

these stories are full of lies, injudicious claims & exaggerations. Moreover, many of the stories make people afraid of worldly consequences more than spiritual ones. These sermonizers give the impression that the sinner must be punished in this world, otherwise, he is spared divine retribution altogether.

Of course, these storytellers do not say this outright. However, this is what comes across from their **numerous fables**. This is indeed a sad substitute for the warnings given in the sacred texts, warnings which are more than enough for the people, whose good sense should be respected. The stories related in the Quran & Sunnah are the stories that a sermon-maker should wish to convey to the people. The Sunnah provides us with a rich reservoir. It is then the job of the sermon-giver to give expression to the lessons & exhortations that those stories contain. Preaching that has **lost touch** with the vitalities of the Quran is easily captivated by egocentric faddism, pretentiousness & sentimentalism.

We often hear it said in the very sermons we are criticizing: "If such-and-such were a good practice, we would have seen the Prophet's Companions doing it." These are good & true words. Let's present the sermon-givers with the same argument: If it were best to relate all kinds of stories in our sermons, why do we not see the Prophet's Companions mentioning in their sermons the stories of their day? They understood the exhortation of the Quran: "**Would you exchange what is best for what is of lesser value?**" Sermons must touch our hearts. Words meeting us where we are – trying to understand how to surrender & what it means.

Persons who step in through the doors of a mosque are not magically transformed. They are desiring to get close to Allah. Khutbahs should bring the struggles into perspective with life applications backed by scriptural references. They should touch our heads and our hearts, and help us express the essence that is inherent within us. And stop using the Khutbah to beg for funds...we need money to fix the vehicles...to pay light bills...to pay water bills...

Let the Quran be our Lighthouse beckoning us to safety. Khutbahs must emphasize the incredible importance the Quran gives to human intellect (the characteristic that makes us potentially greater than the angels) & the Quran's repeated calls for us to think, to use our reason, and not just follow the "customs of our forefathers." Clearly, this is not the same message that is spread by Mosque culture, which has elevated the customs, thoughts of past generations to nearly divine levels. Let's have **less** story-telling & **more** sacred knowledge from well-educated khatibs. No more badly-

spoken English, poorly constructed sentences & threats.

Six questions must be asked of every sermon we preach: Is my sermon Quranic? Does it say one thing? Does it say it concretely? Does it say it relevantly? Did I deliver it with energy? And does it have "bite"? If we learn to answer these questions courageously, two things are sure to happen. First, when we know that we have **preached poorly**, even the commendations of a score of worshippers **will not comfort us**. And second, if we know in our hearts that we have **preached well**, we'll not be downcast **even if no one offers a word of appreciation**.

There's a commandment, yes, in the Quran, that is not typically thought of, but on hindsight is painfully obvious: Islamic civilization fell, and we continue to remain powerless, mainly because Muslims stopped following Allah's command to THINK! When last were you invited to do just that – to think, to reflect, to contemplate, as we are commanded by Allah, and for good reason: Thought is great & swift & free, the light of the world & the chief glory of man.. **Invest** a few moments in deep thinking. It will pay good **interest**.

"Precepts and maxims are of great weight: and a few useful ones at hand do more towards a wise and happy life, than whole volumes of caution that we know **not** where to find." This was said, by Seneca, the Roman Philosopher. Precepts/maxims are of great weight. They nail truth upon our memory. The value of the maxim depends on four things: its intrinsic excellence or the comparative correctness of the principle it embodies; the subject to which it relates; the extent of its application; and the comparative ease with which it may be applied in practice. So rather than silly stories let's use Quranic precepts to invigorate our lectures.

The speaker should take 2-3 current events from the national newspaper in that week & explain them from an Islamic perspective & how Islam provides the solution to that particular situation. Start your research. Begin your writing. Produce sermon masterpieces. The focus must **not** be on dogma but on good character, virtuous behaviour & the spiritual life. The emphasis **not** on the outer shell but the inner heart of religion: God-consciousness; being mindful of God in every situation & everything we do. Naturally never judge people. Instead be guided with gentleness & always try to **make the religion easy to practice**.

