

THE
ISLAMIC
REBEL

The Life and Times of Abu Dharr al-Ghaffari

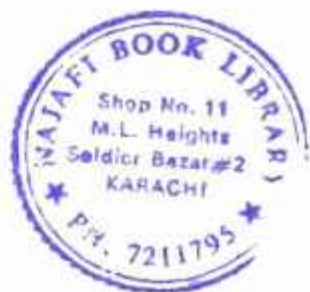
SALMAN HILLS

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In the name of Allah, Most Merciful and Compassionate

Introduction

In the prevalent forms of historical study, namely political or social history and the histories of the arts and sciences, the subject of this book would find little mention. Neither king nor statesman, general nor scholar, scientist nor inventor, poet nor artist, Abu Dharr Ghaffari bore very little influence on the fields that the contemporary method of history, or historicism, commits itself to record. But this book bases itself on the method of religious or traditional history, which commits itself to recording the history of model human beings, unflinching supporters of truth and justice, and presenting their examples before others as an inspiration ideal. In such history, Abu Dharr Ghaffari is a shining star who cannot be overlooked. By his righteousness, his honesty and sincerity and above all his passionate commitment to truth and justice, Abu Dharr has earned himself a place in that tiny band of people who—led by the Prophets themselves—inspire the mass of mankind to appreciate what it really means to be human. In other words, the historical importance of Abu Dharr lies in the influence he exerts, even now, on the characters of those who know him. Besides people like Abu Dharr others—no matter how important their achievements may rank in other forms of history—pale into insignificance.

Abu Dharr was a social reformer, perhaps the first social reformer in the history of Islam. For this reason perhaps his name has gone largely unmentioned and unknown throughout much of the Islamic era. In recent years his name has been revived in the context of the claim that he was the first 'Islamic socialist'. But as the allure of socialism slowly wanes and the world remembers it is possible to bear a concern for truth and justice without being a socialist, Muslims are realising that Islam can be seen to encompass a programme of social and political reform. It is in view of this current,

and to Abu Dharr being its first spokesman and its first martyr, that the present work owes its relevance.

The intention behind this book is to present the reader with a picture of Abu Dharr the way he was. It is not meant to be a polemic of any kind. The book's first interest is in the mind and character of Abu Dharr, and the sources of his thought. As a reformer he cannot be separated from the historical currents and conditions of his time, but it is not for the author to interpret these factors along any denominational lines. Nor has he sought the causes of the decline that Abu Dharr sought to reform. These are a conclusion the author has left the readers to draw for themselves.

Abu Dharr was a voice of truth. A simple man, uneducated and unsophisticated, he was not accustomed to keeping great truths concealed in his breast. If Islam lights a candle in most people's hearts, in the heart of Abu Dharr it lit a blazing fire. In an age dominated by ignorance, superstition and brutality, Abu Dharr went to the devil's own abode to proclaim aloud the cry of monotheism and the new order of brotherhood. Later, in an age characterized by greed, compromise and complacency, he remained an invincible voice against injustice that neither threats nor bribes could stifle, that only fell silent when he had no breath to sustain it.

He embraced Islam in fear and caution, but the moment he became Muslim his Islam became for him a purpose greater even than life. He threw aside all caution and bravely said what no other would say. In love with Islam, he was enraged at the plight of his beloved, and could find no peace until he spoke out boldly in its defense, even at the risk of his life. But when he had done so, Abu Dharr found his loved one rushing solace and warmth to his heart, and he found a peace within himself that only poets can describe, ...until the next time....

Abu Dharr was a simple man, an uneducated man from a primitive tribe in a barbarian land. Yet he had an understanding of religion and of God that was at once primordial and yet sophisticated and subtle. He was an ascetic, but not for him the hollow pietism of turning one's back on the world that is an abdication of responsibility. If it is true of any religion that it is 'the opiate of the popular masses', this was not the religion of Abu Dharr. He himself was a member of 'the masses', a humble if respected member of an undistinguished tribe. Yet when he ventures his way to Muhammad (S)¹, the religion of Islam turns him literally overnight into the loudest, sincerest voice of truth and justice, a spokesman of the human conscience who cries out loudly what people will not allow themselves to think. Awake, he strives to awaken. Alert, he strives to alert society. Courageous with the true courage born of love, he boldly condemns the *status quo* of favouritism and corruption. Not for him an Islam in the service of kings, an Islam that tolerates in-

justice, a cruel parody of Islam that overlooks the rights of the weak and the poor, that like the worst forms of tyranny allows the rich to become richer and the poor to remain poor, or become even poorer. Not for him an Islam that gives a voice and a right to the rich and powerful while depriving the meek and helpless. Not for him an Islam that allows a ruling class to make a mockery of the teachings of the Prophet in the name of the Prophet, who pretend to respect the outward forms of the Prophet's teachings but strive to obliterate his magnificent spirit, the spirit of Islam itself, the spirit of the sacred Qur'an.

The Islam that Abu Dharr had learnt from the Prophet Muhammad (S) had taught him that *'in the wealth of the rich there is a right for the poor'*, and that *'one who sleeps with a full stomach while his neighbour is hungry is not a Muslim'*. It had taught him *'command to the right (amr bi'l-maruf) and protest against the wrong (nahy an al-munkar), for if you do it not God will place over you the evil amongst you and then the good amongst you will supplicate but to no avail'*, and that *'the best jihad is a word of truth to a tyrant'*.

Abu Dharr could not forget the Qur'an's verse, *'the best of you in the sight of Allah is the most virtuous'* and it pained him to see Muslim society place considerations of tribe, house, class and position before those of virtue and knowledge. He longed for the hierarchy of virtue and knowledge that had been the system of the Prophet and against the hierarchy of class and kin that later came to dominate he was angry and rebelled.

This, then, was Abu Dharr: an Islamic rebel, a man of Allah who wanted only Allah. A man who loved what Allah loved and despised what Allah despised. A man inspired to forget his own self, his own likes and wants, even his own needs, in the remembrance of Allah and of the tasks for which we are created.

This book seeks to understand Abu Dharr, to remove from his stirring example the veils of history and the dust of time and forgetfulness, to reveal him and to present him to the dear and respected readers, that they may gaze and marvel. Perhaps not a perfect person, but a very good one whom we would do well, especially in the present age with all its difficulties, to emulate. And from God comes all success.

CHAPTER ONE

A Heart Summoned

The story of Abu Dharr Ghaffari begins in the cruel world of the pre-Islamic Arabs, the period known as the age of 'ignorance' (*jahiliyah*).² In this world there was no room for any but the most basic of masculine virtues. Generosity to guests, courage against enemies and nobility of bearing were respected well enough, but all other virtues were ignored and accorded no value. The whole age was characterised by selfishness and slavery to desires, the merit of power and brute force, and by superstition and appeasement of the conscience through devotion to idols. Amongst the Arabs only a handful of people lived their lives on a level above this squallor and baseness, and these were people who would take to the quiet of the hills and the desert to worship the One God. They were known as the *Hunafa'* (sing. Hanif), and in their lives they reflected the higher values and standards inspired to them by their worship and reflection and by the voice of God that exists in each person's soul. But these *hunafa'* were no more than a few scattered souls, and were of no practical consequence in society, which despite their presence laboured in the darkness of superstition and brutality.

In short, the world was much the same as it has ever been. Islam had not yet made its appearance, and the massive transformation and break with the normal run of things that it was to introduce had not yet taken place. The teachings of the previous prophets were forgotten, hidden in the mists of time, and all that remained of their teachings and personal examples were myths, legends, and a few rituals that had become meaningless through compromise with idolatry. The names of Ibrahim and Isma'il had been attached to every cultural phenomenon, to lend sanctity to the foulest of deeds and to justify the height of injustice. People lived only for themselves, caring little for their families and friends, much less for their fellow human beings. There was no barrier to the demands of lust, greed and egotism, and the individual would turn to any deed no matter how foul to satisfy his passing desires. Drun-

kenness, debauchery, robbing and plundering, these were the pastimes of the Arabs. Power, brute force, wealth, the ability to raise large numbers of fighters, these were the qualities that brought respect and made leaders of men. There was no rule of law, and the innocent, the weak, the poor, the woman and the new-born child, all went unprotected, at the mercy of the strong and powerful.

Ordinary people could not survive in the towns without the patronage of some powerful lord, and the desert was an arena of war and plunder between tribes. Often a man would endure the hardships and dangers of a long caravan haul from Yemen or Damascus and bring much-needed goods to Makkah in the expectation of an honest profit, only to find himself cheated by some Makkan lord who would take delivery of the goods but refuse to pay for them. With no justice and no law, the lot of the common man was misery, and his only hope was servility and obedience to one of the lords in the hope of one day becoming the recipient of his generosity.

For the powerful and the wealthy, society offered every vice and pleasure, and only a few chose moderation and virtue. Most of the nobles viewed society like a private garden, from which they could pluck whatever took their fancy. But for the majority, life was a tortuous ordeal of misery with no relief and no hope. They were the ignorant, the masses, the cannon-fodder, the payers of taxes and protection money, the parents of pretty girls who might attract the attention of one of the lords, but who otherwise were worthless—thus the practice of burying baby girls alive, that came to be a test of a father's manhood.

Against this status quo there was no hope of a reforming social or political movement. Arabian society was divided by tribe, and the society was sunk in inter-tribal rivalry and bloodshed. At the head of each tribe was the tribal leader, whose protection was essential for each of the tribe's members. The tribe operated as a strong unit, and in this way the freedom and safety of the tribe's members was guaranteed. The efficiency of the tribe, in turn, depended on the loyalty of all its members, and on the efficiency of the tribal leader, who was chosen from amongst the tribal nobility for his courage and prowess in war. The common man had no hope but to remain with the *status quo*, bitter as it often was, for the only alternative was the ostracism that would almost certainly lead to slavery or death.

At the heart of this corruption, lending it the air of legitimacy, was the institution of idolatry. Each tribe had its idol, and the city of Makkah was full of them. It is said that there were 360 in the Ka'aba alone. Some of these idols would be simple statues, while some would be ornate, and a few would be richly adorned with gold and precious stones. Besides these there were the usual talismans and the other trappings of ignorance. It had become customary to look

on the idols as manifestations of powerful gods, of partners in Divinity, and the poor worshipped them, dedicated to them offerings they could ill-afford, and pleaded with them for their help and intercession. The rich too worshipped them, appeased their sometimes stricken consciences through acts of devotion and offerings, and saw in them the source of their power and wealth.

But the worship of idols is a bitter worship, and very much a one-sided affair. The worshipper pleads, dedicates and worships but all to no avail. The idol can neither see nor hear. Far from being able to control or even influence the fate of others, it cannot even protect itself. Nor does it offer any other kind of benefit. It is of no import in raising the ethical standard of the devotee; it offers no guidance, imparts no wisdom, and instead of promoting a sense of brotherhood it divides mankind even further. It has no view on justice, no view on the purpose of life, no answer to any of life's questions. It simply remains where it is put, lifeless, speechless, useless. Worship of idols is worse than no worship at all, and yet most of Arabia, like much if not most of the world, thought it perfectly natural to worship them, supplicate them, and pin in them all their hopes.

For the masters of society idolatry-like most forms of false worship-offers many advantages. Unlike God, idols do not demand honesty, sincerity and justice. They do not demand righteousness. They do not demand that we treat others as we ourselves would like to be treated. They do not demand that we feed the poor, tend the sick, clothe the naked and care for the orphan. They do not demand that we subscribe to a view that offers full political and social rights to each and every individual, and that we strive to remove barriers to unity such as the discriminations of tribe, nation, race, sex and class. Above all; they do not demand that we base our lives on reason and thought, and strive to keep ourselves and our whole society mentally alert. Only the true God demands these things, and He makes them clear in the context of His religion; which is why it is in the interests of the ruling classes that worship of the one true God should come to an end. Today this goal is sought in the guise of secularism, atheism and in the bigoted defense of traditional faults that have crept into Muslim society, but in the days of the pre-Islamic Arabs it was pursued in the form of idolatry.

Thus when it is said that Ibrahim was an idol-breaker, or Muhammad was an idol-breaker, besides the literal meaning that they both destroyed idols, the term also implies that they freed man from the limits and deceit of false worship, and restored to man his natural orientation towards God; that is, in communication with Him and on the path of his guidance. This is a far cry from the worship of idols. Allah hears our prayers and answers them, but He also inspires us to perfect ourselves and our society, equips us to accomplish this through the teachings of His message, and imparts

wisdom to the hearts of the pure of his servants.

When a person aspires to this lofty ideal, he immediately begins to sense a dynamism that is hungry for the food of sincerity and effort, and when he is able to provide this sustenance his dynamism cannot be contained within the confines of the traditional acts of devotion, but bursts out to embrace all of his practical activities. As a result, his life becomes enthused with the Divine purpose, and each of his otherwise common-place acts is charged with spiritual significance. His thought becomes crisp, subtle and profound, and is able to penetrate the external form of each phenomenon to embrace the wide spectrum of its causes. Free of the stagnation of false worship, he becomes one of God's servants on the earth, and walks the earth as an agent of the Divine will. He inherits the mantle of the Prophets, and strives to raise the awareness and righteousness of his fellow man. He has no fear but the fear of failing his Lord, no hope but the promise of his Lord, and in the freedom of his devotion to Allah he stands amongst the people as if alone, a nation in himself. No power can tyrannise him into submission, and no bribe can lure him into betrayal. He is a constant enemy of ignorance, and where he sees its chains being laid he speaks out boldly to break them. If necessary, and if the people are ready to accept him, he will lead them against injustice and oppression and the other manifestations of the satanic system. He may thus become known to the world as a politician or soldier, but though his courage and decisiveness and penetrating vision may excite and inspire huge armies of followers, few will understand him.

A person such as this is a product of religion as a process. It is not religion as a collection of dogmas and rituals that builds such a person, but a full and profound entry into the purifying, spiritualizing and ennobling process of the true religion. This 'flowering of man' comes as the result of sincere endeavour in the three fields of human activity: intellectual, to understand the reality; spiritual, to seek nearness to God and the vision of reality, effected through ethical purification; and physical, to bring the Divine order into life and to cultivate the Divine blessings in society. Endeavour in these three fields at one and the same time makes up the religious process, and when anyone of them is neglected an aspect of man's humanity will remain unfulfilled. In other words, it is the balanced, simultaneous pursuit of perfection in each of the spheres of human activity that brings out the perfect balance of the Divine qualities latent in human nature, and failure to seek perfection in anyone area can only lead to an imperfection and imbalance in man's character.

Therefore, the true worshipper is distinguished by three characteristics. Firstly, he constantly endeavours to understand both the eternal realities and temporal phenomenon and is never satisfied until he discovers the profound truths of every affair. Secondly, he is ever vigilant to the condition of his self, and constantly

appraises his condition against the standards of all he has learnt of the right way to be, and he refers all decisions to what he has learnt of the will of God, until God favours him by making this almost instinctive for him. Thirdly, he leads an honest upright life in society, and tries to bring the light of God into all his dealings. Moreover, he is aware of the other aspect of his duty towards society, and is ever on the lookout for the causes of social misery and corruption, and as soon as he perceives them he moves against them with the force of his being. If a movement exists he joins that movement, and if no movement exists he himself becomes a movement. In either case he is to be found at the forefront of the struggle, bringing to it his knowledge, spirituality and steadfastness.

It is in building people such as these that the term idol-breaker takes on its full meaning. And in the case of Abu Dharr Ghaffari there is no doubt that Islam and its prophet were successful in building just such a person. Abu Dharr had freed himself from idolatry and had worshipped the one God for some years prior to his Islam, but it was Muhammad and his message that turned Abu Dharr from a mere contemplative and worshipper of God into one of His most devoted servants.

Therefore, the story of Abu Dharr begins not with his renunciation of idols, but with his acceptance of Islam. This was a conversion in the true sense of the word, one of those conversions that stir the heart. When we look at the history of Islam our attention is firstly drawn to the overwhelming changes Islam brought about in the social order, and the way it changed a primitive, no-account people into conquerors of empires and shortly thereafter into masters and developers of the known sciences. While this should certainly not be ignored, there is always the danger we will overlook the fundamental changes Islam brought about within individuals and the quality as well as the course of their lives. Unfortunately, history and biographical studies can reinforce this tendency. Often we find ourselves reading of kindly people who embraced Islam and went on to be most kindly, or of brave people who put their bravery at the disposal of Islam, or of charitable people who spent their wealth on the Muslims. In other words, there is always the danger of imagining that Islam was accepted only by those who were already virtuous, while those who were less than virtuous were not so enthusiastic or only went along with Islam as it became the dominant force. Yet there are many examples of people who were fundamentally changed and reformed by Islam: robbers who became scholars and holy men, drunkards who became mystics and poets, princes who became ascetics and the inheritors of the Prophet's wisdom. Only when we understand these examples does Islamic history become really meaningful, and they should never be forgotten.³

Jundab b. Junadah, better known as Abu Dharr, was born to

the Ghaffar tribe, who occupied territory to the south of Medina, on the caravan trail to Makkah. There are no precise accounts of when he was born, but estimates put him about the same age as the Prophet, or a little younger. Until the dawn of Islam he had always lived according to the laws and customs of his tribe, and even his monotheism he had kept between and his brother, Anis. The Ghaffar tribe supplemented the meagre sustenance they eked out of the desert by caravan raids and their name was feared throughout Arabia. They even conducted their raids during the 'sacred months' when the rest of Arabia was at peace. Abu Dharr took part in these raids and, since he appears to have attained some fame, it seems likely that he at times led these raids or at least took a prominent part in them, and that perhaps he led them less violently than he might. At all events, he was a caravan raider and a plunderer on the one hand, and on the other a deeply reflective monotheist amongst a tribe of idolators, too afraid to reveal his monotheism. But see what happens when he embraces Islam.

It was early in the Prophet's mission when Abu Dharr heard the news that a man in Makkah had 'declared himself a Prophet, and begun to preach that there is only one God, that people are essentially the same and the greatest tribal chief is no better than a humble slave, and that the weak shall inherit the earth'. This news struck a deep chord in Abu Dharr. For three years he had worshipped the one God in isolation from his tribe of idolators, too fearful to let them know, and now here was news of a fellow monotheist, a man not afraid to tell the world despite the hardships and sufferings the idolators of Makkah of all places were certain to inflict—and the news from Makkah confirmed that the man and his tiny band of followers were being mocked and abused and persecuted—and he was claiming to be a prophet...?

On hearing the news Abu Dharr sat for a long moment sunk in thought—his mind in a whirl and his heart pounding. Shortly he turned to his younger brother, Anis, and told him to journey to Makkah to find out more. Anis set off and after the long journey he arrived safely. He tied his camel and then searched the streets, the market place and the Sacred Mosque. Finally he found the man attempting to address the people. But as he was surrounded by a band of ignorant hecklers—guardians of their own prison of ignorance—Anis could make out but little of what he was saying. What he did hear of the man's words struck him as strange to the ear, not music or poetry, but with the same or even an increased capacity to enter the heart and stir it. More impressive to Anis' desert soul was the man's manner. Faced by the scorn and abuse of the people, he never once lost his composure. With patience and forbearance, gravity and dignity, nobleness of bearing coupled with deep humility and compassion, whenever the noise grew too loud he would simply move to another place and attempt to address the people

again.

Anis found himself transfixed, never before had he seen such composure. He was accustomed to the attitudes and ethics of ignorance. He had seen courage but always coupled with arrogance and brutality, had seen dignity of a sort but always alongside conceit, had seen humility of a sort but never without weakness and lack of commitment, had seen compassion but only in the eyes of his mother. In a word, Anis was stunned, and he stood stock still gazing on the man and his steady composure. In this fixed state he lost sight of the man, and by the time he came to himself the man had gone.

