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In haste

Monday, 23rd Aug 99

Dear Ravi,

(I remember telling you in
my last that I would be sending a
few things for you to read. The

(50 paise Swadhyaya, you may
be interested (or not!). But it is
attracting the middle classes in

Maharashtra of Gujarat. The
founder of the movement seems

to be a fine person. He looks
that's what I think.

Sorry to bother you, I disturb you.
yrs
Channer.

P.S. Did your grand father's pocket

Watch, announce the time a
messing in Kurt?!

I am curious.

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Swadhyaya

A Movement of the Spirit

By GOPAL KRISHNA

The genius of Indian civilisation is continuously creative. It expresses itself from time to time through movements of self-renewal. One such movement is *Swadhyaya*. It is the creation of Pandurang Shastri Athavale, affectionately known as 'Dadaji', whose life has been dedicated to the renewal of our civilisation.

Swadhyaya is a movement of the spirit. Its fundamental premise seems to me to be that, man is a spiritual being, infused with the permanent presence of the divine. This presence of divinity sanctifies man. Knowledge of it elevates him to his true spiritual status. Such a man informed by self-awareness (cultivation of which is the endeavour of *swadhyaya*) becomes, or rather makes himself into, an agent of the ever-present divinity. He recognises divinity in himself and in all other creatures, and that forms the foundation of his bond of affection and fellowship with them.

That a movement grounded in such a philosophical anthropology should flourish in the latter half of the 20th century in what must be regarded as the most advanced regions of India (Gujarat and Maharashtra) is a remarkable testimony to the persistence of religion in the consciousness of the people. The religious tradition of India is very ancient and is continuously renewed by divine incarnations and by semi-divine teachers, preceptors, men of thought and action. *Swadhyaya* belongs to that tradition.

Depleted Condition

Swadhyaya was born out of a profound sense of anxiety for the spiritual and social well-being of the Indian people, who, under the impact of historical misfortunes and the corrosive influences of contemporary civilisation, had become alienated from their own traditions and in the process become spiritually, morally and materially impoverished. The spirit of fellowship had given way to indifference to one's fellow beings, of robust self-assertion to fear and feeble compromises, of honour to dissimulation, of moral rectitude to manipulation. The founder's concern over the depleted spiritual, moral and material condition of the Indian people led him to found the *Swadhyaya* movement, whose primary focus is on *bhakti*, (devotion) with Sri Krishna, *Yogeshwar* (the lord of the *Yogins*), as its recipient, and the *Gita* as its master text. That Krishna *bhakti* could elicit such an astonishing response and generate and sustain such a vast variety of activities leading to individual and collective renewal in a world in which religious spirit is on the decline comes as something of a marvellous surprise.

The God of the *Gita* is a constant companion to man, in this case Arjuna. In a sense man only fulfils God's design, but man is not a passive agent. He is a thinking, and in some measure autonomous, being. It is because he is a thinking being that he experiences doubts, has to confront moral dilemmas and has to make right i.e. *dharmaic* choices.

Dharmic Duty

This autonomy of man, in the discharge of his *dharmaic* duty, aided by God is one of the key precepts of *Swadhyaya*. Taking the *Gita* as the guide, the founder of the movement advises its adherents to pursue the three prescribed paths of *Bhakti*, *Karma*, and *Gyana*, exercising critical reason in all they do and dedicating their endeavours to the divine *Yogeshwar*. Work done in that spirit liberates man from bondage while enabling him to fulfil his *dharma*. *Swadhyaya* activities are undertaken in that spirit.

The varied activities of *Swadhyaya* (*Yogeshwar*, *Krishni*, *Matsyagandha*, *Vraksha Mandir*, *Amritalyam*, *Pathshalas* and *Vidhyapith* and a host of others) have exerted wholesome influences on those who participate in them and all those who interact with them. But the founder insists that the primary drive behind all *Swadhyaya* effort is *bhakti*, devotion to *Yogeshwar*. The activity may result in social benefits but that is not the end *Swadhyayees* pursue. It is a welcome, but secondary, result. Dadaji once said:

"We are trying to bridge the gulf between the haves and the have nots but we are not socialists. We are trying to make women aware of their strength, instil self-esteem in them but we are not women-liberators. We are trying to improve and change the educational system and have started schools with this aim, but we are not educationists. We do not encourage religious fundamentalism. We are not interested in active politics. We regard the downtrodden as the children of God and work for their welfare, but we are not social workers. The *Swadhyaya* family works according to divine teachings of the ancient sages".

Swadhyaya's principal method of work designed to establish mutuality between people is *bhakti-pheri*. In an age where mutuality outside family has almost disappeared, *bhakti-pheri* initiates human contact that is not exploitative. It restores conditions for a living, active community. This community experiences spiritual and moral unity which underpins its life of work and pleasure. *Swadhyaya* generates a sentiment of fellowship, which is so lacking in our society, and which we so sorely need for re-establishing wholesome collective life for ourselves. Fellowship leads to

sharing, which sustains the community.

