

The Office of Prophethood

Majallat al-Hidaya, January 1910

We write today on this subject in order to clarify two religious matters that the common run of Muslims have misunderstood, and in which a certain faction of those who falsely claim to speak for religion, while in truth trespassing upon it, have gone to excess — deceiving and misleading people until they have very nearly led them into confusion about their own religion, and until the ignorance of the one group and the excess of the other have very nearly brought them to drink of religion something foul, to be given its purity turned turbid, and have brought them to the brink of associating with God, mighty and glorious, beings who possess for them neither benefit nor harm, neither good nor evil, in any measure at all.

These two matters are: what is the office of the Prophet, peace be upon him? And what must be safeguarded from error within it? For those corrupting extremists have claimed that the Prophet, peace be upon him, must encompass all things in his knowledge, that his message must deliver to us everything, and that he must be infallible in everything — reciting to us the Book and the Wisdom, teaching us language and philosophy, instructing us in craft and commerce and agriculture and everything that man might need in this world or the next, being in all of this a scholar of pre-eminence, into whom neither error nor conjecture creeps, and whom neither doubt nor illusion ever reaches. Exalted are You, O God, and hallowed are Your names, and too great is Your majesty for any equal or partner drawn from such shameless claims as these, which the brazen-faced and hard-hearted spread among the common people in their sanctification of persons, raising them to the rank of divinity!

Human society has been afflicted by two repugnant vices, which are the source of every evil and sin: the one, the vice of associating partners with God; the other, the vice of tyranny in dominion. However much you exhaust yourself in searching and investigation, you will find no ground for singling out any individual with divinity, or with tyrannical rule, save what those denying extremists themselves invent for him — attributes and titles more rightly belonging to God, mighty and glorious, than to one whose origin is water and clay.

So when we explain today these two matters, and set out the Islamic creed concerning them, and call Muslims to hold fast to their firm supports and their sturdy handholds, we are calling them to nothing but what Muhammad, peace be upon him, himself urged upon them: faith that sovereignty belongs to God alone, and that after God the community has no partner in its own rights.

It was the will of God, mighty and glorious, to create man as by nature a social, civic being, prepared to advance and hold dominion over this world and all that is in it, and to make this worldly life a path toward another life of complete perfection and everlasting happiness. And He, glory be to Him, knew that this life is a dark and obscure path, so He granted man reason, a spark of His own light — exalted be His name — to guide him toward the right way and direct him to the straight path, by which he might come to know his own true interests and discern his own benefits in this worldly life, so that his affairs might proceed rightly and his condition remain ordered. And He knew, too, that this weak creature could attain that only by glorifying reason, submitting to it, and being guided by its guidance. And He knew that this reason falls short of securing for him, in the fullest and best manner, knowledge of his interests in the life to come and his benefits in religion; so He granted him another reason, as it were — the messengers, whom God, mighty and glorious, sent in succession among the nations, one following another through the generations of mankind.

This is a thing no adherent of any faith doubts, and no follower of any religion disputes; and from it we know with the certainty of true knowledge that the work of the messengers, God's blessings be upon them, was precisely this: to guide people in their religion and to lay the ground for the affairs of their common life, so that they might depart from it in safety toward the other abode, and so that people should have no argument against God after the coming of the messengers. And He, glory be to Him, knew that this could come about only if those who conveyed His message were such as could make people understand His call, explain to them His message, and establish upon them His proof; so He chose, from every nation, a messenger sent to it.

So ran the way of God among the peoples of old, until Muhammad, peace be upon him, came to complete for mankind His religion and perfect for them His law; and he discharged the trust, delivered the message, made plain the proof, and established the evidence — then God chose for him what was with Him, and he passed on to the abode of bliss.

If this, then, is the work of the messengers, and this the wisdom of God in sending them, then reason without doubt affirms that they must be protected from error and falsehood in what they convey from God, glory and majesty be His, so that their call may be a truth unmixed with falsehood, and a certainty leaving no room for doubt.

This much reason affirms, and no more; for you will see that their infallibility is, by reason's own reckoning, bounded by the limits of revelation, and that reason does not require their infallibility in anything beyond that. It does not require of them that they be physicians, or astronomers, or mathematicians — for they were not sent to be such; they were sent only to be bringers of good tidings and warners, to those who believe in God and those who disbelieve in Him. In all else, there is no difference, small or great, between them and the rest of mankind.

As for the sciences and crafts and the other affairs of this world, the way to them is only through the effort and toil of reason; for God, mighty and glorious, did not grant us reason in vain, nor create it in us without wisdom. And had it been the work of the messengers to guide us to everything we need in this life, reason would have served no purpose, and no wisdom would be borne out in its creation. God, mighty and glorious, is far above vanity in His acts — and this is not something we have invented or fabricated of our own accord, but is rather the very position held by the leading scholars of the Muslims and by their consensus generally; for they have affirmed infallibility for the prophets only against deliberate lying in matters where the miracle attested to their truthfulness — such as the claim of prophethood itself, and what they convey from God — while permitting to them lapses of forgetfulness (though some scholars dissented from this), and affirming their protection from grave sin and from unbelief after revelation (though the Kharijites dissented from this). Even so, the Sunni scholars protected them from grave sin only on the authority of transmitted texts, not by reason alone — for by reason alone they allowed the possibility. And concerning all of this, before revelation, there is much disagreement among them, which whoever wishes may consult in the books of theology. Given, then, that the furthest reason requires, and that the leading scholars of the Muslims agree upon, is the infallibility of the prophets from deliberate lying in what the miracle attested to their truthfulness, and from unbelief and grave sin after revelation — and given that reason guides us to nothing beyond this — on what ground, then, do we invent for the prophets that they should encompass all things in their