Anis wandered away from the scene in the direction of his camel. Around him the air was abuzz with the bawdy congratulations and self-justifications of the crowd. Some were saying the man was a magician, others that he was a poet. Some were saying he was mad. Stories were circulating that he was the disciple of a foreigner, held by some to be a renegade Jew or a Christian and by others a Persian sage. A few were silent and sunk in thought, like Anis himself, but most spoke of him with hostility, scorn and disgust. Reaching his camel, Anis set off for home.

While his brother had been away Abu Dharr had been able to think of nothing but the man in Makkah. Unable to concentrate on anything else, he sat gazing over the sand and sky of the desert. This had been a favourite practice for Abu Dharr since he first renounced idolatry, when the scenes of nature had taken on a new meaning for him as he sensed in them something of the Divine presence, and he had always found within himself a deep sense of peace. But since hearing the news of the self-proclaimed Prophet his soul had been in turmoil, and he could find no peace. He had found his God and had worshipped Him in his own way for three years. Could it be, he now wondered, that God had chosen this moment to send a prophet?

The thought troubled Abu Dharr. He knew it would mean great changes, both for himself and for all the Arabs. The idolators would not leave such a man alone—that much was certain—and each person would have to choose sides. Yet what benefits it could bring! Abu Dharr pictured before his eyes the new world that could arise from such a religion, were it to be true. No more useless rivalry, no more useless bloodshed, no more oppression of the weak and helpless as if they are no more than grains of sand to be walked upon. Instead, cooperation, brotherhood and 'the weak shall inherit the earth'.

Abu Dharr was also aware of a whole host of voices that had suddenly sprung up within his heart. He listened to each of them and considered them all. Some were telling him that it cannot be, the man is an imposter, a charlatan. Others were telling him how weak the man is, and how dangerous it would be to join him. Others were

telling him that he was already a worshipper of the true God, and that therefore he had no need of further guidance. But whenever Abu Dharr looked out over the desert horizons, the thought came clearly to his mind: 'This is My Prophet...and through him the weak shall inherit the earth'.

As he waited impatiently for his brother, the realization must have been dawning on him that whatever news his brother would bring he would have to go to Makkah himself. In the meantime, he sat transfixed, urgently awaiting Anis' arrival and the news he would bring. Finally he saw his camel, a speck on the distant horizon. He rushed out to meet him.

'What news?,' he asked him.

'Very little,' confessed Anis. 'He preaches what you believe, and recites verses that are neither poetry nor prose. He says this is revelation from his God, Allah. Some say he is a poet, but I know the rhyme and metre of all the Arabs, and what he recites is unknown to me. Some say he is a magician, but I doubt it. His words have a stirring, exciting quality, and cannot be ignored or taken lightly. He calls to goodness and kindness, to righteousness and justice. He says that we are all brothers, and all the same before God except in regard to virtue. The people mock him and stop him from speaking, but he never lets himself be flustered by them. He simply moves from one place to another, and begins to speak again. He is a great man: warm, kind and noble, but more than this I cannot tell you'.

Abu Dharr asked him if he could recite something of the man's verses.

'No, I remember nothing of it,' said Anis.

Abu Dharr stood up. 'This will not do,' he said, 'You have failed to satisfy me and have only increased my interest. Stay here with our mother, I am off to Makkah to find out what I need to know.'

Abu Dharr set off for Makkah without even waiting to pack food and water for the trip. Arriving there, he went directly to the Sacred Mosque, where he performed the *tawaf*. Then—speaking to one—he began his search for the man who claimed to be a prophet.

He was still searching at nightfall, when he gave up his search and prepared to spend the cold desert night in a corner of the Sacred Mosque, with no roof over his head and only his cloak to shelter him.

A young man entered the Mosque to perform *tawaf*. He noticed Abu Dharr and when he had completed his *tawaf* he approached him. 'A stranger?' he asked.

'Yes' said Abu Dharr.

'Then come with me.'

The young man was Ali, the nephew of the Prophet and already a Muslim. He took Abu Dharr home with him, and there Abu Dharr spent the night. Throughout the night Abu Dharr maintained

his caution and told Ali neither his name nor his purpose in coming to Makkah, and Ali did not ask. In retrospect this first night of Abu Dharr in the city of Makkah must be one of the strangest coincidences in history, for the home of Ali was none other than the house of the Prophet himself. Ali had been brought up by the Prophet and now that the Prophet was away (for reasons of safety he was staying in the house of one of his followers, Arqam b. Abd al-Marof Ali was looking after the Prophet's house and presumably his family too. So Abu Dharr, who had come to Makkah looking for the Prophet, spent his first night in the house of the Prophet, but still failed to find the Prophet and had no idea in whose house he was sleeping. How he must have felt when he realised we can only imagine, but it seems safe to assume that the incident must have been the source of considerable amusement.

The next day of Abu Dharr's search proved as futile as the first, and yet that night he was again guided to the house of the Prophet. As he was about to settle for the night in the cold of the Sacred Mosque, Ali saw him again, and said, 'Is it not time that you recognise your house?'

Politely, Ali helped Abu Dharr raise himself off the ground, and again they made their way to the Prophet's house. But the Prophet was still at the house of Arqam, and Abu Dharr was still too cautious to reveal the purpose of his quest.

Even more remarkable is that Abu Dharr's third day in Makkah is spent in much the same way, and on the third night again Ali invites Abu Dharr home with him. But on this occasion Ali is prepared to broach the subject:

'Do you not intend to tell me who you are and what has brought you to this city?' he asked.

Abu Dharr thought for a moment. 'I will tell you if you promise to help me, and that you will tell no one,' he replied, still the soul of caution.

'Very well' said Ali, 'I accept.'

'I have heard that a man of this city claims to be a Prophet. I sent my brother here to find out more and he came and returned but the little news he brought was not enough to satisfy me. So I myself have come to meet him but I do not know him and I do not dare to ask about him.'

Ali's face was a picture of radiant amusement. A subtle smile played across his lips as he regarded Abu Dharr closely. 'Who are you' he asked, 'and where are you from?'

'My name is Jundab the son of Junadah, my *kunya* is Abu Dharr, of the Ghiffar tribe.'

'You have succeeded,' said Ali. 'By God, the man you seek is really a Prophet and what he has received is the truth. And I will take you to meet him.'

That night (or the next morning according to some accounts),

Ali set off with Abu Dharr to meet the Prophet. Ali realized that Abu Dharr was still nervous and fearful, and that it was agreed that Abu Dharr would walk behind him and that if they were to be met by an enemy he would stop as if to attend to his shoes while Abu Dharr was to walk on as if he did not know him. In this way Ali would be able to lead Abu Dharr to the Prophet in perfect safety.

Arriving at the house of Arqam without incident, Ali tapped out the special code quietly on the door of the house.

The door opened and the two of them entered. Abu Dharr's heart was beating like a drum. His long fearful search almost over, his moment was open him. He glanced quickly about him, and then his attention was caught by the voice coming from the main room of the house. Ali entered the room, beckoning Abu Dharr to follow him. He entered the room and saw for the first time the object of his search.

'Salam alaikum,' he said.

'Wa alaikum salam wa rahmatullah wa barakatuh' the Prophet replied.

The Prophet asked Abu Dharr his name and his tribe. Hearing that he was of the feared Ghiffar tribe, it is said the Prophet exclaimed: 'Truly, God guides whom He wills!'

The Prophet and Abu Dharr entered into a long discussion. After a period we can only guess at, Abu Dharr asked the Prophet: 'Grant to me Islam that I may become Muslim.'

'Islam,' said the Prophet 'is that you declare there is no god but Allah, and that Muhammad is His Messenger, and that you perform the prayer.'

'I declare that there is no god but Allah, and that Muhammad is His Messenger,' said Abu Dharr.

'Keep this a secret,' said the Prophet, 'and return to your people and preach to them about Islam. I fear for your safety in this town. But when you hear of my success over them you may return to me.'

The Prophet was concerned for Abu Dharr, but Abu Dharr had suddenly lost all concern for himself. He was now a being with a new-found sense of purpose. The faith he had gained and his love of the Prophet was a powerful force within him that he had not yet learnt to control. It flooded his being and he could not contain it. He longed to climb the house and shout it from the rooftops. His caution and furtiveness was already a thing of the past, ancient history, and he was a new man. Bold, forthright, unable to even see the reason for preventing his tongue from saying what he had in his heart, Abu Dharr was a man aflame.

'By He who has raised you,' he said, 'I swear I will declare this to the people here.'

The Prophet gently smiled.

CHAPTER TWO

A Cry of Truth

Abu Dharr stood up and boldly made his way to the Ka'ba. The Arabs hallowed the Ka'ba as a temple built by Ibrahim the idol-breaker, but by that time Ibrahim was respected less as a Prophet than as father of the Arabs. As for the Ka'ba, it was full of idols and recognized as the most important centre of idolatry in Arabia. It was also the place where the chiefs of Makkah would sit with their followers and receive their guests and discuss their affairs and bathe in the adulation and envy of the people. Therefore, Abu Dharr had chosen well the setting for his first public manifestation of Islam. By choosing the Ka'ba Abu Dharr was challenging both the evil system of idolatry and also the chiefs and lords whose interests rested upon it. He was issuing a direct challenge to the *status quo*, to the false religion that always protects the status quo, and to the ruling class most interested in its defense. This man who just a few hours before had been furtively creeping round Makkah, who had spent three days too afraid to even mention the new prophet and his religion, was now stepping resolutely into the midst of the idolators to declare to them the falsehood of their system and his love of what they hated.

Entering the vicinity of the Ka'ba, Abu Dharr noticed a group of nobles to one side. Addressing them he cried:

'O Quraish, I testify that there is no god but Allah, and I testify that Muhammad is His servant and Messenger.'

The Quraish nobles were stunned. Never had they felt so directly the power of this new religion. Islam was still in its infancy and the Muslims were few – Abu Dharr was only the fourth or fifth man to accept Islam – and the Quraish were determined to stamp it

out before it could spread and grow any stronger. They were by no means prepared to let this unprotected stranger threaten their system and their lifestyles in their very presence, and certainly not in the Ka'ba of all places. And so they returned the brave cry of Abu Dharr with a cry of their own: 'Kill him! Silence his voice forever!' The Quraish and their followers set upon Abu Dharr with the mad ferocity born of love of ignorance and fear of truth, and Abu Dharr must have thought his life was over.

But God had a different fate in store for Abu Dharr. Abbas, a member of the Quraish and the uncle of the Prophet, recognized Abu Dharr as a member of the Ghiffar tribe, and lay upon him to protect him with his body, all the while crying:

'Fools, do you not recognise this man? He is a member of the Ghiffar tribe. How will your caravans pass through the lands of the Ghiffar if you kill this man?'

By appealing to the financial interests of the Quraish in this manner Abbas managed to calm them down. After some warnings and threats they left Abu Dharr alone. He picked himself up from the ground and made his way to the nearby well of Zamzam. There he cleaned the blood off himself and drank a little water. Then, smiling to himself with a deep sense of peace within him brought on by his great achievement, he left the Ka'ba and painfully made his way to the house of Arqam.

There he recuperated and rested in the beloved presence of the Prophet. When he was well, it appears he left the house and did exactly the same thing again. He headed for the Ka'ba, and once there he noticed a group of Quraish, and again cried out to them:

'O Quraish, listen to me: I testify that there is no god but Allah, and I testify that Muhammad is His servant and Messenger.'

Again the Quraish leaders set their followers upon Abu Dharr with the intention of having him killed, and again it was Abbas who saved him in the same way as before. This time he helped him to the well of Zamzam to wash and refresh himself. Abu Dharr was more hurt than the previous time, and he involuntarily let out a groan, yet he felt the same peace and satisfaction in his heart that made him forget his pains and sufferings. With quiet resolve and with perfect dignity, Abu Dharr slowly left the Ka'ba and made his way to the house of Arqam, to be once more beside his beloved Prophet.

Having related to the Prophet what had happened, the Prophet told him: 'I shall be moving to a city having date palms, which I suppose to be Yathrib.⁴ In the meantime, will you return to your tribe and be my preacher amongst them? Allah may benefit them through you and reward you through them!'

In this way Abu Dharr's stay in Makkah came to an end. It had been brief, but long enough to change his life. The Abu Dharr who left Makkah was not the same Abu Dharr who had entered a few short days before. Whereas he had been merely a worshipper of the

true God, now he was His servant. Before he had been in search of a message, now he had found that message. Before he had been afraid, furtive and cautious, now he was bold, forthright and outspoken. He had taken great trouble not to attract the attention of the polytheists, but as a Muslim he had taken the cry of Islam to the very heart of idolatry and had dared them to do their worst. Not once but twice he had spoken out the word of truth at the temple of ignorance and tyranny, and both times had survived not weakened but fortified, with his certainty forged even stronger.

To leave Makkah and the Prophet and the Muslims when they were being persecuted and in need of support could not have been easy for Abu Dharr. But he had nothing in Makkah, no lands, property or trade, and could not support himself there. Besides, his people were the Ghiffar tribe, and the Prophet had asked him to return to them and preach to them the news of Islam. Even so, he must have felt greatly disappointed at not being able to share in the trials and fortunes of the Prophet's mission. And perhaps it was in part this disappointment that had led Abu Dharr to risk his life in the Ka'ba on those two occasions. He had certainly suffered for Islam, and must surely have set Makkah abuzz with talk of his passionate courage. More importantly, he had tested himself and succeeded, had proved himself to himself, so that now he could feel no guilt or shame at leaving the Muslims behind him. Perhaps, raw and inexperienced as he was, he instinctively realised that he would need a strong faith to maintain him during his absence from the Prophet's side, and that nothing fortifies faith more than suffering on its behalf and adversity.

Abu Dharr the Missionary

Before accepting Islam Abu Dharr had always sensed the Divine presence in the scenes of nature, but as he made his way back to his tribe he felt that presence within him and all around him. He felt as if he was moving in a glow of light. He had an almost overwhelming sense of humility and gratitude, but he had left his fear behind him. He was invincible, illuminated, and determined to serve, as well as worship, the source of his illumination.

To this end he had a mission before him. The Prophet had given him a task of preaching to his tribe. It was his responsibility to bring them the message of the oneness and unity of God, and of the brotherhood of man. He had somehow to persuade them that the idols they worshipped were no more than lifeless objects, and the lords who demanded the obedience and respect of the Arabs were human beings just like themselves.

Abu Dharr fully intended to discharge this responsibility as best he could. Of course, he realized that he could do no more than invite the people of his tribe and demonstrate to them the truth of Islam, and that in the final analysis it would be for the people them-

selves to believe or reject: *'Verily it is Allah Who guides the hearts'*. But Abu Dharr had confidence in his tribe, and hoped that once given the chance and Islam was presented to them, they would not be hostile.

Indeed, the Ghiffar tribe were to prove themselves far more receptive to the Islamic message of monotheism than the people of Makkah. As we shall see, the message Abu Dharr brought to them was accepted almost immediately, and the majority of them turned easily from the worship of idols to the worship of God, freeing themselves from the orbit of devils and realigning themselves into the orbit of Allah.

The reasons for this contrast are many. Unlike the Makkans, the Ghiffar had no sophistication whatsoever. They had neither been educated nor had educated themselves to worship idols. Like most of the Arabs, they practiced idolatry simply because this was the only way of life they had ever known. In particular, the Ghiffar were bandits, social outcasts almost, and this meant that unlike the Makkans their contacts with other tribes—much less with other civilizations like Judaism and Christianity—must of necessity been sporadic and superficial; and it is through such contacts that the human potential for inquiry is naturally stimulated. For the same reason they had no commitment to high-sounding theories and dogmas to justify their idolatry to themselves, as having no experience of any other world view they had never questioned it. Discussions of the relative merits and truth of different religions and cultures were alien to them, and they believed in idols for no more reason than that it was the only belief they had ever known. Their minds were raw, endowed with nothing more than common sense, and their hearts, though tainted, had nevertheless not made the fatal compromise of accepting what their minds knew to be false.

Another factor to be considered, is that the Ghiffar were peripheral to idolatry. The Makkans were the guardians of the Ka'ba, the centre of idolatry, and their city was visited by thousands of pilgrims each year, which brought great wealth to Makkah and gave it economic importance. It made Makkah by far the most important city in Arabia, and Makkan traders were respected wherever they went, even in such far-away places as Damascus and even in Abyssinia. Moreover, the Makkans' association with the Ka'ba and the idols it contained, together with the services they performed for the pilgrims, earned them a kind of almost mystical aura amongst the primitive Arabs, and this gave them the tangible benefits of safety for their caravans as they travelled through the desert to Damascus and Yemen each year, and the inviolability of their persons. They became, in short, objects of superstition, for it was considered bad luck, or an insult to the gods, to harm them.⁵

For these and other reasons already mentioned, the Makkans, and especially their leading chiefs, the Quraish, had strong

interests in idolatry, and saw any threat to idolatry as a threat to their interests. Moreover, the Quraish had always used and distributed their wealth in such a way as to gain and hold an influence over the minds and hearts of the common people, and with the coming of Islam they used this influence to drive the people to defend idolatry and persecute the Muslims.

By contrast, the Ghiffar tribe were situated at the other end of the social scale, and had no respect for the niceties and conventions of the idolatrous society. They were bandits and robbers who raided caravans even during the sacred months, when otherwise a general peace prevailed to allow caravans to make the pilgrimage to Makkah. Their disregard for these conventions was such that they would raid the caravans of the Makkans themselves, and would go so far as to raid the caravans of the annual pilgrims. They had no interests in idolatry, and this detachment must have made them more able to use their God-given common sense to make an objective appraisal of Islam, free of any nagging desires to protect revenue and prestige.

All of this made the Ghiffar tribe fairly receptive to Abu Dharr's message, but none of it detracts from their status as honest and sincere Muslims. Though they had no social or financial reasons to resist Islam, nor did they have any such reasons to accept it. The fact remains that their decision to join and support Islam was made on the merits of Islam alone, and coming as it did at a time when conditions made their decision tantamount to declaring war and rebellion against the status quo, their status is confirmed and raised even higher.

Accounts suggest that Abu Dharr had managed to convince most of his tribe to accept Islam within a few hours of his arrival.

The first person he approached was his brother, Anis. After only a short discussion Anis accepted Islam and made his testimony of faith (*shihada*). Together they then approached their mother, and she too accepted Islam. Abu Dharr then approached the rest of his tribe, finding them gathered around their tribal chief, Khafaf b. Ayma b. Rakhsa al-Ghiffari, exchanging tales, banter and amusement.

Abu Dharr awaited his moment, and sat quietly amongst them. When there was a spell of silence, he began to speak. He told them of his trip to Makkah, and that he had met the Prophet there, and he then began to preach to them the message of monotheism, and the fallacy of worshipping the idols.

This brought forth a great hullabaloo, with many of the men trying to outcry their fellows, but Abu Dharr remained calm and unmoved. When it had died down, he continued: 'Listen to me. Listen. I stopped believing in idols three years ago, when I realised they are not more than stone and pieces of wood.'

'Stone and pieces of wood?' they echoed, some in horror but

others in amusement.

'Yes' said Abu Dharr, 'Listen to me, listen!' he cried, as others tried to shout him down. 'You are all able to think. Examine this matter carefully, restrain your emotions. I want nothing more than to guide you. Listen to how I first realised their impotency and futility.'