Swadhyaya endeavours to strengthen the family. Modern condition: have tended to undermine this primary institution of human life. Its weakening has given rise to disorientation, violence, want of an anchor to a very large number of people. Among the *Swadhyayees* family is cherished and one can see its beneficial results in their domestic lives as well as work. It also overcomes many of the divisions which give rise to social conflicts in our time, those focusing on class, caste, religion, gender and age.

It is important to notice what *Swadhyaya* is not: it is not ascetic; it resists resignation and world renunciation; it is not political. Dadaji rejects all contemporary ideologies — individualism, socialism, capitalism, liberalism and the rest of it. In one of his speeches he said *Swadhyaya* stands for *Iswarwad*, i.e. devotion to god, from which flows devotion to man, nature and its other creatures. It generates virtue, self-respect and a sense of responsibility.

In its intellectual orientation, in its programmes and in its actions, *Swadhyaya* is often very radical. A movement dedicated to renewal has to reject those parts of entrenched ideas and institutions which in the light of reason and experience, are seen to be inimical to individual and collective well-being. Thus *Swadhyaya* does not acknowledge untouchability; on the contrary it insists on the brotherhood of all. Gandhiji had taught this truth to us, and *Swadhyayees* practice it in everyday life with commendable results.

Cultural Movement

Swadhyaya is also a cultural movement of the highest importance. Its systematic and dedicated promotion of Sanskrit through its educational institutions and its endeavours to disseminate Sanskritic culture through its activities have the effect of taking Sanskrit and the culture it embodies to the hitherto marginalised sections of our society. This is a process of higher cultural integration of India which has been in abeyance for an unconscionably long time.

Hindu civilisation holds God to be central to man's self-awareness. The greatest of art, the most sublime of music, the highest expression of virtue in life — all these are indubitably inspired by an overwhelming sense of the presence of God, infusing all that there is. *Swadhyaya* reaffirms this truth and has demonstrated through its many activities its abiding efficacy.

(The author is associated with the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi, and Wolfson College, Oxford.)

Review of Why I am Not a Muslim

This review (by Daniel Pipes) came out about a year ago in
The Weekly Standard.

Why I Am Not a Muslim. By Ibn Warraq [pseud.]. Amherst, N.Y.:
Prometheus, 1995. 402 pp. \$25.95.

In March 1989, shortly after Ayatollah Khomeini issued his decree sentencing Salman Rushdie to death for his novel *The Satanic Verses*, London's *Observer* newspaper published an anonymous letter from Pakistan. In it, the writer, a Muslim who did not give his name, stated that "Salman Rushdie speaks for me." He then explained:

mine is a voice that has not yet found expression in newspaper columns. It is the voice of those who are born Muslims but wish to recant in adulthood, yet are not permitted to on pain of death.

Someone who does not live in an Islamic society cannot imagine the sanctions, both self-imposed and external, that militate against expressing religious disbelief. "I don't believe in God" is an impossible public utterance even among family and friends. . . . So we hold our tongues, those of us who doubt.

"Ibn Warraq" has decided no longer to hold his tongue. Identified only as a man who grew up in a country now called an Islamic republic, presently living and teaching in Ohio, the Khomeini decree so outraged him that he wrote a book that transcends *The Satanic Verses* in terms of sacrilege. Where Rushdie offered elusive critique in an airy tale of magical realism, Ibn Warraq brings a scholarly sledge-hammer to the task of demolishing Islam. Writing a polemic against Islam, especially for an author of Muslim birth, is an act so incendiary that the author must write under a pseudonym; not to do so would be an act of suicide.

And what does Ibn Warraq have to show for this act of unheard-of defiance? A well-researched and quite brilliant, if somewhat disorganized, indictment of one of the world's great religions. While the author disclaims any pretence to originality, he has read widely enough to write an essay that offers a startlingly novel rendering of the faith he left.

To begin with, Ibn Warraq draws on current Western scholarship to make the astonishing claim that Muhammad never existed, or if he did, he had nothing to do with the Qur'an. Rather, that holy book was fabricated a century or two later in Palestine, then "projected back onto an invented Arabian point of origin." If the Qur'an is a fraud, it's not surprising to learn that the author finds little authentic in other parts of the Islamic tradition. For example, he dispatches Islamic law as "a fantastic creation founded on forgeries and pious fictions." The whole of Islam, in short, he portrays as a concoction of lies.

Having thus dispensed with religion, Ibn Warraq takes up history and culture. Turning political correctness exactly on its head, he condemns the early Islamic conquests and condones European colonialism. "Bowing toward Arabia five times a day," he writes, referring to the Islamic prayer toward Mecca, "must surely be the ultimate symbol of . . . cultural imperialism" In contrast, European rule, "with all its shortcomings, ultimately benefited the ruled as much as the rulers. Despite certain infamous incidents, the European powers conducted themselves, on the whole, very humanely."

