

CHAPTER 1

HOW I SEE THE QURAN

Faith in the Divine revelation of the Quran is what distinguishes the Islamic faith from monotheism in general and constitutes its central core. For the Muslims the Quran is the supreme locus of the Divine Presence or the concrete mode of God's intervention in history and of contact with chosen human beings, among whom Muhammad ﷺ is the apex as the recipient of God's last and final revelation.

One cannot be a Muslim unless one believes that the Quran was Divinely 'revealed' to the Prophet ﷺ. But what exactly a believer commits himself to when he honestly holds the Quran to be the 'word of God' is far from clear to the vast majority of Muslims. In what follows I wish to explain my own approach to the Quran as the supreme mystery of Islam. Every Muslim must feel free to express any lurking doubts or difficulties (if any) in traditional views or beliefs instead of suppressing his reservations in this regard. The authentic Muslim must feel free to spell out, in all humility and after prayerful reflection, how the ultimate mystery of Islam appears to him according to his own inner lights. Without this inner freedom authentic faith would not be born. And authenticity is the life-blood of faith (*iman*) without which any religious belief is merely a corpse.

I

The Islamic faith implies that the total contents of the Quran were

revealed by God to Muhammad ﷺ who subsequently dictated them to scribes who implicitly followed the directions given by the Prophet ﷺ. The Quranic text is thus held to be quite apart from the Prophet's ﷺ own words or reported sayings. The Quran was revealed in bits throughout the apostolic period of twenty-three years, the first thirteen of which were spent by the Prophet ﷺ in Mecca and the remaining in Medina. The process of revelation began in the cave of *Hira*, about two miles from Mecca, when the Prophet ﷺ was about forty and was repeated at irregular intervals (over which the Prophet ﷺ had no control whatsoever) until his passing away in Medina when he was about sixty-three.

The Quranic references to the nature or modes of Divine revelation are too abstract or vague to enable us to understand or conceptualize the Prophet's ﷺ extraordinary experience of revelation. But even if the Quranic references had been more specific this would not have helped unravel the mystery, since we ourselves have no experience of revelation. Indeed, we cannot conceptualize anything or any event without prior experience of it in some sense or the other. Thus we cannot conceptualize the nature of 'angels' or the '*Holy Spirit*' (Gabriel) and his role in the revelatory process, as mentioned in the Quran.

(42:51, 52)

And it was not (vouchsafed) to any mortal that Allah should speak to him unless (it be) by revelation, or from behind a veil, or (that) He sendeth a messenger to reveal what He will by His leave. Lo! He is Exalted, Wise.

And thus have We inspired in thee (Muhammad) a Spirit of Our command. Thou knewest not what the Scripture was nor what the Faith...

While we understand the expression 'X spoke to Y on the phone', and can easily distinguish this from the expression, 'X wired Y', or 'X sent a written note to Y', and so on, we just cannot claim to know the exact state of affairs described by the expression, 'God revealed to Moses', 'God revealed to the mother of Moses', and 'God revealed to the bee', etc., when we come across such expressions in the following verses:

(28:7)

And We inspired the mother of Moses, saying: Suckle him and, when thou fearest for him, then cast him into the river and fear not nor grieve ...

(16:68)

And thy Lord inspired the bee, saying: Choose thou habitations in the hills and in the trees and in that which they hatch;

Indeed, whenever, we talk of God or His actions we come across an opaque wall of noetic ambiguity or vacuity (in religious language, a sense of mystery and bafflement). We should thus not demand or expect noetic transparency when we use religious language. Beliefs that God ‘*exists*’ or that God ‘*revealed*’ the Quran are thus beliefs in a very different sense from beliefs like ‘snakes exist’ or ‘Mohan revealed this secret to Sohan’. We know more or less exactly the situation in which the above sentences would be accepted as true even if we may not be able to give an exact analysis of their meaning, as desired by the British philosopher, Moore. Moreover, if someone were to deny such beliefs, we know how to establish them. In other words, we know both *what* they designate and *how* they are tested as true or false. But such is not the case where the word ‘God’ is used. We know neither *what* beliefs about God actually connote; nor how such beliefs could be made plausible, if not actually proved.¹