'No, no' some of them cried, and again they tried to shout him down. This time their leader, Khafaf, intervened:

'Allow him to speak; truth is clear from falsehood, and he has not deprived you of your senses.'

And so Abu Dharr was allowed to speak. Briefly but not hurriedly, he gave his account of how he had first turned away from the stones and statues that men called gods. He told them of how, some years previously, he had presented an idol with an offering of milk. 'Reverently I placed it before her, and asked of her my request, and then I reverently withdrew. But from the corner of my eye, I caught sight of something that shocked me to the core. A dog had approached, a wild dog, and was nonchalantly drinking the milk! I stared in horror, sure that it would be struck down by the idol's wrath, but no, the dog carried on until it had finished the milk, while the idol stared out with that fixed gaze on its face. It neither saw what happened nor did anything to protect its sacred offering. Then something even worse happened, Not content with drinking its milk, the dog trotted casually over to the idol, sniffed around it, and then calmly raised its hind leg and yes, urinated over it. Again I waited in fear, but again nothing happened.

'So much, then, for the idol's power; and the other idols are just the same. So much for their dignity and honour, so much for their holiness. Who now will deny that they are mere stone and pieces of wood?'

This had struck a chord in the Ghiffar tribe, and they were silent, their heads lowered in shame, and in thought.

'Ha!' said Abu Dharr. 'Now your hearts are rejecting this nonsense, and its fallacy is becoming clear.'

One of them raised his head. 'How do we know whether this man you speak of is a true Prophet or an imposter?' he asked.

'This question occurred to me too' said Abu Dharr, 'and I examined his face carefully, and saw no sign of lies or deceit. Besides, he has proof of his prophecy, a Book descended from Allah, the like of which no Arab has heard, and none can bring its like. Listen!'

Abu Dharr then recited some verses of the Qur'an, while the Ghiffar listened attentively. When he had finished, he returned to answering their questions. They questioned well and sincerely, and listened carefully to his answers. It was not long before Islam had become clear to them, and the time came for them to choose: either to accept the guidance that had come to them, or to reject it.

Khaffaf was the first to accept Islam, and following his example many of the others did likewise. This led Abu Dharr to concentrate on the remaining few, but they told him: 'We will wait until we see the Prophet, then we will decide'.

So that night the Ghiffar tribe slept the sleep not of confused polytheists, but as committed Muslims happy in the embrace of truth. They had—or at least the majority of them had—accepted the new religion, and were thus amongst the earliest converts. They do not figure in the lists of early converts because these lists are of the converts who accepted Islam from the Prophet himself with whom early historians were naturally concerned. Moreover, they were not Makkans, and for various reasons—not all of them laudable—the early Islamic histories and even many contemporary histories contain an emphasis on the people of Makkah. Be that as it may, there is no doubt that of all the desert tribes, the Ghiffar were the first to embrace the new religion.

As for Abu Dharr, his story is far from over. He had been ordered by the Prophet to remain with the Ghiffar tribe until the Prophet moved to 'the city of date-palms' that he took to be Yathrib (Medina). In the meantime, he kept himself informed of events in Makkah through the news brought by travellers, and presumably acted as spiritual adviser to his tribe, as he eagerly awaited news of the Prophet's move to Yathrib.

CHAPTER THREE

With the Prophet at Medina

History says little more of Abu Dharr until the time of the Prophet's migration from Makkah to Medina. According to reports, the Prophet was met by the Ghiffar tribe as he passed through their territory, and they accorded him a rousing and warm welcome. They confirmed their Islam to him, and he took their allegiance and prayed for them. After a brief rest, the Prophet left and made his way to Medina, completing his famous *hijra*.

With the Prophet settled in Medina, there can be little doubt that Abu Dharr kept himself in constant contact with the Muslim community and benefited from the Prophet's teachings, but he did not move permanently to Medina until the fourth or fifth year after the Hijra. The reasons for this delay are obvious. His home, his living, his whole life was amongst the Ghiffar; in Medina he had nothing and would be a pauper. Yet the magnetism of the Prophet finally overpowered him, and he put God and His Prophet before himself and made his move to Medina.

In Medina Abu Dharr joined the small group of companions who were living in the mosque. These were Muslims who had come to Medina to be with the Prophet and serve Islam under his direction, but who had there no wealth, family or livelihood. For this reason they were allowed to stay in the mosque, and at meal times the Prophet would divide them amongst his companions, and would take some of them home with himself. But it would be wrong to think of them as monastic beggars, rather they would be better compared to a standing militia. While they sought nothing in their lives but the love and satisfaction of God, in times of danger or hardship they were the backbone of the small community and the first and most earnest of volunteers. Later, when the Prophet was ordered not to let people live in the mosque, a shed was built for

them, and they became known as the *ashab al-suffah*, the 'companions of the shed'.

Abu Dharr took readily to this kind of life, and he soon lost himself in the spiritual daze that never really left him until the Prophet died, if at all. His occupations were worship, learning from the tongue of the Prophet and fighting in the way of God. He would listen to the Prophet's words, drink them in and reflect over them, strive to put them into practice as a part of his life, and teach them to others. He soon became a particular intimate of the Prophet, often in the Prophet's company and one of those regularly invited to share his food. The traditions about the merits of Abu Dharr are well-known. In some of them the Prophet said that he was ordered to love four people: Salman, Miqdad, 'Ammar and Abu Dharr, and in others that Paradise is eager for these four.⁶

Other traditions from the Prophet liken Abu Dharr to the Prophet Isa (Jesus) in modesty, asceticism and humility.⁷ Above all, the Prophet praised Abu Dharr's sincerity and honesty, and foretold Abu Dharr's consistency after his own death.⁸ Moreover, the Prophet went so far as to say: 'The sky has not covered, nor the earth supported, a man more honest than Abu Dharr.'⁹

In view of Abu Dharr's personal integrity and his close association with the Prophet, it will not surprise us to learn that he soon became a beacon of learning and a mine of wisdom. Amongst the traditions he has narrated from the Prophet are these:

'Take special note of two blessings: sound health and the opportunity for worship.'

'Value five things before five other things: youth before old age, health before illness, wealth before poverty, leisure before preoccupation, and life before death.'

'Live in the world like a stranger.'

'When you awake in the morning do not have hope of lasting till the evening, and at the end of the day do not hope for the morning.'

'Prayer is the pillar of faith, and charity redeems sin, but guarding the tongue is better than both.'

'Do not look at the smallness of sin, rather look at the greatness of He who is sinned against.'

'Death is trailing you and may come upon you at any time: do good deeds and do them without delay. As one sows so shall one reap: wheat is grown of wheat and barley of barley, think on the recompense of your actions.'

'The hard of heart cannot approach God, so render your heart tender and supple.'

'Try harder to get good value for your life than you do for your money.'

'On the Day of Resurrection Allah will look harshly at the scholars whose knowledge has not benefited the people, and

who have acquired knowledge simply for worldly honour. Such scholars will never smell the scent of paradise.'

'Wise is he who humbles himself and acts for the Hereafter, and foolish is he who follows his desires and is heedless of the Hereafter.'

'A day will come when some of the people of Paradise will say to the people of Hell "How is it that we have come to Paradise on account of what you taught us, while you yourselves have gone to Hell?" and they shall say "We advised others to do good but we did not put it into practice ourselves."

'Remembering Allah in the midst of the heedless is like fighting in the battlefield.'

'Prayer without good deeds is like firing an arrow without a target.'

'The company of the righteous is better than solitude, and solitude is better than the company of the bad.'

'Fear Allah and not the people; if you fear Allah the people will respect you.'

'Allah will fill the heart of the ascetic with wisdom, He will give correct speech to his tongue, show to him the vices of the world and their remedy, and will lift him from the world to the realm of peace.'

'Accursed is he who tells lies to the people to make them laugh.'

'Be wary of backbiting for it is worse than fornication.'

Abu Dharr asked, 'How so, O Prophet of Allah? and the Prophet replied: 'When the fornicator repents Allah accepts the repentance, but the backbiter's repentance is not accepted until his victim himself forgives it.'

'To reveal a friend's secret is treachery.'

'This world is a prison for the believer but for the disbeliever a paradise.'

Abu Dharr lived amongst the *ahl al-suffa* until he married the lady known to us as Umm Dharr. She too was a great companion of the Prophet, and through all of her husband's difficulties and distress she remained faithfully at his side. Thus she is a partner in all of the glory and honour Abu Dharr later acquired.

Once married Abu Dharr left the *suffah* but he did not give up his ways of ascetism. He set up a small tent on a hill-outside of Medina. He enjoyed the feel of the desert, and felt somehow thrilled by meditating in its glorious silence. He always felt constrained in the confines of life in the town and city, and constantly felt the need to gaze over the vast horizons and to see nothing before him but the quiet stillness of the empty desert. There he would regenerate his spiritual energies and reflect and meditate over the course of his own life, that of his tribe and the Arabs, and above all on the new call that had awakened so much of the deep spiritual and ethical

potential of the Arabs, and which was making of them a new nation, and lifting them to the heights of spiritual grandeur.

To sit and reflect over these things in the quiet of the desert was more than enough for Abu Dharr, and he sought no more from this world than that. His food, his dress, his home were all simple. Islam was conquering the desert and all its tribes, and the revenues from these conquests had begun to trickle into Medina. Yet although Abu Dharr was counted as one of the leaders of the conquering community and one of its chiefs, he sought nothing from these revenues. Like the Prophet himself he was content to live in poverty, and whenever his enthusiasm to take part in military campaigns brought him a share of the spoils, like as not he would distribute his whole share amongst those more needy than himself.

One day a friend visited Abu Dharr in his tent. Casting his eyes around the inside of the tent he was amazed to find it so bare. He looked at Abu Dharr and asked him: 'Where are all your possessions?'

'We have another house and we have sent our best possessions there,' Abu Dharr replied.

Understanding that Abu Dharr meant the Hereafter, the man said 'But while you are here surely you need something?'

Abu Dharr replied 'The owner of this house will not let us stay here for very long.' Then he looked at the friend and said to him: 'By God, if you knew what I knew you would not sleep with your wives nor sit on your rugs. By God I would like to be a tree, whose fruit is eaten and its wood broken and consumed by the people.'

'But your sense of religion should not prevent you from benefiting from the world,' the man objected.

To which Abu Dharr replied, 'The Prophet has said, "I am amazed at him who believes in the eternal world, and yet strives for this deceiving world."' "

Abu Dharr's guest soon left, and a few moments later Abu Dharr himself set off for the mosque. Finding the Prophet sitting alone he sat down beside him. The Prophet turned to him and said 'O Abu Dharr, the mosque too needs to be given life, and giving life to the mosque is performing two rakats of prayer. Stand now and pray.'

Abu Dharr performed the prayer and sat back down with the Prophet. The Prophet still being alone Abu Dharr valued the opportunity and asked him: 'O Prophet, you call us to prayer; what is prayer?'

'It is the best of all, whether a little or a lot.'

'O Prophet of God, what is the best deed?'

'Faith in Allah and fighting in His path.'

'Whose faith is the best?'

'He whose manner and disposition is most kindly.'

'O Prophet of Allah, which of the believers has the best Islam?'

'He from whose hand and tongue the Muslims are most secure.'

'O Prophet of God, which is the best prayer?'

'The prayer in which the supplication is longest.'

'O Prophet of God, which is the best *hijra*?'

'The *hijra* from sins.'

'O Prophet of God, what is fasting?'

'It is the duty which has many times its reward from God.'

'O Prophet of God, which is the best jihad?'

'The jihad of he who is killed after his mount is cut from under him.'¹⁰

'O Prophet of God, which is the best slave to free?''¹¹

'The slave who is most valued and loved by his master.'

'O Prophet of God, what is the best charity?'

'The charity of one who is not rich but gives the fruit of his own labour to the poor.'

'Which of the verses God has revealed to you is the greatest?'

'Ayat al-Kurshi.¹² O Abu Dharr, the seven heavens when compared to the ayat al-Kursi, are like a barren plane surrounding a precious jewel.'

'How many Books has God revealed?'

'One hundred and four: fifty scrolls (*suhuf*) upon Shaith,¹³ thirty scrolls upon Akhnukh,¹⁴ ten scrolls upon Ibrahim, ten scrolls upon Musa before the Tawrat, and then the Tawrat, the Injil (upon Isa), the Zabur (upon Da'ud), and the Qur'an.

'O Prophet of Allah, what were the scrolls revealed upon Ibrahim?'

'All of its guidance and council (like). O deceived selfish king who art such a burden on the people.¹⁵ I have placed you over the people that you may administer My justice and protect the right of the weak.' It also contained such as: 'The wise have particular hours. An hour in which they praise God, and an hour in which they seek from Him their needs, and an hour in which they work that they may eat and drink. It is for the wise to do nothing but prepare a provision for the Hereafter and strive in the world for a living and the legitimate pleasures. And it is for the wise one to know about time, to meet his workload and to guard his tongue. One who calculates his speech as he calculates his actions says not a word but is necessary.'

'O Prophet of God, what were the scrolls of Musa?'

'A collection of warnings (such as) "I am amazed at him who believes in death but still loses himself in happiness, amazed at him who believes in the fire but still makes merry, amazed at him who looks at this world and yet worries about its deceits, amazed at him who believes in tomorrow's reckoning and yet fails to act."

'O Prophet of Allah, advise me.'

'I advise you to piety (*taqwa*), for it is the highest of all.'

'O Prophet of God, increase my knowledge.'

'Read the Qur'an; reading the Qur'an is a light for you in the earth and a helper in the heavens. Guard yourself against excessive laughter for excessive laughter, blinds the heart and takes the light from your face.'

'Be silent except in (saying) goodness, for silence drives away from you the satan and assists you in your religion.'

'Have friendship for the poor and sit with them.'

'Treat those under your authority with kindness, it is better for you not to take lightly the blessings of your Lord.'

'Stick with your family and relatives, even if they are offended with you.'

'In the way of God fear the censure of no one, and speak the truth no matter how bitter.'

'Do not find faults in others that exist in yourself, nor censure them for the sins you yourself commit; your own faults and sins are enough to occupy you without looking for them in other people.'

The Prophet then put his hand on Abu Dharr's chest: 'O Abu Dharr, there is no wisdom like reflection, no devoutness like abstention, and no virtue like a friendly disposition.'

The March on Tabuk

Perhaps no incident highlights Abu Dharr's selfless devotion to the Prophet, and his steadfastness in the path of God, as the extraordinary part he played in the march on Tabuk.

During the latter part of the Prophet's government in Medina, the Islamic state had been troubled by a series of conflicts on the northern border it shared with Syria, then under the colonial influence of the Byzantine empire. After one such conflict the Prophet mustered a large force to march on Tabuk, the main town of the area. No mere punitive raid, this affair was a full-scale campaign designed to demonstrate the new Islamic order and its power, and to introduce the Prophet and the Islamic teachings to the people of Tabuk and the surrounding tribes.

For this reason the march was obligatory on all the male Muslims and only those who had sufficient excuse and who applied to the Prophet were excused. The march took place at the hottest time of the year, when the journey was at its most difficult, and when the fruits in the Muslims' orchards in and around Medina were ripe and ready to be gathered. Moreover, the Byzantines looked to prove a formidable opponent indeed. For these reasons, a number of Muslims disobeyed the Prophet and either stayed behind in Medina, or dropped out along the way and returned to their homes. And one of those who fell behind was Abu Dharr.

After the long trip the Prophet and the main force camped at a

well and sat down to recover their strength and to await the strugglers. Soon a few of the Muslims began to count heads. One of them cried out to the Prophet, 'O Prophet of God, Ka'b b. Malik has turned back.'

'If there is good in him he will return,' said the Prophet.

Another called out 'O Prophet of God, Mararat b. Rabi' has turned back', and the Prophet replied 'If there is good in him he will join you.'

Another called out, 'O Prophet of God, Hilal b. Umayya has turned back and again the Prophet replied, 'If there is good in him he will join you.'

Finally, in utter surprise, someone called out, 'O Prophet of God, Abu Dharr is not here.' and the Prophet replied once more, 'If there is good in him he will join you.'

In fact, Abu Dharr's camel had been too weak to make the long, hard journey and had died, leaving Abu Dharr alone in the desert. Upon hearing of the march he had at once tried to build up his camel's strength with plenty of special food, but on setting out it had still been unable to keep up with the others; and after dragging behind for sometime it had finally died. At this Abu Dharr unloaded his pack and placed it upon his own shoulders, and set off to catch up with the Prophet on foot.

The accounts do not mention for how long Abu Dharr struggled his way over the desert, but under the hot desert sun he soon found himself with a burning thirst, with no water to quench it. He must soon have reached the point where he wondered whether he would survive. Throughout that bitter ordeal his sole hope was the hope of seeing his beloved Prophet again; and it was this that kept alive his determination.

Abu Dharr could allow himself no rest. To survive, he had to meet up with the Prophet at his camp, and for that he could only carry on as quickly as he could. Resolutely, with the steady determination born of his faith and trust in God and his love of the Prophet, Abu Dharr marched bravely on.

A man can go without food for days and even weeks, but without water for any significant period he will die. In the terrible heat of the North Arabian desert the rate at which Abu Dharr was losing his body fluids was highly accelerated, and the burning thirst he felt was a reflection of a his body's dire need of water in order to stay alive.

As he walked, Abu Dharr was naturally in silent communication with God. His hope in ease and comfort, Allah was now his hope in hardship. Abu Dharr began to pray to Allah for water. He wanted so much to see the Prophet again, to stand once more at his side, and this gave an earnestness to his prayer that the mere thought of life for life's sake could never give.

Islam tells us that when we pray to our Lord for something, we

should expect to find it at our door. In other words, provided that what we are praying for is legitimate and beneficial, we should never consider it so remote that Allah cannot or will not deliver it to us. As Abu Dharr prayed for water he was sure he would soon come across it, in one form or another. Sure enough, after some while a rain cloud appeared and emptied its load some distance ahead of Abu Dharr. He gave thanks to Allah and rushed on to the spot where the rain had fallen. But by the time he reached it the rain had stopped and the cloud had been blown far away. Nevertheless, certain that the cloud had been the answer to his prayer, Abu Dharr stopped and looked around. He could see no water, nor even any puddles, and so he made a search of the area. Had he been a man of lesser faith he would have perhaps continued his journey with bitterness and doubt, but sure that he would find water somewhere he carried on with his search. And there it was! A pool of cool, clear water that had collected in a decline in the sun-baked earth. Taking a waterskin from his pack, he filled it and put it to his lips. He sipped at it, it was cool and sweet. Abu Dharr's thought went from the water to his Lord and His kindness, and from there it rushed towards the Prophet. 'Perhaps he too is suffering in this heat,' he thought to himself. Then, having taken no more than that first initial sip, Abu Dharr sealed the skin and continued his journey. By the grace of God he soon came within sight of the Prophet's camp. As he did so, a shout went up in the camp, 'O Prophet of God, someone is approaching.'

'It must be Abu Dharr,' said the Prophet.

The Muslims murmured amongst themselves, keeping their eyes fixed on the tiny, unrecognizable figure in the distance. Someone called out, 'O Prophet of God, it is a man walking out there!'

'It must be Abu Dharr,' said the Prophet.

The group kept their eyes on the figure on the distance, until at last he was recognised. 'By God,' someone said, 'it is indeed Abu Dharr.'

The Prophet said, 'May God forgive Abu Dharr. He is alone in life, will be alone in death and (on the Judgement Day) will be raised alone.'

With that the Prophet rushed out to meet him. He was filled with joy at having such a loyal companion. Reaching Abu Dharr he placed his hands on his neck, 'O Abu Dharr, God has forgiven you a sin for every step you have taken towards us.'

