirers, as a very intellectual and philosophical religion, one which appeals to great minds and thinkers. Yet, as we see, its wisdom is not only repeated by Islam but it is made more perfect in it.

I end with a hadith from Bukhari. The Holy Prophet said: “No one’s good deeds will make him enter paradise.” People asked: “Not even you?” He replied: “No, not even me, unless Allah bestows His favour and mercy on me” (Bukhari, hadith 5673). The meaning is that no one, whether prophet or follower of prophet, should feel secure and comfortable that he has done all the good deeds required to enter paradise. You cannot count good deeds. People who do good deeds as a ritual, and count that they have said so many prayers or *rakahs* of prayer, or kept this many fasts, or given this much in charity, they are the ones who feel an entitlement to enter paradise because of how much they have done. Instead, what one should do is to hope for God’s favour and mercy. The Holy Prophet went on to say in this hadith: “So you should keep to

moderation in your deeds and seek nearness to God.” In other words, do whatever you can within reason, and do it to seek nearness to God.

He went on to say in this hadith: “None of you should wish for death, because if he is a good person, he may increase his good deeds, and if he is an evil person, he may repent.” What a great message of hope and optimism! **Neither** think I have done all possible good, so I want my life to come to an end, **nor** think I have done so much wrong that there is nothing left for me but to die. Wish always for life, because of the opportunity it offers to everyone, to a good person as well as a bad one!

بَارَكَ اللهُ لَنَا وَنَا وَتَكْرَمَ فِي الْقُرْآنِ الْعَظِيمِ، وَنَفَعَنَا وَإِيَّاكُمْ بِالْآيَاتِ وَالذِّكْرِ الْحَكِيمِ، إِنَّهُ تَعَالَى جَوَادٌ كَرِيمٌ
مَلِكٌ بَرٌّ رَوْوْفٌ رَحِيمٌ-