

Respond positively to criticism

By Maulana Wahiduddin Khan

The British philosopher Bertrand Russell in his autobiography writes of an incident which took place in the course of one of his lectures: "A man rose in fury, remarking that I looked like a monkey; to which I replied, "Then you will have the pleasure of hearing the voice of your ancestor"" (p. 565). We do not have to deal with the truth or falsehood of the theory of evolution here. We have simply quoted Russell's words as a good example of how to deal with provocation.

When someone is critical of what you say and lashes out at you, you may retort in the same harsh manner, or on the other hand, you may make some quip which will happily divert attention from the matter under dispute. Another way is simply to remain unprovoked. No matter how strongly you are tempted to indulge in counter-criticism, you should keep your temper, for the best response can never be one of sharp reaction; if you make a response at all, it should be well thought-out and positive.

The example of maintaining one's calm can be seen in the life of the Prophet. The Prophet's name was Muhammad, meaning the praised one. But when the Meccans became his dire opponents, they themselves coined a name for the Prophet, "Muzammam," meaning the condemned one. But the Prophet was never enraged. He explained to his followers: "They abuse a person by the name of Muzammam, whereas I am Muhammad."

Stinging retorts only stir up further controversy, whereas light-hearted remarks or the humble submission of alternative ideas can have a tranquillising effect — like throwing water on a blazing fire. It is also effective in silencing an audience. Had Russell reacted adversely, he could never have retained the interest or attention of his audience. His lecture could easily have ended in chaos.