The Prophet removed the load from Abu Dharr's back and placed it on the ground. Weak and exhausted Abu Dharr fell to his knees. The Prophet's eyes were burning with compassion as he gazed at the worn out figure before him. 'Bring water,' he said, 'for he is burning with thirst.'

'But I have water, O Prophet of God,' said Abu Dharr.

'And yet you are thirsty?'

'Yes, O Prophet of God, may my parents be sacrificed for you. In my march I came across water in a hollow in the ground, and tasting it I found it to be sweet and fresh. "No more will I drink of this," I said to myself, "until Muhammad has drunk of it." '

For a moment the Prophet was silent. Then he said, 'God forgive you all your sins, Abu Dharr. You are alone in life, you will be alone in death, and you will be alone when raised again.'

CHAPTER FOUR

The Long Struggle

'You are a pious man; soon after me you will suffer a calamity.'

'In the path of Allah?'

'Yes, in the path of Allah.'

'I welcome Allah's command.'

'O Abu Dharr, why are you sleeping in the mosque?'

'O Prophet of God, sleep suddenly overwhelmed me.'

'What will you do when you are driven from this mosque?'

'I will go to Syria, for my Islam and for Jihad.'

'And when you are driven from there?'

'I will draw my sword and behead he who seeks to turn me out.'

'I give you better advice: go where they drive you, accept what they give you, and do not fight them.'

The Prophet to Abu Dharr Ghiffari.¹⁶

The Prophet died and passed away, and the Muslim community fell into confusion. Some of the companions realised he was dead, while others held that he had simply 'gone away for a period as Moses once went away for forty days.' Of those who realised him dead some were engaged in washing his holy body and the other ceremonies of death, while others occupied themselves in the question of succession.

The leadership of the Islamic state passed to Abu Bakr. He ruled over the Muslims and governed their social affairs in the name of the Prophet for two years, and when Abu Bakr died his appointed successor, Umar, took over this responsibility.

Umar's rule lasted for twelve years, during which time the Muslim armies made the bulk of the conquests for which they are rightly famous. Umar was cut short in his prime by the dagger of a

disaffected Persian slave, and again the Muslim community, especially the capital, Medina, was thrown into confusion.

The whole of this period can be said to be controversial, but the period that began with the accession of Umar's successor, Uthman, is especially so. So controversial in fact, that the events of this period have coloured the whole of Islamic theology, and many a school can be said to exist solely to a particular interpretation of those events. We have no wish to enter into this controversy, but because our subject played an important part in the events of this period, and because it is his attitude to certain aspects of Uthman's rule that make him such an outstanding character worthy of our consideration, we cannot avoid it altogether. Therefore, we have no alternative but to briefly review the main characteristics of Uthman's regime.

Writers and historians are divided as to the nature of Uthman's Khilafat—more by school of thought than any other criteria—but the simple facts reveal that the conditions prevailing under Uthman were conditions of serious injustice and even tyranny. Let us now consider some of these facts.

Uthman ibn al-Affan was selected by a *shura*, a panel of six men appointed in the will of the second Khalifa, Umar, for the express purpose of appointing a successor from amongst themselves. The rules governing this *shura* were extraordinary, and certainly do not give the appearance of a harmonious community at peace with itself. Rather the appearance is one of competing groups vying with each other to gain the Kilafat for themselves, or at best for their interpretations of Islam and their hopes for the future of the Muslim community. This view finds support from a tradition from Umar himself, in which, shortly before his death, he is reported to have called in the six members of the *shura* and said to them: 'I have looked around and seen that you are the leaders of the people and (that) the Khilafat cannot go except to one of you; but I am afraid that dissension will arise among you and the people will also split amongst themselves.'¹⁷

With his characteristic sternness and decisiveness, Umar set up his panel under the authority of 'Abd al-Rahman b. 'Awf, who was to act as kind of chairman. The possibility of a two-way split had been foreseen and in such a situation the vote of Abd al-Rahman b. 'Awf was to decide the issue. The *shura* was held in a guarded enclave, and once the new Khalifah had been chosen, any of the six who failed to give him their allegiance was to be beheaded, for which purpose fifty or so armed guards had been appointed. Similarly, any one of them who refused to take part in the *shura* was also to be immediately beheaded.

The six members of the *shura* were: Uthman b. Affan, the leading candidate of the newly powerful Bani Umayyah; Abd al-Rahman b. 'Awf, Uthman's friend and brother-in-law; Sa'id b. Abi

Waqas, friend and cousin of Abd al-Rahman b. 'Awf; Ali b. Abi Talib, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, who was also the leading candidate of the poor and ascetically minded, as well as of the Prophet's tribe the Bani Hashim; and Talha b. Ubaid Allah and Zubair b. al-Awwam, both leading members of the aristocracy and ambitious for office themselves.

The character of this panel merits some attention. The first thing to be noticed is that the community of Muslims as a whole, whether at Medina or elsewhere, had no say in the affair, as both candidacy and selection were confined to just these six. Secondly, the members of the *shura* were all from Makkah, and thus the Ansar of Medina were totally excluded from expressing their opinion. Thirdly, and perhaps most important of all, with the exception of Ali all the members of the panel were known not for their merit but for their prosperity and wealth, and, with the recent conquests of Persia and the Byzantine, they were amongst the class that sought the tremendous opportunities these conquests opened up. Their selection of Uthman, therefore, reflects nothing more than it does the feeling of the aristocratic class that Uthman was the candidate who offered the most freedom to exploit those opportunities. History confirms this, for the sources are agreed that with the exception of Ali they all amassed fortunes running into millions.¹⁸ Uthman at his death left 100,000 dinars, 1,000,000 dirhams, estates worth over 100,000 dinars and vast herds of horses and camels.¹⁹

At the time of the *shura* the leading candidates in society as a whole were Uthman and Ali. Behind Uthman were the dominant aristocracy of the Quraish, especially the Bani Umayyah with their related tribes, friends, helpers and patrons, who saw in Uthman a weak man of some piety whom they could manipulate to serve their interests. Ali's support, by contrast, came not from his own house alone on the basis of relationship and family pride but, due to his merit and his tendency towards asceticism, he was also the popular choice of the common people. From the time he accepted Islam as a youth, Ali clearly was with Uthman, uncompromising in his principles, straightforward and stern in his religious outlook, and certainly not a man to go out of his way to placate the aristocracy. Therefore, since it is a regrettable fact of life that the weak in society will tolerate a leadership of which they disapprove for far longer than will the powerful, it seems safe to assume that the dissension which Umar sought to prevent – if only for the time being – through his idea of a *shura* with its stringent regulations, was exactly this clash of interests in society between the poor and the wealthy, as represented in the persons of Uthman and Ali.

The deliberations and discussions that took place during the *shura* are by no means easy to discern. However, one commonly reported tradition states that after three days of wrangling, at the time of the morning prayer when the Muslims had gathered in the

mosque to hear the decision, Abd al-Rahman b. Awf first offered the Khalifat to Ali on two conditions: that he should rule in accordance to the Qur'an and the Sunnah, and that he should follow the precedents of the two former Khalifas, Abu Bakr and Umar. Ali accepted the first condition, but declined the second, saying that wherever he found no clear ruling of the Qur'an and Sunnah, he would rely on his own judgement. At this Abd al-Rehman then turned to Uthman and made him the same offer with the same two conditions. Uthman accepted, whereupon Abd al-Rahman declared him Khalifa.²⁰ A few years later, when the discontent at Uthman's policies and his patronage of even the most corrupt elements of Bani Umayyah was widespread, Abd al-Rahman admitted that he considered the policies of Uthman's administration to be in serious breach of this undertaking.²¹

And here indeed lies the crux of the matter. Avoiding unnecessary polemics there is little doubt that the policies pursued by both Abu Bakr and Umar accorded to the general precepts of Islam and the Islamic emphasis on justice, and it is clear that they actively sought the welfare of the Muslim community, and not the interests of any particular group, tribe or class. Moreover, whatever the personal feelings of Ali, he clearly did all he could during their administrations to strengthen the Islamic community and state, while for their part Abu Bakr and particularly Umar availed themselves of his advice and council.²² But with the accession of Uthman b. Affan much of this changed. The relatively open and free society bound by common faith and virtue took on more and more the appearance of an empire bound by the commands of tyranny. Justice for all suddenly gave way to special privileges for a tiny minority, at the head of whom were the Khalifa's kinsmen, the detested Bani Umayyah. Uthman did not deny this. Several historians have quoted him as saying: 'The Prophet granted offices to his kinsmen, and I happen to belong to a people who are poor (*sic*). Therefore I loosen my hands in regard to that which I have been entrusted, by virtue of the care I take of it.'²³

However, unlike the household of the Prophet—men like Ali, Hamza, Abbas and Abd Allah b. Abbas—who were all among the most virtuous of the community and therefore under the Prophet shared in the honour of holding posts, Uthman's kin the Bani Umayyah were amongst the last to become Muslims, and many were only allowed to do so because of the Prophet's consideration of the sanctity of Makkah. Even so, at the time of the conquest of Makkah the Prophet had commanded the Muslims to kill amongst others one Abd Allah b. Sa'd b. Abi Sarh; who happened to be Uthman's milk-brother; who was reluctantly spared by the Prophet on Uthman's intercession;²⁴ and who, upon Uthman's accession, was promptly raised to the governorship of Egypt. Nor was this outrageous favouritism exceptional. Another of those favoured by

Uthman was his half-brother al-Walid b. Uqba who, upon being appointed governor of Kufa, distributed lands to his favourites and finally disgraced himself by drunkenness in the mosque.²⁵ And when he was consequently replaced it was by yet another of Uthman's corrupt relatives, Sa'id b. al-As, who manifested his corruption by publicly declaring that the rich agricultural lands around Kufa were to be divided amongst his tribe.²⁶

It is an historical fact that within a few years of Uthman's accession the Umayyids claimed amongst themselves the governorships of Kufa (Iraq), Basra (capital of a vast territory that included Iran and Central Asia and extended as far as Sind), Syria, and Egypt: all the important provinces of the House of Islam. These Umayyid governors in turn relied upon the support of their own kinsmen, whom they placated and allowed to dominate the advisory councils.²⁷ With little thought for the general welfare of the Muslims—much less their rights—the Umayyid clique sought and cared for nothing but their own material advancement. No trust or responsibility to be discharged in a spirit of virtue, government for them was a means to increase their wealth and satiate their desires. The hierarchy of knowledge and virtue that had been the government and social apparatus of the Prophet and—in the main—of his two successors, had become a hierarchy of greed, duplicity and political intrigue.

At the head of this edifice was a weak old man whose patronage of his tribe and their excesses led him to become increasingly dependent upon their support, for which in turn he was forced to pay an ever increasing price; while below were those who winced at the injustices and whose hearts burnt with rage as they remembered the time of the Prophet.

It is obvious that with the best will in the world no society can enjoy peace and cohesion for any prolonged period when between the rulers and the ruled there is such a conflict of priorities and values as existed in the time of Uthman; and, it may be reasonably argued, nor should it. On the other hand, rarely has an oppressed people been able to rally around a single banner and pursue a single policy of their own free will. All too often in seeking change in the status quo the people are led astray by deviant hypocrites or by those seeking power for themselves while posing as lovers of justice and the champions of the people's rights. Following this natural law of human weakness, the resistance to the Umayyid clique took on two forms. As always in such conditions there arose a number of opportunists, who sought to harness the bitter resentment of the common people to further their own ambitions. However, there also came forward from amongst the people a body of the Prophet's distinguished companions. These were men who had been raised and refined by the teachings of Islam and the particular attention of the Prophet, and who were renowned for their sincer-

ity, piety and Islamic learning. Known as the *qurra*, reciters or better still teachers of the Qur'an, it was this religiously minded class whom the Prophet had relied upon to justly carry out his programmes; and they had also formed the backbone of the administrations of Abu Bakr and Umar. Now that they were thrust aside to make way for the Khalifa's Umayyid favourites, they were obliged to watch the just society they had carefully helped to cultivate, be wrecked by the ravenous greed of their Umayyid inheritors. For the *qurra*, government had always been a trust to God they had always tried to discharge the way they would have done in the time of the Prophet. Of itself their replacement by the Umayyids may not have rankled them, and there is little evidence to suggest that had the Umayyids tried as they themselves had tried to govern fairly the *qurra* would have been in the least disgruntled, but it was clear that the Umayyids saw in Islamic government nothing more than a rich prize for whoever had the cunning and 'political skill' to capture it. Worse still, with the brashness of the newly victorious the Umayyids openly boasted of their corruption and embezzlements, and treated others, particularly the *qurra*, as the vanquished.

One of the religious intelligentsia to have borne the particular brunt of the Umayyid's tyranny was 'Ammar b. Yasir. A *muhajir* of Yemenite extraction whose family had been of no consequence during the period of ignorance, Ammar b. Yasir's Islamic pedigree was outstanding. Both of his parents had been amongst the early Muslims who were persecuted in Makkah, and Sumayyah his mother had died in these persecutions to become the first martyr of Islam. Moreover, 'Ammar had gone on to become one of the Prophet's foremost companions, and Uthman himself was known to have oft-repeated the tradition of the Prophet that 'faith is blended with the flesh and blood of Ammar'. For this very reason Ammar was approached by some of the companions who had settled in Egypt to present a letter to Uthman, in which they made several complaints against the governor of Egypt, Abd Allah b. Sa'd b. Abi Sarh, and advised Uthman for his own good to replace the governor and free himself from his Umayyid courtiers.

'Ammar took the letter to Uthman, but after reading only a few lines Uthman furiously threw the letter to the ground, and when Ammar objected to this saying that a letter from the companions was worthy of respect, Uthman called him a liar and ordered him to be beaten. Although by this time Ammar was an old man with white hair, he was beaten so severely that he fell unconscious, and even then was shown no mercy but was dumped unceremoniously into the street.²⁸

During Umar's administration Ammar b. Yasir had been appointed governor of Kufa. His deputy had been another prominent companion of the Prophet, Abd Allah b. Mas'ud. He too had been an early convert to Islam, and he was the first to openly recite the

Qur'an before the Quraish, for which, like Abu Dharr, he had suffered at their hands.²⁹ It is also well-known that he had been one of the Prophet's official recorders of the revelation (*kutub al-wahy*).

At the time of their appointment Umar had written to the people of Kufa: 'I am sending you Ammar as the governor and Abd Allah as your teacher and the deputy. Both of them are among the most illustrious and distinguished companions of the Prophet! Listen to them and follow them. I have preferred you over my own self (or otherwise I would like to keep them with me)'³⁰ Like Ammar, Abd Allah b. Mas'ud was another of the *qurra* to fall foul of Uthman's temper. In charge of the treasury in Kufa, he was recalled to Medina after a quarrel with al-Walid b. Uqba, the governor, and the Khalifa had ordered him to be roughly beaten in his presence.³¹

These accounts of the brutal treatment meted out by Uthman to some of the most distinguished of the Prophet's companions completes our picture of the political and social conditions that emerged with the accession of Uthman. Whereas at the beginning of Uthman's period it is true that the community as a whole had already lost their political rights (in the name of unity, note well), within a few years of Uthman's succession the economic justice they had known under the Prophet and his two successors had also been stripped from them, and the system that quickly prevailed under Uthman was one of favouritism and partisanship supported by measures of tyranny.

That these conditions represented a serious deterioration from the high standards set by the Prophet goes without saying, and the few attempts to disguise the outrage felt by all of the religiously minded *qurra* to be merely the result of a few mischief-mongers is a most blatant instance of white-washing that simply cannot be accepted, even if for centuries this has been the officially patronised point of view. No serious scholar of the period can overlook the fact that those who surrounded Uthman and formed the backbone of his administration were amongst the worst and most dubious members of the entire community, and that many of them had been shown to be such by the Prophet himself. Nor is it possible to ignore the large numbers of *qurra* who were either punished by the order of Uthman or sent by him to Damascus for his kinsman Mu'awia to punish. Conversely, there is no evidence to show that any such 'mischief-monger' was ever punished by Uthman, and the sources show that by and large the dissenters were amongst the most influential of the Prophet's companions and the most religiously minded of the whole community.³²

This brings us to a most important point, for the implications of this discussion go far beyond a mere consideration of the third Khalifa of Islam and his relations with a particular companion named Abu Dharr. After all, it all took place a very long time ago and would seem to be of little relevance to the present day. How-

ever, when we redirect our attention from the person of Uthman and from the corrupt elite that under Uthman's protection managed to embed itself at the head of the society's affairs, to the reaction of the prominent companions who had been the intimates and confidants of the Prophet, and consider how they acted in those circumstances, we cannot but notice that the entire period of Uthman is replete with lessons of the most constructive sort.

Islam is well-known as being a complete way of life that commands us to build ourselves and our society on the lines of the Islamic teachings, in order that both as individuals and as a society we may approach our perfection. On the individual level perhaps there is nothing to prevent us but our own desires and ignorance, but if on the social level, there is a government, a judiciary, an army and a police force standing in the way of social perfection, fixing the society in a mire of corruption and preventing the society from adopting the Islamic teachings necessary to lift it from that corruption, what are Muslims to do?

To this question there would seem to be three conceivable alternatives. Either we sit and do nothing, in which case history shows us that all too often in our desperation we will blame our stagnation on groups from amongst ourselves, and develop bigotry and intolerance instead of the harmony and brotherly love that is one of the purposes of religion;³³ or we may rise and fight no matter the consequences and regardless of whether the people are ready or able to implement Islamic government for themselves (much like the Khawarij and their counterparts throughout history and into the modern era). Obviously both of these alternatives are not without their shortcomings—assuming them to have any virtues—and it is difficult to consider either one of them to be endorsed by Islam. Rather the Islamic way would appear to be the third alternative, characteristically the middle path that enjoins us to stand against injustice and tyranny and condemn it, through the use not of arms but of tongues; firing not arrows or bullets but appeals to reason and to the lofty sentiments of the heart, and to strive to enlighten the general populace until they find their natural abhorrence towards injustice and oppression, and withdraw from the regime all forms of co-operation and consent, without which even the most well entrenched regimes cannot endure for very long, until the people do become ready and sophisticated enough to implant Islam at the level of government.

Of the three alternatives, it goes without saying that the regime itself prefers religion to teach the first, and wherever it finds religion wanting in this it is not above interfering to redress what it sees as the 'imbalance'; either by attributing false statements to genuine Prophets or other religious personalities; or by using force or bribery to insist on interpretations of the religious texts and other sources that will foster complacency; or by patronising treacherous

scholars and clergymen; or even by financing religious imposters and forming sects or religions of their own making.³⁴

Our Prophet never lived in the kind of state that was to afflict the Muslims shortly after his death. He was not to live in a state dominated by oppressors and tyrants claiming to be Muslims. Thus there is little in his life to guide us on these problems. Moreover, since the time of our Prophet most of those who relate to the people the traditions have lived under the shadow—if not the patronage—of the state, and as a consequence the Islamic guidance in how to deal with the crimes of the state seems to have sorely suffered, and is all too often lost under a haze of indecision and contradiction. Indeed, this would account for the whitewashing of the state crimes of the Umayyids under Uthman. Otherwise, how also can we explain the total absence of the name of Abu Dharr, one of the Prophet's four most outstanding companions, from the religious vocabulary of most Muslims and their Ulama?