knowledge?! And this is not all we have to say on the subject; for many of the leading scholars of the Muslims, in theology and in the principles of jurisprudence, have permitted that the Prophet, peace be upon him, might exercise independent judgement in legal rulings before the descent of revelation, and that he might err in that judgement. They said: this indeed occurred, as many verses of the noble Book attest — as in His saying, mighty and glorious: "It is not fitting for a prophet that he should have prisoners of war until he has thoroughly subdued the land. You desire the goods of this world, but God desires [for you] the Hereafter" [Quran 8:67]. The origin of this was that he, peace be upon him, consulted his two companions Abu Bakr and Umar concerning the prisoners of Badr; Abu Bakr advised taking ransom for them, since they were close kinsmen, while Umar advised putting them to death; and the Prophet, peace be upon him, inclined to Abu Bakr's view — whereupon God reproached him for this in the verse.

This is a hadith related by Muslim, and an account which the historians report at greater length than this. We say: had the Prophet, peace be upon him, been infallible in absolutely everything, speaking truth and rightness in every matter, it would never have been permissible for him to exercise independent judgement or to take counsel — for the truth would never have been hidden from him, no opinion would have stood above his own, and error would never have befallen him. Yet all of this did in fact occur. And if this does not suffice to convince the stubborn and the obstinate, then in His saying, mighty and glorious, "and consult them in the matter" [Quran 3:159], there is enough to cut short the tongues of those who argue falsely and to break the pens of those who mislead; for God knew that the Prophet, peace be upon him, was a human being who erred and who was right, that perfect infallibility belongs to Him alone, and that the view of the community, where no revelation had come down, was nearer to the truth than the Prophet's own opinion — so He commanded him to consultation, and the Prophet recognised this in himself and so took counsel, and very often consulted his companions on matters both particular and general, and acted upon their opinion, unless revelation came down. And it is related in the Sahih of al-Bukhari that he, peace be upon him, consulted Ali and Usama ibn Zayd concerning the affair of the slander [al-ifk], and acted on Usama's opinion, until revelation came down and the slanderers were flogged. And it is also related in the Sahih of al-Bukhari that he, peace be upon him, consulted his companions about marching out to Uhud, and they advised him to do so; but when he had put on his armour and made ready to go out, they

then advised him to remain — yet he refused, in obedience to His saying, mighty and glorious, "and when you have resolved, then put your trust in God" [Quran 3:159], and said to his companions: "It is not fitting for a prophet, once he has put on his armour, to lay it aside until God has judged [between the two sides]." And al-Bukhari devoted a chapter, in his Sahih, to those matters about which he, peace be upon him, was asked before revelation and either kept silent or said, "I do not know." Many accounts are related concerning his silence, among them the hadith of Ibn Mas'ud: "While I was walking with the Prophet, peace be upon him, among the ruins of Medina, he leaning upon a palm-stalk, we passed by a group of Jews, and some of them said to the others: Ask him about the spirit. And some of them said: Do not ask him, lest he bring you some answer you dislike. But others said: We shall indeed ask him. So a man among them stood and said: O Abu'l-Qasim, what is the spirit? And he fell silent. I said [to myself]: he is receiving revelation now — so I stood aside; and when it had passed from him, he said: 'They ask you about the spirit. Say: the spirit is of the affair of my Lord, and you have been given of knowledge only a little' [Quran 17:85]."

And there are authentically related, though not meeting al-Bukhari's own criteria, other hadiths indicating that the Prophet, peace be upon him, was asked something and said: "I do not know." Among them, that a man asked him: which region of the earth is finest? And he said: "I do not know" (see the commentaries on al-Bukhari by Ibn Hajar [Fath al-Bari] and al-Qastallani [Irshad al-Sari]). And whoever reads the accounts of the military campaigns in the books of hadith and biography will know that the Prophet, peace be upon him, very often consulted his companions in matters of war and acted upon their opinion; and in the story of Badr there is, in this regard, enough to quench any thirst for proof. And it is authentically related, in more than one book of the Sunna, that he said: "You know better the affairs of your worldly life," and that he said: "Whatever concerns your religion is for me [to decide]; whatever concerns your worldly affairs, you know better."

And the Companions of the Prophet, peace be upon him, came to recognise in him this inclination toward consultation; so that, whenever he resolved upon something, they would ask him: is this revelation, or is it [your own] opinion? And if it was opinion, they would offer him their counsel, and he would listen to them (see the story of Badr).

All of these are plain proofs, unmixed with doubt, which no conjecture can touch in the eyes of any person — unless he disbelieves in

God and denies His Book — and all of them show that the Prophet, peace be upon him, was not infallible except in what he conveyed from God, mighty and glorious; that he himself knew this, and so left the affairs of this world to the people themselves; and that God, mighty and glorious, knew this, and so commanded him to consultation. And someone might perhaps say: does this not diminish the Prophet's standing and belittle him? We say: not at all — rather, it is the very excess in sanctifying and glorifying him, adding to what is found in the Book of God and the Sunna of His Messenger, that diminishes his standing; for that is a lie told against him and a fabrication against God. And what could diminish a person's standing more than praising him for what is not truly in him? God, mighty and glorious, has said: "Say: I am only a human being like yourselves; it is revealed to me that your God is one God. So whoever hopes for the meeting with his Lord, let him do righteous deeds, and associate no one in the worship of his Lord" [Quran 18:110]. He gave the Prophet no distinction over the people save through revelation and the message — and that alone is a blessing beyond which no human being could ever hope for more.

And now, having spoken at length without wearying you, and having achieved what we intended in establishing what we claimed, we must stop at this point; and we truly hope that in this discourse there may be guidance for the misguided, and instruction for the ignorant.