Re-evaluate inherited attitudes & traditions, and free our religion, as we free our minds, from our own shackles that bind us, and rise to meet our truly noble potential. It's the only way that Islam will regain relevance and remain vibrant, apart from a miracle from Allah. In Muhammad's (p) life shines brightly a light to guide us on our sojourn on the dark path that is the human condition on earth. That was the Reformation...**we only need to follow**.

# Story TELLERS

Why don't we have proper Sermons?

Language is our first step toward salvation. We cannot "fight" what we cannot describe.

## Islam does **Not**

need a "Reformation." But a whole lot of Muslims do. Including those who give **Sermons that are sappy, timid, saccharine & zombiefied**. Religion is like nuclear power. It's clean, it has the power to illuminate, but it also has terrifying toxic by-products...when delivered by "**religious idiots**." Their "talks" are incoherent jumbled verbiage. When sermon-givers misread & misapply religious teachings, religion becomes the problem, **not** the solution to the problem. Their Islam resembles nothing more than a vast old-clothes shop where **ancient** thought-garments, almost unrecognizable as to their original purport, are mechanically bought & sold, patched up & re-sold & where the buyer's only delight consists in praising the old tailors' skill... "**While the spiritually inclined appreciated his glib talk on religion, they could also detect in it the stench of bitterness**. His discourses were a mixture of the good & the **bad**. He mixed **poison** in rose jam." Rumi. A perfect explanation of most khutbahs.

We cannot think what we cannot express. And we cannot express what we cannot think. Simple linguistic truth. **Expression is the basis of thought**.

**W**e have all seen hummingbirds hover in air, wings aflutter, while they sip from feeders filled with a red liquid — sugar & water. If the mixture is made up of saccharin & water they will continue to come & feed with equal thirst, but gradually they will become weak & unable to fly. The taste of saccharin is sweet enough to fool them, but it lacks the calories they need. In a similar way, non-saccharin khutbahs must not only sweetly appeal to the ear of the listener; it must nourish the spirit.

Have you heard any khutbahs (sermons) that were intellectually stimulating this year? Spiritually uplifting? That left you inspired? We forgot last Friday's sermon by the evening. As you listen to the khatib you have that "ah ha" moment of why very few of the khutbahs you've heard were memorable & inspirational. They don't speak on social issues. Real stuff! They just sound like commercials. What we cannot make out is if God is the Sponsor or the Product.

Khutbahs should not be tirades telling people to do better. So infantile. Examine contemporary issues from the universal principles of the Quran & the Sunnah. Show how Islam is a religion of social justice. The popular adoption of "pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die-by-and-by" storytelling is a symptom of reality avoidance: don't dwell on social injustice & political corruption, just chant/pray & seek "enlightenment" to evolve spiritually. Another Friday. Jum'ah. Sigh! We go more out of "duty" than an actual desire. It should be the other way. Sermons do not touch our hearts because they are only preached to the ears.

It is wrong to **look down** upon the venerable institution of sermon-giving just because some people who are **not** qualified to speak sometimes get up and make a farce of it. We must respect the idea of sermon-giving, since the topic of a sermon is Allah's revelation to humanity and it draws upon that revelation for its subject matter. Moreover, we must respect sermon-giving because it was one of the occupations of the Prophets. This gives sermon-giving a double dignity: that of conveying Allah's message & that of being the vocation of the Prophets.

When those intellectuals are reprimanded who ridicule the practice of sermon-giving & say that it is the practice of simple-minded & backward-thinking people, we must know that those intellectuals do not shoulder the guilt alone. They have partners in crime — sermonizers

who are equally guilty of visiting disrespect upon the institution of sermon-giving. Indeed those sermonizers are more guilty than their critics. They are misrepresenting the practice of religious exhortation; their intellectual detractors are merely describing what they see.