Understanding the reaction of such notables as Ammar b. Yasir, Abd Allah b. Mas'ud and Abu Dharr Ghaffari to the conditions of injustice and tyranny that prevailed under Uthman, is an understanding of the Islamic response to conditions of injustice and tyranny everywhere and in every age. And this is a matter far too important to conceal behind expressions of piety.³⁵

Abu Dharr and the Bani Umayyah

Amongst the companions who objected to the policies of Uthman and the ruling Umayyid clique, none was as prominent and as outspoken as Abu Dharr, and none suffered so much because of it. As we have seen, Abu Dharr was not a man to mince his words, and whenever he felt that a truth needed to be said he would be the first to shout it out in the most public places. On such occasions nothing could hold him back. History shows him as a man who lived for Islam, who cared little for the world of shadows and illusions, but cared only for the real world of goodness and light that belongs to Allah.³⁶ He was a man the Prophet had carefully cultivated, and in the Prophet's absence he never wavered.³⁷ His life for him was a vehicle to serve Islam, for he knew as the Prophet knew that the pinnacle of service to God is service to Islam and the Muslims.

Abu Dharr was a simple man, a man of the people, and he realised better than most that much of Islam's appeal to the common man is in its being an instrument and system of perfect justice. This made it impossible for him to rest idle while the fabric of Muslim society was torn apart by the Prophet's erstwhile enemies, and the social justice of Islam replaced by a system of inequality and oppression.

Thus Abu Dharr's Islam was no mere collection of dogmas and rituals somehow divorced from daily affairs; rather with his profound vision he regarded it as a perfect system of guidance that

frees man of all forms of superstition, eliminating their causes from society.

For Abu Dharr the Prophet was not merely someone who had destroyed the idols in Makkah and most of Arabia, but a man who had practiced Islam in the most perfect way, so that he was able to destroy the very root of idolatry – injustice and oppression – and establish in its place the guidance of Allah both as a personal system of ethical refinement effected through worship, and as a complete and perfect social and political system effected through *jihad*.

For Abu Dharr, Allah was the Beneficent and the Merciful, who felt no desire to be worshipped and praised, but had sent Islam as a blessing for humankind, to end all their miseries and doubts. As he prayed, he realised that the contact with Allah that he achieved through prayer was above all for his own benefit. And as he fasted he felt himself more able to control his inherent imperfections, and thus better equipped to serve Allah by serving the religion, the ideology and system, that He had sent for the benefit of His creatures.

For Abu Dharr, one of the peaks of spirituality is a concern for justice. His prayers, his fasts, his acts of charity, his hajj, his jihad, his spiritual improvement, the opening of the vistas of his heart, his boundless love of Allah and His Prophet, all were to make him just – a lover of truth and a warrior of justice. For Abu Dharr, the whole of the magnificent edifice of the Islamic *shari'a* was to facilitate man's struggle for justice, to enable mankind to overcome oppression, and to make of the planet the garden of justice it was meant to be.³⁸

Abu Dharr was also concerned for the future generations. He was no sociologist, but he was aware that the common members of society are all too often susceptible to the values and attitudes of the ruling body. Now that the Prophet's chair had been filled by Uthman, and the seats of his virtuous companions by the depraved and worldly Umayyids, the danger was evident that if things were allowed to continue it would not be long before the young and impressionable would model themselves on the corrupt and perverse, and the spirit of Islam would wither and become all but lost to the world.

For all of these reasons, Abu Dharr felt himself obliged to issue a challenge to the new ruling class, and to be a thorn in the side of their deviations. He chose not the path of assassination, it is worthy of note, for assassination is normally a huge sacrifice for little effect, and is often of little or no consequence in improving the general awareness. Rather he chose the middle path of verbal denunciations of the ruling clique. His powerful protests against the accumulation of public wealth in the hands of a few, and his demands for expropriated lands to be distributed amongst the community,³⁹ shook the whole of Medina. Typically, he chose for his

thundering denouncements the mosque of the Prophet, where he could reach the greatest audience, and also cause the maximum embarrassment to Uthman and his party.

Perhaps the initial confirmation of the trend of Uthman's administration was the way in which, early in his Khalifa, certain revenues were disposed of. In particular Uthman granted a fifth of all the taxes of Africa—an enormous sum—to Marwan, and handed out three hundred thousand dirham to Hirth b. Abi 'l-'As, and one hundred thousand to Zaid b. Thabit.

When he heard about this, Abu Dharr exploded. He marched directly to the Prophet's mosque, where he addressed a large crowd on the Qur'an's verse: *...And as for those who hoard gold and silver and do not spend it in Allah's way, announce to them a painful chastisement.*⁴⁰ Basing his talk on this verse, Abu Dharr denounced the evils of favouritism and valuing wealth above virtue and good deeds, and contrasted Uthman's lifestyle and that of his court to that of the Prophet when he had been head of state, and of the Prophet's officials. Finally, following the command of the verse, he publicly rebuked Uthman, counselled him to mend his ways, and warned him of a painful chastisement were he to fail to do so.

News of Abu Dharr's outburst quickly reached the ears of Marwan, who immediately took it to Uthman. Uthman sent his slave to summon Abu Dharr. As soon as Abu Dharr entered the room Uthman haughtily told him to stop what he had heard of him. Abu Dharr asked Uthman what he had heard. Uthman replied he had heard that Abu Dharr was raising the people against him. 'How?' asked Abu Dharr.

'I heard that you recite nothing in the mosque but the verse *And those who hoard gold and silver...*'

'O Uthman', responded Abu Dharr, 'O successor of the Prophet, do you prevent me from reciting the Book of Allah, and from speaking against those who ignore it?! By Allah I swear that I prefer to please Him by annoying Uthman, than please Uthman by angering Allah!'

With this Uthman was silent, and Abu Dharr confidently withdrew, leaving Uthman to wonder how his caustic tongue could be silenced. From what later transpired it would appear that he quickly chose the method of exile, and awaited a suitable opportunity.

One of Uthman's favourite advisors was a man called Ka'b b. al-Ahbar. He was a recent convert from Judaism, and one of the scholars of the Jewish community in Medina. One day Abu Dharr came across the two of them sitting together—the sources are not clear as to where—engaged in a private discussion. Upon seeing Abu Dharr Uthman looked directly at Ka'b and, raising his voice loud enough for Abu Dharr to hear, asked him whether it was permissible for the ruler to take wealth and keep it unspent for as long as he liked.

'No' said Abu Dharr, before Ka'b could respond. 'That is not permissible.'

'Why not?' countered Ka'b, 'there is no problem in that.'

At this Abu Dharr turned to Ka'b, 'O son of a Jew, do you teach us our religion?'

Ka'b could only look painfully at Uthman, who spoke to Abu Dharr, 'How you trouble me, and your tongue my friends!'

This led to a bitter argument between the two, which only ended when Uthman shouted to Abu Dharr, 'Be off with you; go to Damascus!'

Syria

Exile to Damascus did not mean that Abu Dharr's campaign came to an end; far from it. If anything, conditions in the capital of the Syria province were such as would have strengthened his resolve. It had become, in short, the personal fief of its Umayyid governor, Mu'awiya, who had made of it a city of splendour and splurce, and also injustice, to rival the capitals of Byzantium, Persia and Rome. Witness to such conditions Abu Dharr saw no reason to be silent.

Mu'awiya had built a grand palace for himself, in which he was attended by thousands of guards and servants. Catching sight of Mu'awiya on an upper balcony one day shortly after his arrival, Abu Dhar called out to him.

'Mu'awiya, if you have built this with the money of the people it is treachery, and if you have done it with your own money it is extravagance.' Thenceforth he would call out the same or a similar phrase whenever he passed the palace.

Abu Dharr was not long in Damascus when he was approached in the mosque by a group who told him they had a complaint against Mu'awiya, for he had withheld their monthly dues for some time.⁴¹ At this Abu Dharr lowered his head for a few moments, and then stood before the people gathered there and addressed them:

'O People', he said, 'today I have heard something that I have not heard before. By God, it is not in the Book or the Sunna of His messenger. I see by God that truth is vanquished and falsehood is alive, and that the truthful is called a liar, and that corruption has raised its head.

'O wealthy, be fair with the poor, for ...*as for those who hoard gold and silver, and do not spend it in Allah's way, announce to them a painful chastisement.*'

'O wealthy, know that there are three partners in your wealth. First, the march of time, that seeks not your permission to destroy your wealth. Second, your heirs, who wait for you to die. Third, yourselves, so try to be no more helpless than your two partners. Allah says in His Book *No one attains to goodness till he spends of*

what he loves."⁴²

'O wealthy, are you not aware that when you die you are helpless and nothing can benefit you anymore, unless you build something from which the people benefit after your death, or impart knowledge that continues to benefit others, or leave a virtuous child who remembers you after your death. The Prophet has said, "My Lord said to me that 'if you like I will make the valley of Makkah turn gold for you' but I said 'No, I prefer to be full one day and hungry the next, that I may supplicate You in my hunger and thank You when full.'"

And yet I see that you select silk and curtains of fine brocade and your spoilt bodies are irritated by course cloth, while the Prophet slept on a rush mat. You eat beautiful, colourful foods, while the Prophet ate only barley bread, and that never till he was full.

'O wealthy, are you not aware that each day two angels come to the earth, one of whom says "O God, reward those who spend in your way", while the other says, "O God, kill those who hoard up wealth."

Abu Dharr concluded his address and turned to occupy himself in worship. The poor had listened attentively to the speech and had sat enthralled; the wealthy were shaking in agitation and fear. One of them, Jundad b. Musalama al-Fihri quickly made his way to Mu'awiya. He sat at Mu'awiya's right and said to him, 'It is clear that Abu Dharr will raise Damascus against you; if you wish to keep the town you must silence him.'

Mu'awiya thought to himself. Force was obviously not the way, for that would set the city ablaze. To complain to Uthman? But what would Uthman say? Would he not reproach him and accuse him of failing in his duty? Finally Mu'awiya decided that the best way of dealing with Abu Dharr was to send him on a *jihad*. He summoned Abu Dharr and put the venture to him. Ships bound for Syria had been troubled by raiders based in Cyprus, and Mu'awiya wanted to send a force to capture the island. Abu Dharr knew that Mu'awiya simply wanted to remove him, but since it is legitimate and obligatory to defend Muslim territory and the Muslims' rights of passage no matter who rules over them, he could not refuse. Besides, Abu Dharr was always mindful of his promise to the Prophet to go wherever they sent him.

Abu Dharr told him, 'One day fighting in the way of Allah is better than a thousand days elsewhere. I have been called to *jihad* in the way of Allah, and acceptance is the only answer worthy of me.'

Victorious in Cyprus, Abu Dharr returned with the army to Damascus, where he resumed his campaign of dissent. He was soon to confront Mu'awiya about his policy of terming the public treasury 'the wealth of Allah', rather than follow the Prophet and

his two successors who called it 'the wealth of the Muslims'. The reason for his anger on this subject was that he realised it was a subtle ploy on Mu'awiya's part to take from the general populace their sense of responsibility towards public funds. No doubt that the public purse is indeed the property of Allah, but the people are responsible towards it and it is the general populace upon whom it must be spent, or amongst whom it must be distributed. For this reason the Prophet was pleased to term it the property of the Muslims, knowing that this term would foster in them feelings of responsibility and also of expectancy.

When Abu Dharr tackled Mu'awiya on the subject, the latter smiled and said, 'Why, are we not the slaves of Allah, and our wealth His wealth?'

'Don't say that,' said Abu Dharr, 'Say the wealth of the Muslims.'

Mu'awiya relented, and then said, 'Why have you opposed me on this?'

Abu Dharr told him, 'You are not permitted to hoard wealth that belongs to the Muslims, yet in breach of the *sunna* and the practice of Abu Bakr and Umar, you hoard it for yourself and the rest of Bani Umayya.'

'It is not as you think', shouted Mu'awiya, 'I simply put some aside to spend at the right moment. I take nothing from the people, and where I must spend I spend.'

'But where you spend, you spend not for the sake of God but that the people might think you generous—as some of them do! O Mu'awiya, it is you who have made the rich rich and the poor poor!'

Mu'awiya was now cold in his anger, and threatened Abu Dharr, 'O Abu Dharr, stop what you are doing; you do not know where it will lead you.'

'By God', Abu Dharr replied, 'until the wealthy share their wealth I will never stop.' And with that he left.

Mu'awiya's next move was an attempt at bribery. He sent a man with three hundred dinar. Abu Dharr looked at the purse. 'If this is my rightful share for this year that has been withheld from me I will take it, but if it is a gift I have no need of it.'

The servant looked steadily at Abu Dharr in the hope that he would take it. His silence told Abu Dharr that the money did not represent his rightful share. 'Go!' he said, harshly, 'Return to him! I have no need of it.'

Angrily Abu Dharr made his way to the mosque. As he entered the mosque the people, especially the poor and helpless, turned to watch him. He took a stand at the front of the mosque and thundered, 'O men of wealth, spend out of what God has given you. Do not allow the life of this world to deceive you. Maintain in your wealth a right for the poor. The Prophet has said, "the son of Adam says 'it's mine', 'it's mine', but has he more that what he eats and is

destroyed, what he wears and becomes old and ragged, and what he gives in charity and remains to his credit?"

'O people of wealth, God has forbidden the hoarding of wealth. The Prophet has said, "A curse on gold! A curse on silver!"

'If this is hard for you know that it was hard on the companions, and they said to each other, "So what are we to earn?" Umar volunteered to find out for them. He went to the Prophet and asked him, and the Prophet told him, "A tongue that praises Allah, a thankful heart, and a wife who assists you in the works of faith."

'O people, the treasury is the right of all the Muslims, but Mu'awiya spends it on his palaces, his supporters and his servants. He forgets that over and above two sets of clothing (one for winter and one for summer), his expenses to perform hajj, and food for himself and his family nothing is lawful for him from the treasury. He should live as the people of his tribe live, neither better than them nor poorer. This is how Umar lived his life, why does Mu'awiya not do the same?

'The public treasury must be divided justly amongst the people, as it was during the time of the Prophet, Abu Bakr and Umar. Mu'awiya takes magnificent properties and spends thousands of dinars lavishly decorating and furnishing them, and forgets the Muslims. 'Umar went on Hajj with his son and took only sixteen dinars for his journey there and back. But still he said to his son, "We have been extravagant in this journey." 'Umar the head of the Muslims went on Hajj and spent only sixteen dinars and still considered it excessive! while Mu'awiya spends thousands on his tribe and considers it little!

At this point Abu Dharr was interrupted by one of those who are always there to advise the peace of stagnation and decay whenever the price of truth and reform looks likely to be high. He whispered in Abu Dharr's ear, 'Abu Dharr, you are coming down hard on Mu'awiya; be careful!'

Abu Dharr looked at him and told him, 'My beloved Muhammad bequeathed me the instruction to always speak the truth no matter how bitter, and not to fear the censure of anyone. I recite the prayer that he always recited: "O Allah, I seek refuge with you from cowardice, miserliness, life's humiliations, the world's deceits and the torment of death."'

The man was silent. Feeling a repulsion for such Muslims who seem to worship security and tranquillity in the world, Abu Dharr continued his address:

'In preparing their food they use all kinds of skills and ceremonies. So much colourful food do they consume that they are forced to seek medical remedies to digest it all. Yet when the Prophet left this world his stomach had never been filled with two types of food. The day he ate bread he would not eat dates. Never did his household fill themselves both morning and night for three

consecutive days, not even with barley bread. Whole months would sometimes pass without his household lighting a fire to cook with.'

'So what did they eat?' someone asked.

'Dates and water', replied Abu Dharr, 'The Prophet said, "The son of Adam can fill no vessel worse than his stomach; it is enough for you to eat just to stay on your feet." He also said, "Do not eat to the full, for it makes you lazy in your prayers, ruins your body and makes it prone to disease. It is for you to be moderate in eating; this way you will be free (of the sin of) extravagance, will benefit your body and will have more strength to worship your Lord.''

'Do not think that because the Prophet's companions had nothing they were abstemious by nature. No, they chose the path of asceticism solely for the sake of God and the promise He has given.'

'When the wealth of other countries had begun to flow into Medina (during the time of Umar), Umar's daughter Hafsa said to her father, "Father, is it not better for you to wear better clothes and eat better food, God has extended our sustenance?" "I will let you judge," Umar replied, "Have you forgotten how the Prophet and Abu Bakr lived?" Then he gave her examples until she wept and the tears streamed down her face. Then he said, "Beware, by God I swear that I shall share their life of hardship, so that mayhap I will attain their honourable station. They collected and stored nothing, but gave everything away, not even keeping something for themselves to eat!"

'One day A'isha came upon the Prophet and seeing him so hungry she began to weep. 'O Prophet,' she said, 'do you not ask Allah to give you food?' The Prophet replied, 'A'isha, by Him in whose hands is my life, were I to ask Him to make the mountains gold for me and the desert flourish wherever I go, He would do it; but I prefer hunger of the world to being full of it, poverty of it to wealth of it, and its sorrow to its happiness. O A'isha, for Muhammad and his household it is not fitting. God is not pleased with his Prophets except through forbearance of the world, and I am charged like them. Allah has said, 'Be forbearant like the Prophets before you were forbearant'. By God, I follow no course but obedience to Him. By God, as far as I am able I will be forbearant like them, and there is no power but with God.''

In addition to speeches like this in the mosque, Abu Dharr would continually shout at Mu'awiya from outside his palace. Once when Mu'awiya was visited by Halam b. Jundab, governor of the small Syrian town of Qinnisin, his guest saw Abu Dharr in front of the palace shouting angrily, 'May the fire take you! O God, curse those who fail to prohibit the wrong. O God, curse those who fail to enjoin the right.'⁴³

At this Mu'awiya changed colour, and as he turned to Malam he was violently shaking. 'Do you know this man?' he asked.

'No,' he replied.

'Who will rid me of this Jundab b. Junadah?' Mu'awiya exclaimed, in a tone of helplessness. 'Everyday he comes here, and every time he cries out what you have just heard.'

Then he turned to his men and told them to summon Abu Dharr. When he arrived, Mu'awiya said to him, 'Enemy of God and His Prophet! everyday you come here and repeat this action. If ever I was to kill a companion of the Prophet without Uthman's permission, it would be you!'

'I am not the enemy of God and His Prophet', Abu Dharr retorted, 'you and your father were the Prophet's enemies, and now you appear to be Muslims but in reality you are not!' And with that he left.

By this time Damascus was in a turmoil and the people were becoming emboldened to overthrow the tyranny of Mu'awiya's palace. Daily the wealthy were putting pressure on Mu'awiya to have him put the matter to an end. Mu'awiya again summoned Abu Dharr, but this time he determined to treat Abu Dharr with the maximum of cordiality. He stood when Abu Dharr arrived, hurried over to greet him, and respectfully ushered him to a seat beside himself. He called his servants and ordered them to bring food. A royal spread was laid before them consisting of the most tasty and appetizing food—such that Abu Dharr had never seen before. Mu'awiya beckoned his guest to eat, but Abu Dharr declined, and said, 'During the time of the Prophet my food was one measure of barley and by God I will add no more to that until the day I am restored to his company'. He then looked sternly at Mu'awiya. 'But you have changed', he said, 'in the past you would eat brown bread with two dishes, but now your food has become colourful and varied. You wear one set of clothes in the morning and another in the evening. You were never like this in the time of the Prophet.'

'Those days are over', countered Mu'awiya. 'We are in a foreign country, and we must put on a show to impress them, or they will take us lightly.'

'Beware,' Abu Dharr countered, 'I have never changed my habits. How likely it is that in the next world I will be the nearest of you all to the Prophet, for I heard him say, "On the Day of Resurrection the nearest to me will be he who leaves this world as he was when I leave this world", and by God I swear that of all of us here only I am like that.'