To the conventional argument that the achievements of Islamic civilization in the medieval period shows the greatness of Islam, Ibn Warraq revives the Victorian argument that Islamic civilization came into existence not because of the Qur'an and Islamic law but despite it. The stimulus in science and the arts came from outside the Muslim world; where Islam reigned, these accomplishments took place only where the dead hand of Islamic authority could be avoided. Crediting Islam for the medieval cultural glories, he believes, would be like crediting the Inquisition for

Galileo's discoveries.

Turning to the present, Ibn Warraq argues that Muslims have experienced great travails trying to modernize because Islam stands fore-square in their way. Its regressive orientation makes change difficult: "All innovations are discouraged in Islam -- every problem is seen as a religious problem rather than a social or economic one." This religion would seem to have nothing functional to offer. "Islam, in particular political Islam, has totally failed to cope with the modern world and all its attendant problems -- social, economic, and philosophical." Nor does the author hold out hope for improvement. Take the matter of protecting individuals from the state: "The major obstacle in Islam to any move toward international human rights is God, or to put it more precisely . . . the reverence for the sources, the Koran and the Sunna."

In a chapter of particular delicacy, given that he himself is a Muslim living in the West, Ibn Warraq discusses Muslim emigration to Europe and North America. He worries about the importation of Islamic ways and advises the British not to make concessions to immigrant demands but to stick firmly by their traditional principles. "Unless great vigilance is exercised, we are all likely to find British society greatly impoverished morally" by Muslim influence. At the same time, as befits a liberal and Western-oriented Muslim, Ibn Warraq argues that the key dividing line is one of personal philosophy based and not (as Samuel Huntington would have it) religious adherence. "[T]he final battle will not necessarily be between Islam and the West, but between those who value freedom and those who do not." This argument in fact offers hope, implying as it does that peoples of divergent faiths can find common ground.

As a whole, Ibn Warraq's assessment of Islam is exceptionally severe: the religion is based on deception; it succeeded through aggression and intimidation; it holds back progress; and it is a "form of totalitarianism." Surveying nearly fourteen centuries of history, he concludes, "the effects of the teachings of the Koran have been a disaster for human reason and social, intellectual, and moral progress."

As if this were not enough, Ibn Warraq tops off his blasphemy with an assault on what he calls "monotheistic arrogance" and even religion as such. He asks some interesting questions, the sort that we in the West seem not to ask each other any more. "If there is a natural evolution from polytheism to monotheism, then is there not a natural development from monotheism to atheism?" Instead of God appearing in obscure places and murky circumstances, "Why can He not reveal Himself to the masses in a football stadium during the final of the World Cup"? In 1917, rather than a miracle in Fatima, Portugal, why did He not end the carnage on the Western Front?

It is hard for a non-Muslim fully to appreciate the offense Ibn Warraq has committed, for his book of deep protest and astonishing provocation goes beyond anything imaginable in our rough-and-tumble culture. We have no pieties remotely comparable to Islam's. In the religious realm, for example, Joseph Heller turned several Biblical stories into pornographic fare in his 1984 novel God Knows, and no one even noticed. For his portrayal of Jesus' sexual longings in the 1988 film The Last Temptation of Christ, Martin Scorsese faced a few pickets but certainly no threats to his life. In the political arena, Charles Murray and Dinesh D'Souza published books on the very most delicate American topic, the issue of differing racial abilities, and neither had to go into hiding as a result.

In contrast, blasphemy against Islam leads to murder -- and not just to Salman Rushdie or in places like Egypt and Bangladesh. At least one such execution has taken place on American soil. Rashad Khalifa, an Egyptian biochemist living in Tucson, Arizona, analysed the Qur'an by computer and concluded from some rather complex numerology that the final two verses of the ninth chapter do not belong in the holy book. This insight eventually prompted him to declare himself a prophet, a very serious offense in Islam (which holds Muhammad to be the last of the prophets). Some months later, on 31 January 1990, unknown assailants -- presumably orthodox Muslims angered by his teachings -- stabbed Khalifa to death. While the case remains unsolved, it sent a clear and chilling message: even in the United States, deviancy leads to death.

In this context, Ibn Warraq's claim of the right to disagree with Islamic tenets is a shock. And all the more so when he claims even the Westerner's right to do so disrespectfully! "This book is first and foremost an assertion of my right to criticize everything and anything in Islam -- even to blaspheme, to make errors, to satirize, and mock." Why I Am Not a Muslim does have a mocking quality, to be sure, but it is also a serious and thought-provoking book. It calls not for a wall of silence, much less a Rushdie-like fatwa on the author's life, but for an equally compelling response from a believing Muslim.

End of review by Dr. Daniel Pipes

Daniel Pipes, a professor at Harvard, is one of the world's foremost historians.