Some novices to sermon-giving give it a bad reputation, because they approach it incorrectly & because they are injudicious in what they say & in the material that they draw upon. Others, as a consequence, become prejudiced against the whole idea & spread that bad reputation by limiting their criticism of sermon-giving to the few poor examples that they have seen. They fail to mention that there are other sermons being delivered which are intelligent, dignified, inspiring & even at times sublime. Due to these two groups of people, sermon-giving has developed a public stigma that it should not have. This problem is very serious, because of the high position that the practice has in Islamic teachings.

The sermon will not reclaim the respect that it once had until those sermonizers who disgrace the sermon with their mistaken methods & their off-the-cuff, nonchalant approach of saying whatever happens to come to mind. **They show little regard for the seriousness of what they are doing.** Their attitude towards religious exhortation is to have a sincere and solemn intention to give a sermon — and then they stand up and improvise. They neither bother to prepare their facts nor to set their ideas in order. They do not worry about how they choose their words nor do they care to substantiate what they say.

If one of them happens to go so far to mention a verse of the Quran or a hadith of the Prophet (p) regarding a matter of what is lawful or prohibited in Islam, they stretch what the text is saying beyond anything that could possibly be understood from it with their far-fetched interpretations. They often destroy the beauty of the verse by their banal commentary and by trying to prove that the verse is imposing a religious duty that it is not imposing, or that it is forbidding something that it is not forbidding.

Often times, the advice given in khutbahs is repetitive & not crafted in a manner that is engaging. There is no effort to make you think and ponder upon your condition. This advice may be centered around: Pray (more/better/on time); read the Quran (more/better/with reflection); give charity (more); be kind to people; be more aware of God. None of the statements are weak or simple. Behind them are oceans of wisdom. The people of knowledge & dynamic speakers have the blessing & ability to give the above their

**DUE RIGHT.** To put them forward with the kind of zeal & enthusiasm, that the power & greatness of such advice deserves. However, many a "kindergarten sermonizer" do a disservice to our spiritual learning.

This class of sermonizers who denigrate the art of sermon-giving are very close to being part of the rank-and-file, as indeed many of them are. They are close to being scriptural illiterates, speaking far more than they read and not verifying the truth of what they say. This is in spite of the fact that religious exhortation is always either about Allah's promise of reward or threat of punishment. Such matters are known to us only through divine revelation, so any tidings of eternal reward or threat of punishment must be taken directly from scripture. These are matters of the Unseen, not matters open to personal opinion. The speaker's "good intentions" are not enough to carry him. Also there is an almost drone-like recitation of various verses with a lack of proper Arabic pronunciation & English grammar which is reminiscent of Yoda from Star Wars.

These people are duped into impromptu sermonizing by an overly high self-opinion, so that they are no longer capable of sensing their own limitations. They fail to see the need to study or revise their knowledge. They do not take the effort to read or engage in research, since they find it so easy to sermonize with what cannot be found in books — or sought in the Quran & Sunnah. Why bother, when they can see how inspirational they are and how they can captivate the ears with what they have to say. This easy approach is none other than the approach of **storytellers**. Stories that allege to be "factual" are especially exciting. Stories have a natural appeal. They can hold an audience's attention from beginning to end. It is not wrong to mention a story in a sermon. We see stories being used effectively in the Quran. What is a problem is to go too far with so-called "factual" stories, presenting them without restraint: many of them too far-fetched to be believed & with no more authority than "someone heard that someone said..."

If there were nothing else wrong with these stories — regardless of how "true" they might be — aside from the fact that they distract us from relating the authentic, ennobling stories of the Quran and Sunnah, that should be enough for us to keep them to a minimum. These rumors, stories, anecdotes that people mention are a **poor substitute** for what is found in scripture. How much worse it is when we add to that the fact that many of



**Finest** of narratives is the **Quran**

Prophet Muhammad (peace)

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