Mu'awiya was not impressed. 'O Abu Dharr, the men of wealth have complained to me of you, that you are urging the poor to rise against them.'

'I am cautioning them against hoarding wealth.'

'Why?'

'Because of God's words: "...those who hoard gold and silver..." I am warning them against such a grave chastisement.'

'This verse was revealed about the people of the Book'.

'No, it is about both us and them.'

'I command you to stop.'

'By God, I will continue to call the people to stop hoarding wealth and I will carry on warning them of a painful chastisement.'

'Your interests lie in bringing this to an end.'

'By God, my struggle will continue till the day when the wealth is distributed amongst the people fairly.'

Mu'awiya was angry now. 'Be careful Abu Dharr, this will drive a rift between us.'

Abu Dharr quickly replied with a verse of the Qur'an: '*Say, nothing affects us but what Allah has written.*'⁴⁴

Mu'awiya had Abu Dharr escorted from the palace, and issued the edict that no one was to have any dealings with him or even talk to him. Dumped unceremoniously outside the palace, Abu Dharr made his way to the mosque. He performed the *wudu* and sat to read the Qur'an. That day was a Friday. Soon Mu'awiya and his entourage came to the mosque to perform the prayer. Mu'awiya mounted the *mimbar* to deliver the two sermons. In his address he made the following comment:

'The wealth is our wealth, the treasury is our treasury. We grant it to whom we please and deny it to whom we please.'

At that a man stood up and said, 'Never! the wealth is our wealth and the treasury is our treasury and whoever deprives us of it, by God we will judge him with our swords.'

Mu'awiya lowered his head. In what the man had said Mu'awiya sensed the effect of Abu Dharr. He quickly calculated whether he should punish the man as an example for the rest of the people. Instead, master of intrigue and duplicity as he was, he decided to put on the appearance of being benign and well-meaning. After the prayer he sent for the man; and indicating him to the people he said: "This man has given us life, may God give him life. I heard the Prophet say, 'After me will come rulers whom no one will be able to oppose. They are like monkeys rushing to throw themselves into the fire.'"

But secretly Mu'awiya was livid. As he rushed home his teeth were fiercely clenched in anger. His face was white and trembling. When he had arrived home some of his family entered his room and were amazed to find him so angry. 'What is it?' one of them asked.

'Abu Dharr has ruined me', replied Mu'awiya. 'By Allah, if we leave him he will raise the people against us.'

'I will free you from him, by Allah,' said one of them.

'Force is useless,' said Mu'awiya.

'Who can tell?' said the man, and with that he hurried to the house of Abu Dharr. Arriving, he knocked loudly on the door and went in.

Abu Dharr did not recognise him. 'Goodness?' he asked.

'No' said the man, 'badness. If you do not end your protests against Mu'awiya and stop raising the people against him you will no more walk this earth!'

'I have no fear of death', replied the Prophet's companion.

'Abu Dharr, stop what you are doing and do not anger Mu'awiya, that is your best interest.'

'To anger Mu'awiya is better to me than to anger Allah.'

'Don't throw yourself into danger! Do not excite the people against us, stop this campaign of yours.'

'By God I will never stop until the public wealth is redistributed amongst the people.'

'By God, we know well for whom you are doing this. By God, if you do not stop you will know the feel of the whip.'

'By God, I will not stop till you return to the Book of God.'

The man was silent for a moment. His threats having come to nothing, he pursued a different tack: 'O Abu Dharr, none of your friends can profit you or save you from any harm, but Mu'awiya has wealth like a sea of waves, and you can profit from this.'

'I have no need of wealth, and no desire but for the satisfaction of my Lord, and what is with Him.'

'I am telling you, you are bringing yourself to your death.'

'Death for me is better than life!'

Defeated and speechless, it appears the man left without incident, but the pressure on Abu Dharr from Mu'awiya and his courtiers continued unabated. He was denied his share of the distributions, and was constantly harassed and threatened.

Yet Abu Dharr never wavered. One day he stood before the people and said:

'The Umayyids threaten me with poverty and death. By God, poverty is dearer to me than wealth, and being under the ground dearer than being upon it.

'O people of wealth, return the wealth of God to the people, and do not say "the hand of God is bound while we are rich", for *verily your wealth and your children are a trial, and Allah it is with whom there is a great reward. Therefore fear Allah as much as you can, and hear and obey and spend. That is better for yourselves. And whoever is saved from his own greediness, these are the successful. If you set apart a goodly portion for Allah, He will double it for you and forgive you; Allah is the Multiplier (of rewards), the Forebearing.*'⁴⁵

Such remonstrations coupled with Abu Dharr's iron will not to be deflected from his course, forced Mu'awiya to realise that he could never succeed against him. He had tried kindness, threats and bribery, but all to no avail.⁴⁶ Finally he could see no way but to send him back to Medina. He wrote to Uthman:

'Around Abu Dharr groups gather. He has placed us in a straightjacket. Things are very difficult for me. I fear that he will

raise them up against you. If you have need of the people of Syria take him from me.'

Uthman replied: 'The rising has shown its teeth and is ready to find its tongue. Do not open the head of this boil, but mount Abu Dharr on your most vicious mount and have him guarded by one who will treat him badly, and send him to me. Meanwhile, restrain the people and remain calm. If you do nothing to the people they will do nothing to you.'

When the people of Damascus heard they were to lose their refuge and spokesman they were severely distressed and tried to prevent him from being taken away. Abu Dharr addressed them:

'People! I call you to that which will profit you. I do not seek social chaos and hypocrisy. People. I praise God...'

Here the people interrupted Abu Dharr, saying 'al-hamdulillah'.

Abu Dharr continued: 'I testify that there is no god but Allah, and that Muhammad is His servant and messenger.'

The people all repeated this phrase.

'O people, I testify that the resurrection is true, paradise is true, hell is true; I testify to all that has come from God. You all witness this.'

'We are a thousand witnesses,' the cry went up.⁴⁷

'To those who die on this belief and have not helped the sinners nor assisted in oppression, I give glad tidings of the forgiveness of God. People, whenever you see treachery I tell you to become angry, just as I tell you to pray and to fast. Do not earn the pleasure of rulers through the anger of God. If they betray you be away from them,⁴⁸ even if you are punished and exiled in this way you please God. Remember, God is higher and more deserving; it is not right to please a creature by angering God.'

Abu Dharr was placed on a camel on a rough wooden saddle, under the supervision of five heavy-handed Sicilian slaves. Their orders were not to let Abu Dharr have any rest, but to drive the camel on to Medina relentlessly. As a consequence, by the time this white haired old man reached Medina the skin was torn from his legs and he was near to death.

As he approached Medina, his party came across some people busy outside the town. As soon as he saw them Abu Dharr called out to them:

'Give news to the people of Medina of a great disorder and an historical struggle.'

The people approached Abu Dharr. Amongst them were Uthman and Ali. Uthman was the first to speak: 'God gives no pleasure to the eyes through seeing you, O Junaydab.'⁴⁹

'You call me Junaydab', replied Abu Dharr, 'but the Prophet called me 'Abd Allah, and I prefer that name to my own.'

'Why do the people of Damascus complain to me so much of

your tongue?' complained Uthman.

'Because they hoard wealth and I warned them of the heat of hellfire.' replied Abu Dharr.

'Do you think that we say God is poor and we are rich?' said Uthman.

'If this was not your view you would divide God's wealth amongst His servants. I advised you and you called me a traitor; I advised your friend and he too called me a traitor.'

'You lie, you seek a rebellion for that is what you desire; you raised the province against us.'

'Follow your two friends [i.e. Abu Bakr and Umar] and no one will bother you.'

'What is all this to you, good-for-nothing!?'

'By God you have no grievance against me except that I call to what is right and protest at what is wrong.'

Uthman's anger was intense. Turning to those around him he asked: 'Tell me what to do with this lying old man. Shall I hit him? Kill him? He has divided the Muslim community; shall I send him into exile?'

The only person to answer was Ali. Turning to Uthman he said, 'I say to you what the believer said to Pharaoh: *If he lies, on him will be his lie, and if he be truthful there will befall you that with which he threatens you... Surely Allah does not guide the extravagant, the liar.*'⁵⁰

At this Uthman turned on Ali and accused him of being Abu Dharr's accomplice. A heated argument developed between Ali and Uthman, and others broke in to quiet them. Uthman ordered that while Abu Dharr was in Medina no one was to sit with him or speak with him, and with that he made his way back to the city.

With Abu Dharr once more in Medina so many people gathered around him—despite Uthman's decree—that it was as if they could have never done without him, listening to his opinions and seeking his legal verdicts. This was intolerable for Uthman, and he commanded that no one was to seek his verdict. Nonetheless, people cautiously continued to seek his opinions and respect them.

Once a man came to Abu Dharr in the mosque and said, 'Uthman's tax officers have made the tax heavy on us. Is it permissible for us to hide some of our property so as not to pay too much tax?'

'No', said Abu Dharr, 'keep your property where it is but tell them to take only what is right and to leave the rest; if they take more than that and wrong you it will be written for you on the Day of Judgement.'

At this a young man of the Quraish spoke up, 'O Abu Dharr, has not the khalifa forbidden you from issuing verdicts?'

'What do you know?' retorted Abu Dharr. 'I swear by Him in whose hand is my life, if you put a sword here' and he pointed to his

neck, 'and I calculate that I will be able to relate a saying I heard from Muhammad before you cut it, I will certainly say it!'

Uthman once heard that Abu Dharr had been surrounded by a large group who had listened avidly to his words. He sent someone to summon Abu Dharr, and Abu Dharr promptly responded. When Abu Dharr came upon Uthman he found him with Ka'b b. al-Ahbar and some others. Uthman said to him, 'O Abu Dharr, when will you stop this?'

'When the poor receive their rights from the wealthy.'

Turning to those present Uthman asked them, 'In your view, when a person has paid *zakat*, do others still have a right to what remains?'

Ka'b b. al-Ahbar spoke up: 'No, once he has paid his *zakat* then even if he builds a house from silver or gold, there are no rights upon him.'

At this Abu Dharr was enraged and struck Ka'b with his stick. 'You lie, son of a Jew: *Goodness is not that you turn your faces to the east or west, rather goodness is believing in Allah and the Last Day and the Angels and the Book and the Prophets; and giving away wealth for His love to the near of kin, the orphans, the needy, the distressed wayfarer, those who ask and for freeing the captives; and establishing the prayer and paying the zakat; and keeping promises and being patient in distress and affliction and times of conflicts; these are the true, these are the virtuous.*'⁵¹

'Do you not see', Abu Dharr continued, 'that here a difference is shown between giving *zakat* and spending on one's relatives, the orphans, the poor and the slaves, and that the verse gives priority to these over *zakat*? Do you not see that it forbids the hoarding of wealth and commands to spending it in the way of Allah?'

'Listen Abu Dharr', countered Uthman, 'one cannot force the people to be virtuous. My duty is (only) to judge by the laws of Allah and to encourage the people to the middle path of moderation.'

'I will not leave the wealthy until they give charitably, and give to their neighbours and brothers and promote the ties of harmony.'

Ka'b b. al-Ahbar broke in again, saying, 'When a person has given his *zakat* there is nothing more upon him.'

Once more Abu Dharr struck him with his stick—angry in the way of God—and asked him, 'A person usurps the people's property and unlawfully takes their rights from them, and then he gives them *zakat*, and in your view he is a Muslim who has carried out his duties?' With this he angrily left the room.

Bewildered, Uthman tried to appease Abu Dharr. He sent a servant after him with a purse of two hundred dinar, with the instructions that he was to take it and distribute it amongst his followers. Abu Dharr asked the servant if he had given the same to everyone. The servant replied that he hadn't. 'So,' said Abu Dharr, 'since I am just one of the Muslims, whatever I receive they must

also receive.'

The servant replied, 'Uthman says that this is his personal money, and that by God there is no haram money mixed in it. He says he sends you nothing but money that is lawfully acquired.'⁵²

'Still I have no need; today I am amongst the richest of people.'

'May God make it so', said the servant, 'but I see nothing much here in this your house.'

'Under this basket', said Abu Dharr, 'lies a piece of barley bread that has been there a few days, so what need have I of all that money?'

Uthman tried the path of bribery on several occasions, never once with success. Once he sent a slave with one hundred dinar, and told the slave that if Abu Dharr accepted he would be free. When Abu Dharr refused the money the slave said to him, 'God have mercy on you, take this money, for in your acceptance I will find my freedom.'

'But then,' said Abu Dharr, 'I would be enslaved.'⁵³

When Abd Allah b. Awf died his wealth was brought and placed in a pile before Uthman. It was so much that the pile acted as a barrier between Uthman and the man standing at his side. Uthman said, 'God have mercy on Abd Allah b. Awf. He gave charity, he was hospitable, and now he has left all this.'

Ka'b b. al-Ahmar was with him. 'You are right, O leader of the faithful', he said. 'He earned it lawfully and spent it lawfully: God has given him the good of the world and the Hereafter.'

It was not long before Abu Dharr heard about this. Angrily he left his house and searched the streets looking for Ka'b. Like a hungry lion he picked up a camel bone he came across lying in the street, the better to strike Ka'b with. The news that Abu Dharr was looking for him soon reached Ka'b and he hurriedly took refuge with Uthman. Abu Dharr went to Uthman and found him there. As entered Ka'b immediately rose from his seat and moved to stand behind Uthman. Abu Dharr raised the bone and brought it crashing down on Ka'b's head, causing it to bleed. Then he cried out, 'O son of a Jew, when a man dies and leaves behind all this wealth you say that God has given him the good of this world and of the Hereafter!' So now you determine the actions of God! Once the Prophet marched to Uhad and I went with him. "O Abu Dharr", he said to me. "Yes O Prophet of God, may my mother and father be sacrificed for you", I replied. "I would not wish to spend in the way of God a mountain of gold the size of Uhad, and leave behind me two *qirat* (a coin of tiny value)."

"Two *qintar* (a coin of large value)?" I asked.

"Two *qirat*," repeated the Prophet. Then he said, "O Abu Dharr, you want a lot, while I want a little."

'This', continued Abu Dharr, 'is what the Prophet wanted, and

you, O son of a Jew, say that what Abd Allah b. Awf left behind is *halal*! Did God send it from the heavens? Or did he take it from the hard-earned rights of the people? By God, I swear that on the Day of Resurrection the master of this wealth will wish it had been scorpions that had stung the veils away from his heart. The Prophet has said, "All wealth treated with miserliness is fire for its owner's belly until he spends it in the way of God." And yet you say that Abd Allah b. Awf will not be questioned about all this wealth? By God, Ka'b, you lie, and everyone who shares this belief with you also lies.'

Uthman apologised to Ka'b for this outburst and asked him to overlook it, and then turned angrily to Abu Dharr and said, 'How you trouble me! Turn away from me, for I do not wish to see you. By God you and I cannot be in the same place together. Go outside!'

'Gently Uthman,' said Abu Dharr, 'did you not see the Prophet and Abu Bakr and Umar before you: do you act like them? No, you treat me like a tyrant!'

Uthman was shouting now: 'Get outside! Leave our country and our vicinity!!'

How I hate your company; tell me, where shall I go?,

'Where you will!'

'I shall go to Makkah.'

'No, that I will not allow.'

'Do you prevent me from going to Makkah to worship God until I die?'

'Yes, by God, I do.'

'So I will go to Syria, the land of Jihad.'

'No, by God, you ruined Syria and for that reason I brought you back; shall I now send you there again?'

'Then I will go to Iraq.'

'No, that will not do either. There the people are more against us than anywhere.'

'Egypt then,' said Abu Dharr.

'No, by God, choose some other place.'

By now Abu Dharr was losing patience. 'No, by God, I will only choose one of the places I have said. Were I free I would stay here, so send me where you will.'

'I exile you to the desert.'

'What, would you send an Arab to live in the desert after he has lived in the town?'

'Yes.'

'In that case I will go to the desert of Najd.'

'No, you must be where I can keep an eye on you. Go, you must leave today. I am sending you to Rabza.'

Uthman turned to his attendants, and said, 'Take him out: put him on a camel on an uncovered saddle, and carry him roughly to Rabza. At Rabza no one may befriend him, till God does what He wills.'

CHAPTER FIVE

Rabza and the Death of Abu Dharr

Uthman charged Marwan with the duty of accompanying Abu Dharr to Rabza, and ordered that no one should see him off. Marwan and his party mounted and set off. As ordered, the people stayed away. Deep in thought, Abu Dharr said his farewells to the town that had changed so much since the time of the Prophet, and yet was still blessed with the aura of his presence. The tears flowed from his eyes.

News of Abu Dharr's exile soon circulated through the town. When Ali heard of it he exclaimed, 'What are they doing to this loyal helper of the Prophet?' and he wept. Together with some members of his household and his friend Ammar b. Yasir, he set off to catch up with their old and dear friend, and say their farewells. Ali drew up in front of Abu Dharr to speak to him. At this Marwan came between them and said, 'O Ali, the leader of the faithful has forbidden anyone from accompanying Abu Dharr, or seeing him off; if you didn't know it, know it now!'

Ali ignored him and carried on at the side of Abu Dharr. Marwan again intervened. This time Ali struck Marwan's mount, and said, 'Get aside! May God throw you in the fire!'

Seeing Ali thus enraged and determined Marwan returned to Medina to complain to Uthman, while Ali and his party accompanied Abu Dharr to Rabza. On their arrival they sat and spoke for a while, until the time came for Ali and the others to depart. The two of them in tears, Ali and Abu Dharr hugged each other farewell. Abu Dharr spoke a few words, and Ali replied with a few sentences that have been recorded, and because of their beauty and relevance we repeat them here in full:

'You were angry for the sake of God, so have hope in Him for

whom you were angry. These people were afraid of you for the sake of the world, and you feared them for the sake of your religion. So leave them with that for which they were afraid of you, and take that for which you feared them; how badly they need what you deny them, and how little you need what they deny you. If you had accepted their world they would have loved you; and if you had appropriated to yourself some part of it, they would have been more able to stand your presence.'

Ali then told Hasan and Husain to bid farewell to their 'uncle' and 'Aqil b. Abu Talib to his 'brother' and in silence they departed.

The news of Abu Dharr's cruel exile spread through the rest of the Muslim world like wildfire. Abu Darda, one of the Prophet's most respected companions, was often heard to say, 'By God, if he had cut off my hand or another limb I would not harm him, for I heard the Prophet say, "The sky has not covered nor the earth supported a man more truthful than Abu Dharr."'

Another prominent companion who felt strongly about Abu Dharr's exile was Abd Allah b. Mas'ud, who was at that time living in Kufa, Iraq. For a long while he made a practice of reciting the Qur'an's verse: *You are those who kill some of yourselves and exile a party from amongst you*.⁵⁴ This and other factors led to his recall from Kufa to Medina, where Uthman had him treated so roughly that it led to his early death.'

In Rabza Abu Dharr settled down to a life of hardship and want. Old and feeble as he was, it appears he tried his best to eke out a meagre living from the barren soil. He lived in a tent. At the beginning of his exile he was accompanied by his son, Dharr, and either his daughter or his wife, though it was probably his daughter. One year he took Uthman's permission and went on Hajj.

Soon after he returned from Hajj, life grew even harder as the few sheep he had and upon whose milk they all depended so much, began to die off, leaving Abu Dharr and his family to eat whatever they found growing. In this regime his son became seriously ill. Feeling that were his son to die he would himself be held responsible before God, Abu Dharr went to Medina and straight to Uthman. Poorly dressed in rags with his white hair ruffled, he stood before Uthman and told him, 'Uthman! You have sent me to a place where nothing grows and where there is nothing to eat. I had only a few sheep but those that are left give no milk. I have no help but my daughter. You must give me some sheep.'

