AN ESSAY BY TARIQ MUSTAFA

What Religion Means to Me

As a searcher for truth, I began my personal quest in my mid-twenties, seeking answers to fundamental questions. What is the purpose of life? How best should we live it? What lies beyond death?

To me, religion means guidance on such big questions: how to live well, and how to find the answers that best serve mankind. But to do so, religion has to be unique. No human can claim to answer what lies beyond — not even science. For such guidance to be definitive, it must come from a source infinitely more capable and knowledgeable than any group of humans: directly from the Creator, Sustainer and Nourisher of the universe.

But does such a Creator really exist? This cannot be answered by bottom-up enquiry, because science, for all its awesomeness, has not yet managed to understand the world, let alone fathom a far more intricate entity. But surely the Creator can answer. And when we search for top-down guidance from the Creator, we find it has existed since Adam — the first Homo sapiens sapiens — sent to mankind through a long line of messengers who taught man, in their original versions, "what he knew not" and could not know otherwise.

This acknowledgement, far from resting on faith alone, has to be supported by convincing evidence. As Bertrand Russell said: "Not enough evidence, God, not enough evidence." Could it be that the evidence is there, but evaded Russell? Another well-known sceptic, Carl Sagan, was more specific: all God had to do, he contended, was to say things through the prophets that no human could have known in their time, and that modern science would discover centuries later.

Remarkably, both Russell and Sagan have been answered adequately by the Creator in His guidance. Yet the sceptics ask: of the various claimed revelations, which should we look at? The answer cannot come

from "faiths", which are notoriously culturally biased, but from reason and science, which have devised tests of validity. Why can we not develop tests for verifying the authenticity of revelation? I have made such an attempt (Zygon, September 2008).

Such guidance can come only from the one and only Creator. It sets out a complete system of life, nourishes humanity with dignity, and reaffirms the highest order of moral strength. It holds that:

01 There is no conflict between the work of the Creator (the universe, and science) and His words.

02 Creation — mankind — must be one brotherhood: "It is a self-evident truth that all humans are born equal." There is no room for kings or dictators, priests or mullahs, racism, original sin, chosen people or promised lands, slavery or subjugation. Men and women have equal rights, and obligations towards each other, to uplift one another.

03 Piety — closeness to natural law — is the sole criterion of human superiority.

04 Man, as the vicegerent of God, is endowed with consciousness: the ability to think and reflect.

05 There is no compulsion in faith, even to the point of denying the Creator; but freedom comes with accountability for the choices made.

06 Beliefs and deeds are equally important.

07 Humans have an honoured place in a universe that evolved with a purpose.

08 Humans are children of the stars — not just poetically but literally, since the heavy elements essential for life were forged in supernova explosions. Each human life therefore has incalculable value, which we must recognise in order to respect ourselves, and so respect others.

09 The human body developed through physical evolution, but the

human personality — the soul, our distinctive characteristic — is a special gift of the Creator. It continues to evolve after death, freed from its bodily constraints.

10 Just as physical laws govern the universe, moral laws govern human personality.

11 Our life on earth is a journey in preparation for what follows death. What we spend on ourselves is used up; what we spend on others — wealth, time and energy — truly belongs to us.

The willing acceptance of the one Creator — Beneficent and Merciful — and of the brotherhood of mankind, through the timeless word of the Qur'an that tells man "what he knew not", so that we may live in a win-win way and lead humanity to its highest potential: that is what religion means to me.

— Tariq Mustafa