What then are we to understand by the belief that ‘God revealed the Quran to the Prophet ﷺ?’ In the final analysis it means that (a) the Prophet ﷺ was not the author of the Quran in the sense in which Shakespeare was the author of *Hamlet*, though the Quranic verses were uttered and dictated by the Prophet ﷺ to some scribe; (b) the Quranic verses were not contrived or thought out by the Prophet ﷺ but ‘came’ to him or were crystallized in his consciousness fully formed or fashioned by some ‘Other’; and (c) this *Other* is nothing more and nothing less than the supreme Source of all that exists. This threefold analysis however says nothing about *how* the contents came to the Prophet ﷺ. Any belief or theory about how the contents came to him is not a part of the substantial belief *that* the contents were revealed,

but an additional belief. Thus, for instance, the belief that Gabriel used to appear in human or angelic form to the Prophet ﷺ and made him recite and memorize the Quranic verses is not logically equivalent to the belief that God revealed the Quran, but rather a particular theory of revelation. Now the crucial point is that a Muslim may well believe that the Quran was revealed without accepting the above theory of revelation, or any other theory, for that matter. He may well hold that no theory of revelation could properly be asserted in the absence of any experience of revelation as such, and yet hold the Quran to be 'revealed' in the above threefold sense. He may take the revelation of the Quran as the supreme mystery of the Islamic faith, and not merely accept the Prophet's ﷺ own honest interpretation of his extraordinary experiences.²

A critic could possibly take the stand that even if the Prophet's ﷺ revelatory experience were genuine, he might have forgotten or missed some part of the revelatory content, or the scribe might have erred in recording it, or some written portion might have been lost and thus excluded from the final collection, or some spurious content might have been included in it through some mistake or oversight of the Prophet's ﷺ companions who collected the scattered verses/*surahs*. Well, the above type of doubts can *never* be historically settled. All a Muslim can say with historical certainty on the basis of evidence, as is generally deemed adequate in such matters, is that Muhammad ﷺ was a respected and highly truthful person who, at the age of forty, claimed to be the recipient of Divine messages (through revelatory episodes) which he claimed to remember and which were subsequently dictated by him to scribes who wrote them down on a piece of skin, bark or cloth, according to availability. The rest is all scholastic reconstruction or Muslim faith without any unanimity of belief.

The dominant view is that the Prophet ﷺ himself indicated to the scribes the sequence of the verses within a *surah* as well as the sequence of the separate *surahs* or chapters themselves. This implies that the Quran, in its standard written form (without however the Arabic vowels and the lexically equal division into thirty parts or '*paras*'), existed before the Prophet's ﷺ death.³ According to another reliable view, it was the first *Khalifa*, Abu Bakr, who, at the instance of his immediate successor, Umar, compiled and arranged the Quranic text in its standard form about two years after the Prophet's ﷺ death. According to yet another view, the third *Khalifa*, Usman, about fifteen years after the Prophet's ﷺ death, first arranged the chapters

in the standard form extant today. But the dominant view is that what Usman did was to duplicate, on a relatively large scale, the earlier edition made by the first *Khalifa*. According to the same view, Usman recalled all the scattered verses/*surahs* in circulation and had them burnt to preserve the accuracy of the standard edition. In my opinion this is a historical issue to be settled through critical historical investigation, and should not be equated with the core content of the Muslim faith that the Quranic verses were Divinely ‘revealed’.

It may be asked further whether the titles of *surahs*, the numbering of the verses, the Prophet’s ﷺ directions (if any) to the scribes regarding the placement of the verses in different *surahs* were based on his own independent judgment (assuming that the present book form of the Quran had been finalized by the Prophet ﷺ himself), or were Divinely revealed or inspired. Whatever one’s views on these questions may be these matters are distinct from faith in the revelation of the Quranic verses as such.

The Muslim faith implies that the Quran was revealed and has been preserved in its entirety, uncontaminated by error or interpolation.

(41:41, 42)

Lo! those who disbelieve in the Reminder when it cometh unto them (are guilty), for lo!, it is an unassailable Scripture. Falsehood cannot come at it from before it or behind it. (It is) a revelation from the Wise, the Owner of Praise.

Faith in revelation in this sense, however, does not imply any additional belief or beliefs concerning the issue as to when and how the Quranic verses were collected, or numbered, or how they or the *surahs* were arranged, as we actually find them in standard editions of the Quran, for the past fourteen hundred years.

To sum up, neither the belief in the Prophet’s ﷺ sincerity, nor the belief in his being unlettered, nor the belief in the hitherto unsurpassed literary excellence of the Quran, severally or jointly constitutes a proof (in the deductive or inductive sense) of the Islamic faith.⁴ The justification of faith can be found only in the individual’s authentic response to the Quran or, rather, those of its verses which may be said to possess a spiritual ‘aura’ or

inner power to grip and illumine a receptive listener or reader of the Quran. At times even a non-receptive mind may come under the spell, as it were, of the Quran, as happened in the case of Umar when he heard for the first time some verses recited by his sister or her husband.