Uthman's only reply was to turn his face as if he had not heard him. Abu Dharr walked in front of him and repeated his demand. Again Uthman ignored him. One of those who was present was Habib b. Musalama. He felt pity for the old man and said, 'You have a thousand dinar, five hundred sheep and a servant, from me!'

Abu Dharr looked at him sternly. It was not charity that he had come for but his rights. 'Give your money, your sheep and your ser-

vant to someone in need' he told him, 'all I want is my right maintained for me in the Qur'an.'

At this point Ali entered. Uthman turned to him and said, 'Will you free me of this fool of yours?'

'What fool?' said Ali.

'Abu Dharr,' said Uthman.

'By God, he is no fool,' said Ali. 'I have heard the Prophet say that Abu Dharr is like the Prophet Jesus in modesty, aestheticism and humility.'

By this time Abu Dharr had stormed out of the palace heedless of the cries for him to return. He felt unable to remain in Medina, for that would be tantamount to begging, and he made straight for Rabza. When he arrived his son was dead, and his daughter was sitting in tears. The pain in Abu Dharr's heart was intolerable. He turned to God and sought intimacy in prayer and devotions and supplications. Then he performed the funeral rights for his dead son.

Through all of his terrible hardships Abu Dharr had felt ever closer to God. Now he felt totally immersed in God. God's light was bright within him and he was himself a light of God shining in the dark earth. He stood for a moment at his son's grave. Then he addressed his son:

'My son! God forgive you. You were righteous and you were always kind to your old parents. Dear son, I do not feel humiliated or helpless at your death. I need only God. The trouble I took for you was not allowed to save you. My son, if I was not afraid of the first day [i.e. stage] of death I would like to have died in your place; how I wish I knew what they asked you in your first trial and what answers you gave! O God, you placed him under obligations, and you gave me rights upon him. O God, I overlook my rights; you too overlook Your rights upon him. You are more forgiving than me.'

After more long and bitter days in the clutches of famine and destitution, the cold hand of death finally made its way to Abu Dharr himself. He lay crumpled up in a heap as if he was a broken toy. His knees were bent right up into his stomach and his head was in his chest. He was like this for a long while when his daughter saw the sign of death on his face. She began to weep. Abu Dharr opened his eyes to look at her. He too realized he was about to die. He looked at her lovingly, as if to praise her loyalty and that of her mother before her.

'My time is near,' he said.

His daughter stared in horror. 'What is to happen to you?' she asked.

'By God,' said Abu Dharr. 'I am soon to leave this world and rush to the eternal abode.'

With this he lost consciousness, and his daughter burst into

tears. When he opened his eyes again she was still crying violently. 'Why do you cry?' he asked her.

'How can I stop myself,' she replied. 'I see you are to die in this barren desert and I can do nothing for you; and neither of us has sufficient cloth to cover you.'⁶⁵

Abu Dharr sought to cheer her. 'Don't cry', he said, 'I give you glad tidings. I have heard the Prophet say that a Muslim will not lose three children and remain firm and steadfast and count it as in the way of God, without that person never having to see the fire. Have your mother and I not lost three children and remained firm and counted it as in the way of God?'

Abu Dharr was silent. After a few moments his daughter could no longer hold back her tears. Abu Dharr opened his eyes, and spoke soothingly to his daughter. 'The Prophet once said to a group of us that one of us would die in the desert and group of believers will attend his death; and all of them have died in towns and cities, and I am that one who will die in the desert. By God, I do not lie and nor was I lied too. Rise now, and look out over the desert.'

'Where shall I look?' asked his daughter. 'The Hajj has begun and the trail is deserted.'

Rise, and if you see no one put this cloak over me when I am gone and leave me beside the trail, and say to the first caravan that comes along that this is Abu Dharr, companion of the Prophet who has died here, and tell them to help you bury me.'

His daughter went, saw no one and returned. Again and again he sent her, and again and again she went, if only to please her father. She had little hope. But then on the distance she saw a tiny speck, that soon took the form of black shapes. Standing a little way off she waved a cloth for them to see her. They approached her.

'What do you want, O slave of God?' one of them asked.

'A Muslim is dying; cover him and take your reward from God.'

'Who is it?'

'Abu Dharr.'

'The companion of the Prophet?'

'Yes.'

'My father and mother be sacrificed for you, O Abu Dharr!'

Quickly they made their way to the tent. Abu Dharr was still alive. They said their salams. Abu Dharr opened his eyes. 'If I or my daughter had a cloth for a kafn we would not bother you. By God, if any of you is an officer of the state, do not cover me.'

They looked at each other in surprise. All but a young Ansar held such posts. The young Ansar said gently, 'Uncle, I will cover you, either in this cloth I am wearing, or in cloth woven by my own mother.'

'Cover me.'

With this off his mind Abu Dharr closed his eyes to gaze once

more at the memories of his long and painful but honourable life, and the face of the beloved Prophet he had missed so much. And soon he was there. They washed him, covered him, and alongside a stone they buried him under the hot desert sands.

The young Ansar stood next to the grave and prayed: 'O God, this is Abu Dharr, the companion of your Prophet. He is your slave and your worshipper who has always fought your enemies. O God, Abu Dharr never changed his beliefs, but rather saw wrong and fought against it with his heart and his soul. They tortured him and exiled him till they had stripped him of all family and friends, and he died alone. O God, destroy those who have deprived Abu Dharr and driven him from his home and the sanctuary of the Prophet.'

The others raised their faces to the heavens. 'Amin,' they said, silently.

Abu Dharr died on the 8th of Zi 'l-Hajjah, 32 A.H., at the age of eighty-five; may God shower mercy on his soul.

Epilogue: The Legacy of Abu Dharr

Abu Dharr died alone in poverty and considerable misery: the daughter he left behind could have inherited no more than a simple tent and a few cooking utensils. Nevertheless, he left to succeeding generations a legacy vast enough to enrich and enoble all who wish to benefit from it. Consisting not of material goods, the vast wealth bequeathed to us by Abu Dharr is the legacy of his stirring example, the example of a truth-loving man at his best. It is the example of a man hungry for truth, raised and refined at the right hand of the Prophet himself, left the task of remaining true to truth in a world careering towards falsehood, hypocrisy and confusion, who performs this task so successfully that for the whole of mankind he becomes an inspiration.

Despite this, the name of Abu Dharr has remained relatively unknown, and no proof of the subsequent deviation of Islamic society is more conclusive and damning than this. In days when a reverence for the Prophet's companions is seen as a cardinal virtue of Islam and a measure of Islamic orthodoxy, the name of one of the greatest of them has been forgotten. Of all the mosques throughout the world that ring with commemorations of the Prophet's companions—all echoed by pious benedictions—in only a handful has the name Abu Dharr ever been mentioned. Yet ironically, the names of his enemies and persecutors are more familiar to Muslims today than that of Abu Dharr, and more revered among them.

Here we cannot help but ask ourselves to what does Abu Dharr owe this anonymity. It cannot be because he was an insignificant figure either historically or as a companion of the Prophet, for a while he was among the first of the Prophet's companions and one of his closest intimates, he also played an important and notable historical role both in the time of the Prophet and afterwards,

during the Khilafat of Uthman. Moreover, he was the narrator of many important sayings of the Prophet. In the same way, his anonymity cannot be because there are no useful lessons to be learnt from his life, for we have seen how his life is a whole course of lessons in the crucial topic of the Islamic response to tyranny, that unfortunately has been the rightful concern of almost all Muslims even since, and perhaps no other companion has given us these lessons so forcibly. Thus we are forced to look elsewhere for the answer to this mystery, since this almost exhausts the possibilities and we are left with no option but to conclude that the story of his life and his very name have been deliberately suppressed precisely to prevent the Muslims from learning the lessons, the story of Abu Dharr seeks to teach, so that another, contrasting view of the Islamic response to tyranny and social corruption might go unchallenged. This is the view that the proper response of the Muslim towards social corruption and tyranny is to tolerate and accept it, and seek to be delivered from it through prayers and supplications to God—as it were by miraculous means—or, at most, to seek to correct it through kindly advices to tyrants. In this view the open denunciations practiced by Abu Dharr and which set the people aflame are harmful and unlawful, and a number of grounds are cited for this. Since the story of Abu Dharr is not complete without a consideration of the justifications offered by those who ignore him and denounce his method, here we consider what appear to be the three most commonly cited.

First, it is held that a set of genuine sayings of the Prophet explicitly prohibit the Muslims from troubling their ruler and from interfering in the affairs of state, no matter how badly and unjustly the state may be run. Some of these traditions go so far as to exhort the Muslim to remain loyal and obedient to the ruler even if the ruler whips him, steals his property and murders his family. In considering these sayings it must first be noted that they appear to contradict another set of sayings over the authenticity of which there is no dispute, and which are just as clear in exhorting us to combat injustice and oppression with as much force and drive as we can muster. Some of these traditions are famous, such as the saying, 'the greatest *jihad* is a word of truth to a tyrannical ruler', and also: 'He who sees evil should act against it bodily, and if not then with his tongue, and if not then he should detest it in his heart and this is the lowest level of faith.'

Moreover, the quietest set of traditions also appear to contradict the spirit of the Qur'an, at least when they are interpreted unconditionally. The Qur'an is firm in its condemnations of all forms of social injustice, even the weighing of scales, as in the chapter *Shu'ara*, 'the Poets':

The dwellers of the forest belied the Messengers, when Shu'aib said to them,

'will you not fear God?
 'Surely I am a faithful Messenger to you,
 'so fear God and obey me,
 'I ask of you no reward, my reward is only from the Master of
 the worlds,
 'Give full measure and be not from those who sell lightly.
 'Weigh things with a just balance
 'and do not cheat people of their things,
 'do not arrogantly make corruption in the earth,
 and guard against (displeasing) Him who created you and the
 former nations.'

By definition no Muslim can doubt the veracity of the Qur'an, and therefore for the Muslim there is no better measure by which to discern the true intent of traditions from the false. And since of two conflicting sets of traditions only one can be genuine, it is for Muslims to reject or at least suspend judgement on those that contradict the spirit of the Qur'an, rather than those that accord to it.

But this is if we take the apparently quietist traditions at face value and interpret them unconditionally, holding them to apply to all circumstances and all conditions. However if they are held to be conditional and applicable only to certain, particular, circumstances, there may be far less of a case for rejecting them. And this could well be the truth of the matter. In our account of the life of Abu Dharr we have noticed that he interrupted his internal *jihad* of social reform to take part in the *jihad* against the external enemy in Cyprus, and in this lies an indication that there is indeed some wisdom in these apparently quietist traditions, so that when a ruler or a regime is occupied in defending Islam and the heartlands and rights of the Muslims against external aggression, it is the duty of the Muslims to support that ruler no matter how offensive his internal policies. When interpreted this way, these apparently quietist traditions take on quite another more radical and positive character, no longer contradict the Qur'an, and can be accepted alongside the clearly radical traditions without clashing with them and in fact contributing to the total and lofty understanding that is only available when both are considered together.

A second, more feeble ground for adopting quietism in the face of tyranny and oppression is the Islamic interdiction of backbiting, called in Islam *ghaibah*. While there is no doubt that backbiting is genuinely forbidden in Islam and that Islam paints a picture of the most grievous other world punishments for those who commit it, it is necessary to realise that this is a general law instituted above all to preserve the harmony and brotherhood and thence the quality of Islamic society. Therefore, like all general laws it is open to particular exceptions when Islam sees its harm to be greater than its good, in which case the interdiction lapses. A simple illustration of such a lapse is the case of one whose advice is

sought in connection with the suitability of potential marriage partner. Should the person whose advice is sought be aware of some fault in the would-be husband or wife that could well ruin the marriage and bring misery on the other partner if not both of them, it is by no means permissible in Islam to remain silent on the grounds that to mention that fault would be backbiting and forbidden. This would be a gross betrayal of confidence that is forbidden in Islam.

Similarly, the harm of remaining silent towards tyranny and oppression, which are far greater social evils than backbiting, and far more ruinous to the fabric of society, exceed by far the harm—if any—of backbiting the tyrant. The obligation of protecting the society through raising the awareness of the people is essential to the spirit of Islam, and is not to be cast aside under a pretence or a misconception of piety. The Qur'an itself provides an illustration of this. Where it mentions the tyrant Qarun this sacred book relates first how he was of the followers of the Prophet Musa, peace be with him, but that he rebelled against Musa—traditions state that this was when he was asked to share his wealth. At this Qarun was addressed by the 'nation', that is to say by their public spokesmen, and told not to bathe exultantly in his wealth, but to think of the poor and needy. Despite this open condemnation Qarun refused to mend his ways, and the Qur'an relates how he made a special show of his wealth and finery before the common people, possibly to win over supporters, and that the many of the common people were indeed impressed by his finery, envious of him and openly admired what they saw as his blessings. This led the learned to speak out against him again, but because he ignored their warning he was destroyed along with all his wealth in a sudden earthquake. At this the ignorant people who had openly admired Qarun were brought to their senses, and said: Had Allah not been merciful towards us He would most surely have abased us; O, how the ungrateful never succeed!

This story teaches several points. First, that hoarding and exulting in wealth is a terrible sin. Second, that it is a sin with grave social consequences abhorrent to God. Third, that God commends the learned who speak out for the people against those who hoard the wealth of society and exalt in their possessions. In no way can be seen to censure them for backbiting. Thus there can be little doubt that speaking out against tyranny and oppression are not covered by the interdiction of backbiting.

The third and most feeble argument against Abu Dharr's method of social reform is the claim that history shows any attempt to do so to have resulted in further deterioration of social conditions. In dealing with this argument it is sufficient simply to deny the premises for it betrays—or assumes—a total ignorance of Islamic history. Even a superficial acquaintance with the accounts of the rising of Abd Allah b. Zubair, or of the Kharajite sect in their

early stages, or of Hallaj b. Yusuf, is sufficient testimony to the fact that despite the evils of the present, the evils of the past have at times been far worse. In the same way, the present domination over the Muslim world by the powers of what used to be called Christendom represent a crucial problem for the Muslims of today and have caused what sometimes seems like unimaginable suffering that must surely come to an end, but while it is the duty of every Muslim to strive for a real freedom and independence for the Muslim heartlands it is a sorry truth that these problems do not come near to matching the enormous catastrophies the Muslims suffered during the invasions of Ghengiz Khan and the Crusaders. In fact, taken at face value this argument is so ridiculous to be unworthy of serious consideration, and it is mentioned here only because of its popularity and because it has a dangerous corollary that totally turns truth upon its head: namely, that the evils of Islamic society and the misery by which Muslims are beset are largely not the fault of the tyrants and plunderers who have grasped the reigns of Islamic society and contaminated it with an epidemic of injustice and corruption of which they have been the source, nor of those who have betrayed their learning and have tolerated these tyrants and acquiesced to their tyrannies, but of Abu Dharr and his likes who have strived and suffered enormous hardships in their efforts to bring about reform. Therefore, while this is the weakest of the three views it is also the most insidious, and the most likely to have originated in the courts and palaces it serves, for it turns the blame for social diseases not on those who are responsible for them but on those who are striving in the Islamic manner to cure these diseases and re-establish society on the path of health and growth. Naturally, many of those deceived by this view may be sincere enough, but the reality is that this is a satanic view serving to divide society and alienate the reformer from those whose awareness he is striving to raise, both in his own time and in subsequent generations; as indeed has happened in the case of Abu Dharr.

In the light of this there can be no doubt that the legacy of Abu Dharr represents the true teachings of the Prophet concerning the proper reaction to social and political deviation and his life is a great and sublime instance of those teachings in practice. Moreover, although the name of Abu Dharr seems to have been forgotten, in reality his legacy is waiting in the shadows ready to manifest itself when the people are aware and committed enough to firmly grasp it, guard it and implement it. And Islam is in need of such people, because for as long as Muslims limit their Islam to a set of devotions without seeking the deep meanings behind these acts, and without perceiving the lofty goals these devotions are designed to serve, they will never solve the pressing problems in their societies and their youth will continue to turn to foreign ideologies.

No better proof of this exists than the fact that the present age

is witness to a general and powerful resolve—particularly amongst our youth—to see Islam implemented at all levels and the Islamic teachings applied to the social and political problems with which our societies are beset. Amongst Muslims this is often referred to as a return to true Islam, and its common factors are the assumptions that the decline of Islam is due to a deviation that took place sometime in the past in Muslim society, and that for Muslims to solve their problems and to progress to the full potential promised them by Islam, it is necessary for them to somehow retrace their steps and again take hold of Islam as it was originally presented by the Prophet. This is the phenomenon termed fundamentalism, and ignoring the debate over this term and the similarity to Christian Fundamentalism that it implies, there is no doubt that it is a phenomenon never been seen to the same strength since the time of the Prophet. And it is in this context that the legacy of Abu Dharr is so important, for the legacy of Abu Dharr gives to this movement not only legitimacy, it gives it shape; it gives it direction; it gives it guidance and inspiration; and it gives it strength and solidity. Moreover, because the legacy of Abu Dharr reveals the deviation and qualitative decline of Muslim society to have been in full swing at a far earlier date than most reformers would suppose, it shows that in order for Muslims to lift themselves from their plight of stagnation and decay it is not enough to imitate ancient ancestors: a fundamental rethink of Islam and of the Islamic ethos and even of the status of many of the Prophet's companions is required.

Islam is a unique religion in many ways. One of those ways is in the mandate it places upon its followers to enter into the world and worldly affairs in order to effect a total reform in accordance to the teachings of truth and teachings of justice which Islam encompasses. Unlike other religions this mandate does not rest upon the accidental vanity of clerics or the hunger for power of those who rule in Islam's name, but is fundamental to the Islamic ethos. The Qur'an declares: 'He it is who sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth, to make it prevail over all religions, though the polytheists be averse' (28 : 48).

Precisely because this mandate is such a pronounced part of the essence of Islam, the followers of other religions are posed no threat; Islam does not intend to wage war upon them so as to force them to accept Islam at the point of a sword. Contrary to the opinion expressed by its critics Islam does not permit this, and it is ironic that we notice those who are most vocal in condemning this supposed fault of Islam are often ardent supporters of religions or other ideologies that have indeed spread in exactly this way. In Islam, by contrast, since the mandate of world reform is so fundamental to its ethos, full legislation of the permissible and prohibited methods have been provided, which do not include attempts to impose Islam by force. Thus on the one hand the Qur'an declares: 'No compul-

sion is there (to be?) in religion; the right way has become clear from error...' (2: 255). And, on the other, 'Call to the way of your Master with wisdom and goodly exhortations, and discuss with them in the best manner...' (16: 125).

The slightest consideration of these verses leaves no doubt that the spread of Islam and the mandate of reforming the world according to its sacred teachings is to be accomplished not through the use of the arms but through logic, reason and our own actions. We are to call to Islam with our tongues, but must not be like those the Quran'an censures for not putting into practice what they themselves preached:

'Do you command people to virtue while you yourselves forget?!' (2: 44).

