

God is great, not humans

By Maulana Wahiduddin Khan

Umar ibn al-Khattab was, in his capacity as Caliph, delivering a speech in Medina. One from the congregation rose and administered him this warning: "By God, Umar, if we detect any crookedness in you then we will put you straight with our swords."

Audacious and insolent though these words appear, Umar did not object to them; neither did anyone in the congregation challenge the man's right to address Umar in this way. The Companions of the Prophet were used to criticism of this nature among themselves. An atmosphere of healthy criticism, in which people had every right to speak their minds, endured for about two generations after the Prophet of Islam. There was no restriction on what people said, as long as they looked into a matter carefully before pronouncing judgment on it: only criticism without prior investigation was disapproved of.

There can only be one reason for the atmosphere of tolerance that prevailed during the time of the Companions and the generations that immediately succeeded them: for those people only God was great. They lived in awe of His greatness alone. As far as they were concerned all human beings were God's servants. Why should they object, then, when one person criticised another? They were conscious of only God's greatness, and criticism of one human being by another did not diminish anything from the greatness of God.

The aura of greatness that surrounds humans in this world has no real substance. It is just a facade put on for the test of men. It is those who can see through this facade, and realise that no one besides God has any real greatness, who will be successful in the next world, where only His greatness will remain. As for those who let the greatness of mere mortals rule their lives, their greatness will perish.