In the final analysis religious faith is an existential conviction, which may dawn suddenly or gradually, like love, rather than a belief, which could be inductively or deductively established or proved. Again, the religious response to the universe is strikingly similar to, though not identical with or totally reducible to, the aesthetic response. Significantly, the Quran repeatedly exhorts man to reflect upon the beauty and wonder of nature and also of man's own inner self. The verses of the Quran and the phenomena of nature both are called '*ayat*' or signs which may evoke and reinforce faith in God for one who seeks truth with humility and sincerity. Consider the following Quranic verses:

(3:190-191)

Lo! In the creation of the heavens and the earth and in the difference of night and day are tokens (of His sovereignty) for men of understanding, such as remember Allah, standing, sitting, and reclining and consider the creation of the heavens and the earth and say: Our Lord thou created not in vain, Glory be to thee: Preserve us from the doom of fire.

(30:22)

And of His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the difference of your languages and colours. Lo! Herein indeed are portents for men of knowledge.

(30:23)

And of His signs is your slumber by night and by day, and your seeking of His bounty. Lo! Herein indeed are portents for folk who heed.

(6:100)

*He it is who sendeth down water from the sky, and therewith
We bring forth bucls of every kind; We bring forth the green
blade from which We bring forth the thick clustered grain;
and from the date-palm, from the pollen thereof, spring
pendant bunches... Look upon the fruit thereof, when they
bear fruit and upon its ripening. Lo! Herein verily are por-
tents for a people who believe.*

(41:53)

*We shall show them Our portents on the horizons and within
themselves until it will be manifest unto them that it is the
truth. Doth not thy Lord suffice, since He is witness over all
things?*

It follows that all that could be said to an honest skeptic unmoved by the power and beauty of the Quran is exactly what can be said to one who remains unmoved by the beauty of sunset, or the snow-clad peak, or the slow movement of a symphony or concert “Please look or hear again with receptive humility; a fresh experience may lead to a new type of response or evoke in you a new chord. But please don’t feel tense, guilty, inferior, or deficient in case your response remains different from mine.”

The similarity between appreciation of the beauty of nature and faith in the Quran, however, does not amount to an identity. Indeed, the starry sky or the symphony does not issue forth any prescriptions or value judgments, which might possibly conflict with those of the observer. And this is precisely what may happen with the Quran. Even if one appreciates or feels overwhelmed by the beauty and power of the Quran one may honestly dissent from some of its prescriptive contents.⁵ This predicament does not arise when one contemplates nature and experiences an inner and profound conviction that nature is not a blind accident. The following Quranic verses are deeply significant and intensely moving:

(44:38-39)

“And We created not the heavens and the earth, and all that is between them, in play. We created them not save with truth; but most of them know not.”

(21: 16-17)

“We created not the heaven and the earth and all that is between them in play. If We had wished to find a pastime, We could have found it in Our presence—if We ever did.”

(30:8)

“Have they not pondered upon themselves? Allah created not the heavens and the earth, and that which is between them save with truth and for a destined end. But truly many of mankind are disbelievers in the meeting with their Lord.”

II

One will not be able fully to appreciate the Quran if one reads it as a systematic book comprising logically interconnected chapters divided into or built out of sections, as one finds in any well written work on, say, Theology, History, or Sociology.

The Quran is not a book in this sense. It is a collection of 114 ‘*surahs*’, which are not ‘chapters’ in the usual sense but rather self-contained and complete compositions or units comprising ‘*ayats*’ (verses) which may or may not have been revealed in one single revelatory episode. Since *surahs* vary enormously in length (the longest *surah* comprising 286 verses, while the shortest a mere three), it is highly plausible and likely that the longer *surahs* were revealed piecemeal.⁶ According to the orthodox view itself, the revelation of several fresh *surahs* started even before the completion of a previous *surah* or *surahs*, and later verses juxtaposed with earlier ones. Thus the unit of a set of ideas or theme is not even a *surah* but a set of verses. The division of the Quran into thirty parts of equal length (without any regard to

subject matter or the placement of the different *surahs*) is meant to facilitate its memorization or ritual recitation in fixed proportions.