In calling out to Islam and extending the Islamic mandate therefore, Muslims must be attentive to implement that mandate themselves. As for the Islamic law of *Jihad*, when the message of Islam is not allowed to spread naturally to other societies; when barriers of lies, deceit and repression are erected to prevent the Islamic message of justice and to preserve the artificial climate of injustice, then in certain circumstances Muslims are permitted to use force to smash and cast aside those barriers that all may be free to make up their minds for themselves. Similarly, if a small group of people accept Islam and are persecuted because of it, again in certain circumstances it is permissible for Islamic society to go to war to end that oppression. Failing this the oppressed may curse the Muslim rulers who were in a position to end their oppression but failed to do so, and those rulers will share in the punishment for that persecution. But this is a far cry from imposing religion by force, and Islam is clear in stating that the sole method of implementing the Islamic mandate is through wisdom accompanied by goodly examples.

Freedom is meaningful only when it is the freedom of the people to progress in the path of natural perfection, and Islam has come to achieve exactly this. Yet since the time of the Prophet Muslim society has only at rare occasions been able to attain this for itself, let alone attain it for other societies. Not least of the hurdles that have stood in the way is a general reluctance to become involved in the immense social problems of Muslim society, and a tendency to brand all attempts to do so as worldly behaviour and power struggles; so that laziness, cowardice and downright disobedience to the commands of Allah may be concealed under a pretence of piety.

It is an unfortunate fact that since the time of the Prophet Islamic society has really only managed to expand: its cultural attainments have been few, the secrets of the Qur'an largely unnoticed, and the Muslims have invariably been at each other's throats. In this last issue a whole host of dynasties come to mind—Umayyids,

Abbasids, Seljuks, Buwayids, Mamluks, Mughals and even Ayyubids—each of whom have come to power through the sword, and whose only justification for waging war on neighbouring states—be they Muslim or otherwise—was that they felt strong enough to succeed against them, and who have largely regarded the people as a kind of sub-species; while the common people for their part have always been encouraged to absorb the attitudes and values approved of by their rulers.

Thus there is little reason for Muslims to wax warmly on their past; it is true that the academic classes have indeed risen to lofty heights when compared to other civilizations in their infancy, and these achievements are to be valued. But in relation to the Qur'an and the perfect way of individual and social life the Prophet bequeathed Muslim attainments have been miserable, and by no means sufficient to assuage the depression that results from a contemplation of the social fabric of Islamic society. When the Muslims have remained unable to establish once and for all the teachings of Islam to better society and the quality of human life, what account is it that our ancestors were able to bewilder medieval Christians by sending them a clock?

Nor has the present age brought significant progress in these fields. Muslims today are living in misery almost everywhere. Those few countries which have set themselves apart from the remainder of the Muslim world the more easily to enjoy their vast oil wealth: their citizens are scorned and despised throughout the world and have done more to tarnish the sacred name of Islam and the honour of the Muslims than the disbelievers ever could. The Muslim world today is hopelessly divided. It is divided by the false divisions of nation state, by passports and visas, by nationalisms and tribalisms, by political-economic systems alien to Islam, by class, and by different streams or interpretations of Islam. Our countries are occupied by strangers, and our brothers and sisters are driven from their homes while the majority of Muslims carry on with their lives as though nothing has happened. Our youth are exposed to the insidious perversions of the electronic age and we seek to guide them with slogans and instruction by rote and we wonder why they rebel against us. Our governments on the whole do nothing but talk, and whenever their talk leads them into a crisis they are the first to withdraw—except against their own people whom they are ever ready to crush. The two superpowers of traditional Christendom dominate our lives, and cause the Muslim world nothing but ruination. Yet still the Muslims believe that Islam permits our governments to enter into alliances with them and to accept their advice and influence. These same superpowers determine our laws and manage our economies and as a consequence there is hardly a town in the Islamic lands without its beggars and prostitutes. Today the Christian tourist swaggers through the lands

of Islam like some modern-day Quran, while not a voice is raised against him or the system he represents; on the contrary, special hotels and pleasure palaces are built for these tourists to encourage them to come and to pollute our youth with their hideous influences. To top it all, our greatest intellectuals and scientists are forced to quit the Islamic lands and set up residence and work in the West.

Thus Muslims have no more grounds for congratulating themselves on their present than they have on their past. But what they do have to be grateful for is the potential of Islam. All of these problems would be swept aside in a moment if only Islam were properly understood and acted upon. The Islamic potential is such that when realised it will raise human society to peaks that are now but hazy dreams, even for those used to the convenience of the West or the profound sensations of mystic contemplation in the desert. Islam is a just balance equipped to provide each and every human being an industrious life that will deliver him to material comfort, spiritual awareness and the inner peace and deep satisfaction of righteousness. All of this requires no more than that Muslims take hold of Islam, grasp it firmly with all of their might and put it and its Master before their own desires and requirements; and the Master of the world will look after them and fill this poor world of ours with His justice and light. At such a time the level of Islamic society will rise to such heights that will make all previous attainments seem as a mere ripple before a tidal wave, and no Muslim will be mocked, nor be afraid, and nor will he grieve.

But for this to happen without a thorough programme of reform is building castles in the air, a pipe dream. There is no doubt that such attainments are Islam's ultimate goal in this world, but they will never be realised without a new wave of consciousness engulfing the Muslims. For as long as Muslims remain as they are, divided by passport, by sect and by class and too afraid to speak out the truth for fear of punishment or social ostracism the Muslim world will continue to deteriorate. This is inescapable, for in the Qur'an Allah has told us: 'Allah does not change a people's conditions until they change their own conditions' (13: 11).

In the present age this means that Muslims must throw off the restraints of the quietist Islam that has been handed down not from the Prophet but from the palace and court. Muslims must give importance to their social plight and denounce its causes, and must consider this an act of Islam, an act of worship. The legacy of Abu Dharr needs to be revived, and must overcome the legacy of his Umayyid opponents. The Muslim world requires the existence of thousands of Abu Dharrs; Islam requires it. The legacy of the Prophet is the legacy of Abu Dharr not that of his enemies, and it is for Muslims to accept the legacy of this venerable and tireless companion. Were the Islam of the Umayyids the real Islam the Muslims

would not be suffering as they now are. Our countries would not be overrun and the cream of our intelligentsia would not be living abroad serving the societies of Islam's enemies.

Muslim society direly needs to become reacquainted with Abu Dharr. Afflicted as we are with general tyranny it is for all Muslims to understand how Islam expects us to deal with that tyranny. Abu Dharr was especially instructed by the Prophet in how to deal with it; therefore, whose example could be better?

Today it is for Muslims to use all of their resources to defend Islam and the Islamic lands against the inroads the materialist civilizations have made against them. Muslims must recall that they are a brotherhood and a family: what is painful to one is painful to all. And when someone keeps the family of Muslims in misery and confusion, it is for Muslims to speak out against that person even if—nay, especially if—that person claims to be their benefactor and the head of the household.

Abu Dharr, the Prophet's companion, disdained silence until his last breath. He spoke out against injustice and oppression even though it cost him years of misery and finally his life. Today Islam cannot remain without many other Abu Dharrs. We each of us owe it to that great companion to learn more about him, to revive his illustrious name, to seek out the Abu Dharrs amongst us and to support and encourage them, and, above all, to become like Abu Dharr ourselves; until in every town, every village, every street and alleyway, there is at least one Abu Dharr, and the Muslim world will be able to lift its head once more and feel the admiration of the God-seeking people of the earth.

May Allah shower His blessings on Abu Dharr
and shine His light on the hearts of all who follow him,
and may He curse his enemies and their successors
from now until the Judgement Day.
And peace be upon those who follow the guidance.

Notes

1. (S) denotes a phrase of benediction on the Prophet which it is desirable and customary to repeat after saying his blessed name.
2. Any study of the Arabian social background to the revelation of Islam must take account of the important differences between the cultures of north, south and central Arabia. The account presented here is only a very general picture that is broadly true of the whole of Arab society, but particularly that in and around Makkah.
3. The Quran terms itself 'guidance for the God-fearing', but we must realise that unless and until even God-fearing people are guided by the divine message they remain in darkness. Such people can be easily deceived into leading lives of dishonour and ill-repute, especially if they see themselves as in some kind of revolt against hypocrisy and humbug. Although the danger of the lives they often choose for themselves are enormous, such people are at least sincere with themselves, and when presented with the message of truth can be amongst the first to become Muslims, go on to be amongst Islam's most diehard supporters, and be found in the first ranks of its martyrs.
4. Yathrib, the town that later took the name Madinat al-Nabi (the city of the Prophet) or more simply Medina, in honour of the Prophet's migration to it.
5. It is strange and not a little ironic to see Muslims from the Arabian peninsula cultivating the same kind of aura for themselves today: Islamic priority based on location!
6. Ibn Majah, *Sunan* Cairo 1952, I, p. 53.
7. Tirmidhi *al-Jami' al-Sahih* Cairo 1965, V, p. 670; Ibn Sa'd *Tabaqat* Beirut 1957, IV p. 228; Hakim *Mustadrak* Beirut n.d., III p. 342; Ibn Majah I, p. 55.
8. Ibn Sa'd, IV, p. 228.
9. Imam Hanbal *Musnad* Cairo 1972 X, pp. 28, 121, XII, pp. 32-3; Ibn Sa'd IV, p. 228; Hakim III, p. 342; Ibn Majah I, p. 55.
10. This is to say that the best jihad is that of one who fights on bravely even though he is surrounded by the enemy on all sides, the height of courage and determination in the way of Allah.
11. *Slave*; here is obviously not the place to enter into a detailed discussion of the concept of slavery in Islam, but it is difficult to resist the opportunity of pointing out that in the early days of Islam, and in Islamic law, a slave is essentially a prisoner of war.

12. The Sacred Quran, 2: 255.
13. *Shaith*: the Biblical Seth, Adam's third son and mankind's second Prophet.
14. *Aknukh*; the Prophet Idris, great-grandfather of Nuh (c), often associated with Hermes; the Biblical Enoch.
15. This king would be Nimrud, against whose regime of ignorance and tyranny Ibrahim rose, and who sought to have Ibrahim burnt alive.
16. Hanbal, *Musnad Beirut* n.d. V 156. See also Ibn Sa'd IV, p. 226.
17. Ibn Sa'd III pp. 344ff; Baladhuri *Ansab al-Ashraf* Vol V, Jerusalem 1936, pp. 16, 18; *Tabari Ta'rikh al-Rusul wa al-Mu* Leiden 1879-1901, I, p. 2778; Ibn Abd Rabbih *al-Iqd al-Farid*, Cairo 1952-6, IV, p. 275.
18. Ma'sudi *Muruj al-Dhahab* Beirut 1966, II, p. 332. See also Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddimah*, ed. 'Ali 'Abd al-Wahid Wafi, p. 542.
19. *Ibid*. See also Ibn Abd Rabbih, IV, p. 313.
20. Tabari I, p. 2793; Baladhuri V, p. 22; Ya'qubi *al-Ta'rikh* Beirut 1960, I, p. 162; Ibn Abd Rabbih, IV, p. 279.
21. Baladhuri, *op. cit.* V, pp. 26, 57; Tabari, I, pp. 2955, 2980; Ibn Abd Rabbih, IV, p. 280.
22. Ibn Abd al-Barr, *Kitab al-Isti'ab*, Cairo n.d. III p. 1104.
23. Tabari I, pp. 2948ff. Also see Ibn Sa'd, III, p. 64; Baladhuri, V, p. 25; Ya'qubi II, pp. 164ff; Mas'udi II, pp. 334ff; Ibn Abd Rabbih, IV, pp. 28ff. Perhaps by poor Uthman had in mind the curious definition of being denied the opportunity to use wealth to exert political influence and gain office. In any case the statement is no less than extraordinary.
24. Tabari I, p. 2871; Ibn Ishaq, Guillaume's translation, Oxford I, p. 550.
25. Baladhuri V, pp. 31ff; Tabari I, p. 2845; Ibn Abd Rabbih IV, p. 279; Mas'udi II, p. 335.
26. Baladhuri V, pp. 31ff; Tabari I, p. 2845; Mas'udi II, p. 335; Ibn Abd Rabbih IV, p. 307.
27. Tabari I, pp. 2932-3; Mas'udi II, p. 337.
28. Baladhuri V, p. 48; Ibn Abd Rabbih IV, p. 307. The venerable companion was carried by his kinsmen to the home of Umm Salma, the Prophet's wife, may Allah be pleased with her, where he remained unconscious for the rest of the day and most of the night. On coming round, he immediately called for water to take wudu and make up the prayers he had missed. See also Abu 'Ala Mawdudi's *Khilafat wa Mulkiyat*.
29. Ibn Ishaq, *op. cit.* p. 141.
30. Ibn Sa'd VI, p. 7.
31. Baladhuri V, pp. 36f; Ya'qubi II, p. 170.
32. It is clear that this clash of interests between the *qurra* and their followers on the one hand, who were foremost in Islam and at times painfully devoted to the social principle introduced by the Prophet, and on the other hand the newly emerging aristocracy spearheaded by the Umayyids, was the same rift that had been foreseen by the dying Umar. Moreover, it is worthwhile noting here that much of early Islamic history only really make sense when seen in the light of this fundamental clash of interests. It was—despite efforts to confuse the issue—the single most important and consistent factor behind the long period of bloodshed that began with the revolt against Uthman and his unfortunate murder, continued through the civil wars of the khilafat of Ali and his tragic assassination, rumbled under the surface

with the accession of the Umayyid Mu'awiya, to burst into the open once more when the khilafat was turned into a monarchy with Yazid's succession of his father, when the blood of the Prophet's family was shed at Karbala and that of his companions at Medina and later at Makkah itself, when the streets of Medina ran red with blood and the holiest shrines of Islam were used by Yazid's troops as stables, and which only disappeared with the overthrow of the Umayyids by the Abbasids some sixty years later. However, although the Abbasid accession may have signalled the end of the conflict, it certainly did not bring an end to the tragedy. Until that time the adherents of the Prophet's social teachings had always felt the impulse to rise against the regime, but it would appear that the Abbasid's almost inconceivable cruelties together with their hypocrisy, was able to achieve what the open animosity of the Umayyids had never been able to. In other words, the Abbasid's cunning and duplicity in carrying out a revolution in the name of others, and their subsequent corruption and tyranny that surpassed even that of the Umayyids, seems gradually to have led much of the Islamic intelligentsia and that of later ages to lose all hopes of ever reasserting Islam on the social and political levels. As the Abbasid era is also notorious for the prevalence of fanatical intolerance and sectarian violence, one is led to wonder whether the intelligentsia's dissatisfaction was not deviously turned against themselves. If so, it would appear that history shows the price of not taking up the divine struggle to reform society, to be that the society becomes an arena of competing groups, each group blaming the others for all of society's faults, all of them refusing to see where the blame really belongs, on the society's masters.

33. See previous note.
34. An example of this latter intrigue can be seen in the origins of Ahmadism and Bahatism, both of which—unbeknown to their many well-intentioned followers were formed in close cooperation with the European colonial powers. It is also to be suspected that much of the power and influence today associated with the name Wahhabism, if not its own origin, is of the same ilk.
35. A mystic might term such expressions of piety a 'veil of light'. That is, just as dark, evil things like greed and arrogance throw a veil over the heart and blind its perceptions, so too can good things whenever they are allowed to stand in the way of greater things. The desire for harmony and brotherly love is a clear example of something that in itself is good, but if allowed to stand in the way of something greater and more holy on the scale of virtue, like truth and justice, will take light from the heart and blind man to the higher realities just as surely as will pride and greed. Such a barrier, therefore, is a veil not of darkness but of light, but nonetheless is still a veil, and some mystics consider them to be more dangerous even than veils of darkness, in rather the same way as Islam considers hypocrisy to be more dangerous than open atheism and *kufir*.
36. '*Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth...Allah guides to His light whom He pleases.*' The Sacred Quran 24: 35.
37. For an account of the oath taken by the Prophet from Abu Dharr, that he would always speak out the truth no matter how bitter, see Ibn Arabi's chapter on the subject in his *Futuh al-Makkiya*.

38. The Quran leaves no room for doubt concerning the purpose for which the Prophets and the religion have been sent. In some verses this has been handled ambiguously, that is to say metaphorically, as in the verse, '*An apostle who recites to you the clear signs of Allah, that He may bring forth those of you who believe and do good works from darkness into light...*' (57 : 25). Elsewhere the rationale of religion is explained in a more direct way: '*Certainly We have sent our apostles with clear arguments, and We sent with them the Book and the Balance, that mankind may establish justice...*' (57 : 25). Therefore, since we must understand the ambiguous (*mutashabih*) in the light of the clear (*muhkam*), there is no doubt that the ultimate purpose of Islam is to establish justice in the earth, and, possibly to heighten our regard for this purpose, Allah has termed justice as 'light', and injustice as 'darkness'.
39. These lands and wealth had been acquired for the community by the community in jihad, and were therefore a communal right which by distributing them amongst his favourites, Uthman violated. It is important to draw the line between Abu Dharr's insistence that the communal wealth be returned to its rightful owners, and the principle of communism that there is no such thing as a rightful owner, and that everything belongs to the community, which in practice of course means the party. Between the two positions there is a world of difference.
40. The Sacred Quran 9:34
41. This must have been a group of soldiers, and the dues they were expecting their shares of the revenues from areas they had helped to liberate.
42. The Sacred Quran 3: 92.
43. Enjoining the right (*amr bi 'l-ma'ruf*) and protesting at the wrong (*nahy 'an al-munkar*) are two of the fundamental duties of every Muslim, repeatedly mentioned in the Holy Quran.
44. The Sacred Quran 9: 51. The basic ethic of all movements of reform in Islam is to do whatever legitimate acts one can in order to overthrow tyranny and corruption, but to realise that in the final analysis the result of their activities will be granted by Allah. And it exactly this that makes the Muslims such a force to be reckoned with, for, provided they do nothing that goes beyond what Islam permits, they can never fail; their success is that they tried.
45. The Sacred Quran 64: 15-18.
46. According to some writers, Mu'awiya also tried to silence Abu Dharr by exiling him to Jabal 'Amil, a distant area under his jurisdiction that presently goes by the name of South Lebanon. Even there Abu Dharr afforded Mu'awiya no peace but continued his campaign with such success that Mu'awiya was forced to recall him to Damascus.
47. It is not unlikely that Abu Dharr made this part of his speech to counter aspersions made by the court upon his character and Islamic credentials.
48. *Be away from them*: by this Abu Dharr means have nothing to do the regime and withdraw from it all forms of cooperation.
49. *Junaydab*: the reader will recall that Abu Dharr's name was Jundab, Abu Dharr being his title (*Kunya*) used by the Arabs as a mark of respect. Uthman's use of the word *Junaydab*, literally the small

Jundab, was the height of disrespect.

50. The Sacred Quran 60: 28.
51. The Sacred Quran 2: 177.
52. *Haram money*: that which is acquired unlawfully.
53. Had Abu Dharr taken Uthman's bribe he would have been so compromised that thenceforth he would have been unable to speak out, and forever in Uthman's debt. In this sense, therefore, he would have no longer been a free man.
54. The Sacred Quran 2: 85. The significance of Ibn Mas'ud reciting this verse so often is that, being respected as one of the Prophet's earliest and most knowledgeable of the Prophet's companions, the people hung on to his every word, and what they didn't understand they asked. By his repeated recitation of this verse, therefore, he must have given rise to countless discussions of Abu Dharr and his lonely exile, and of all the issues which this raised.
55. *Sufficient cloth to cover you*; amongst the funeral rights of Islam is that the corpse be shrouded in what is called a *kafn*.

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ABU DHARR has earned himself a place in that tiny band of people who inspire the mass of mankind to appreciate what it really means to be human. He is perhaps the first social reformer in the history of Islam. Indeed he was a voice of truth who went to the devil's own abode to proclaim aloud the cry of monotheism and the new order of brotherhood.



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