The titles of the different *surahs* are also not titles in the conventional sense and one would be disappointed if one expects any close correlation between the title and the contents of a particular *surah*. Indeed the titles are rather mystifying or problematic, and it is almost impossible to be certain about the real significance or rationale of a particular title. One can certainly refer to a particular idea, word, or expression contained in the *surah* after which the title might have been given to a *surah*. But often this correlation or connection is highly tenuous or marginal relative to the dominant theme or themes of the *surah*. Thus, for instance, the second *surah* is titled 'The Cow' (*Al-Baqara*), or the fiftyseventh *surah* is titled 'The Iron' (*Hadid*), or the sixth which is titled 'The Cattle' (*Al-Anam*) and so on, but the main themes of these *surahs* are quite other than the cow, iron, or cattle. Indeed, in view of the tremendous repetition and juxtaposition of ideas and themes no title possibly could have done the conventional job of a title or heading. The titles are, therefore, proper names of *surahs* rather than clues to their content. It is, therefore, undesirable speculation or dogmatism to claim to grasp the real significance of the title.

Exactly the same applies, with much greater force, to the interpretations given to the mystic prefixes (*Muqataat*) to approximately thirty *surahs*. The prefixes, and perhaps also the titles, may be said to constitute the mystique of the Quran. If the titles are viewed as clues to decipher the spiritual or 'ontogenetic' power* of a *surah*, one could select a particular *surah* for regular or repeated mystical recitation as one's favorite *surah*, depending upon one's inner needs, interests, or aspirations. This choice should, however, not be viewed as reliance on a 'mantra' for realizing one's worldly aims or objectives. This would reduce the Quran to the level of a magical recipe book for worldly success.

Quranic themes have been repeated again and again and still again (depending upon their significance in the total economy of life) in different *surahs* and also in the same *surah*, even as themes are repeated in a musical composition. The *surahs* do have a basic theme and subsidiary or tertiary ones, but it would be going off the mark to claim (as is often done by learned Muslim commentators on the Quran) that there is a discernible logical sequence between the successive sections of a particular *surah*, as also between

* See pp. 15-18

the successive *surahs*. It seems to me that there is no need to attribute any logical or systematic connection (in the conventional sense) to the actual order of the *surahs* or even to verses found in the longer *surahs*. Obviously, there should be some perceptible order in a set of successive verses in order to express a clear-cut theme; and order, in this sense, there certainly is in the Quran. These themes are however repeated very often. This again does not amount to any flaw, provided we do not view the Quran as a textbook, but rather as a spiritual symphony which is meant to warn, sustain, exhort and illumine man in the task of learning an integrated response to the mystery of the universe.

Since there cannot be any one ideal order of reading the Quran, no *surah* or *surahs* (apart, of course, from *Al-Fatiha*, which has a unique status) should, in my opinion, be selected for ritual recitation on the basis of convention. A Muslim must learn to respond to the Quran authentically in his own individual manner as one responds to music, poetry, or the beauty of nature. Indeed, every true believer ought to discover the beauty and power of the Quran on the basis of his own inner promptings or spiritual instinct, as it were.

The Quran is certainly not a textbook of natural and social science, even as it is not a magic book of ritual recitation for attaining one's worldly desires and objectives. The Quran can be no substitute for the laborious learning process of observation, experiment, formulation of hypotheses and their verification in the field of inductive knowledge and of the rigorous grasp of logical connections in the field of deductive knowledge. The Quran makes no difference to, and leaves untouched, the pursuit of inductive and deductive truth, which falls in the domain of natural and social sciences. Nor does the Quran prove or claim to prove the basic beliefs which constitute the content of 'faith in the unseen'—the existence of God, revelation, life after death, and so on.

The Quran approaches such matters in an evocative rather than in a ratiocinative manner, and rightly so. The Quran exhorts man to look at nature and into himself and reflect again and again on the mystery of creation and holds out, to the sincere seeker, the promise of attainment of truth. This is quite different from deducing God's existence from a self-evident truth or set of truths. Indeed, the Quran dispels the illusion of the power of reason to prove or disprove the contents of 'faith in the unseen' (*iman bil ghaib*).

Apart from the importance of correctly grasping the Quranic approach to the above matters, discovering the right method of semantic interpretation of the Quranic text is the crux of the matter. Though classical Islamic scholars and divines have done valuable work in this field, much greater labours and more refined analytical techniques and tools are needed for dealing with this crucial issue.⁷

The Quranic verses belong to different types of discourse and perform different functions of language—informing, judging, exhorting, commanding, consoling, promising, eliciting, and so on and so forth. Quranic verses also differ in their ‘functional genesis’ or the purposive ‘point’ of their revelation. And the range of this difference may vary from the ‘functional genesis’ of the seven verses of the *Surah Al-Fatiha* (regarded as the quintessence or ‘mother of the Quran’) to that of the verse which chides the Prophet ﷺ for forbidding to himself what God has permitted, or the verse teaching elementary manners to the rather crude and uncouth Beduin Arabs, for instance, announcing before entering into another’s house.⁸ The *Al-Fatiha* seems to have no functional genesis over and above its intrinsic value as a superb and matchless jewel which ‘shines by its own light’, possessing an unsurpassed interpretative, evocative and ontogenetic power. As compared to this, verses condemning one of the arch enemies of the Prophet ﷺ, or prescribing the procedure of swearing on oath, or describing the Arab calendar based on lunar reckoning, and numerous others, have a functional genesis which obviously has a contingent dimension.⁹ It seems that careful and systematic reflection on this crucial point may help committed Muslim thinkers to distinguish verses which have an intrinsic significance from those having an instrumental function. This distinction would tend to promote and legitimize an open and truly dynamic interpretative approach to the Quran itself rather than to the *shariah* alone.

The contingent and instrumental complexion of several Quranic verses implies that if the life situation of the Prophet ﷺ and his milieu had been other than what they actually were, at the time of the revelation, the verses in question might not have been revealed at all, and other verses, relevant and appropriate to a different situation, might have been revealed.¹⁰ Likewise, if the grammar and syntax of the Arabic language had been different from what it actually is, the Quranic text would also have differed correspondingly. To go a step still further, if the Prophet ﷺ had been born in India or

China the language of the Quran would not have been Arabic. The point is that a merely literal adherence to the Quranic text without (a) a critical and sound method of semantic interpretation of the Quran, and (b) awareness of the Prophet's ﷺ milieu (the socio-cultural conditions of Arabia immediately preceding and during his lifetime) is a simplistic and misleading approach harmful to the Muslims and, for that matter, to the entire human family.

The contention that adherence to literal meaning without 'contextual exploration' is not enough should not be taken to mean or imply any indifference to the literal meaning of the Quranic text. Indeed, attention to the literal meaning is extremely important, and speculative interpretation of Quranic verses to suit one's own ideas is highly improper.¹¹ Likewise, one should not twist and stretch the plain meanings of words to explain away any doubts or difficulties which may arise for the reader of the Quran because of some reason or other. Some difficulties, however, arise due to a unique Quranic style of non-literal expression; in such cases insistence upon a literal interpretation would be a wrong principle. The application of commonsense and attention to linguistic usage in Arabic or other languages will be found to remove these difficulties and quandaries without twisting or stretching the ordinary meanings of the words of the Quran. If, in spite of this, any perplexity remains it should be frankly acknowledged by the honest Muslim. Consider the following verses:

(2:6, 7)

As for the disbelievers, whether thou warn them or thou warn them not it is all one for them; they believe not. Allah hath sealed their hearing and their hearts and on their eyes is a covering. Theirs will be an awful doom.

(5:14)

And with those who say "Lo! We are Christians", We made a covenant but they forgot a part whereof they were admonished. Therefore, We have stirred up enmity and hatred among them till the Day of Resurrection, when Allah will inform them of their handiwork.

On their first reading and literal interpretation, these verses make God responsible for the hardened and intractable disbelief of the unbelievers

and the mutual enmity of the Christians. But a little reflection makes it clear that this is not the case at all and that this impression is created only because of the style of expression employed by the Quran in such cases. The Quranic expression, "*We have stirred up enmity and hatred among them*", or "*Allah hath sealed their hearing and their hearts*" is only an elliptical way of saying that "great mutual enmity and hatred have been produced among the Christians as a natural consequence of their deeds in conformity with well-established and social psychological laws which cannot be flouted by man at his sweet will". The same type of explanation applies to the expression concerning, '*God's sealing of the hearts*'.

The fact of the matter is that while, on the whole, the Quranic style is extremely simple and direct, going straight to the point, it becomes elliptical and perplexing in a few cases. And it is precisely in such cases that a literal interpretation sounds absurd.¹² Disagreements or difficulties also result from the allusive, vague, or metaphorical verses. In view of the above complications the intellectually honest Muslim simply must show tolerance and accept the principle of plural interpretations. The claim that only 'my' or the traditional interpretation is true has in the past led to suppression of free enquiry and even persecution.¹³

The following Quranic verse beautifully sums up the position:

(3:7)

He it is who hath revealed unto thee (Muhammad) wherein are clear revelations—they are the substance of the Book—and others (which are) allegorical. But those in whose heart is doubt pursue, forsooth, that which is allegorical seeking (to cause) dissension by seeking to explain it. None knoweth its explanation save Allah. And those who are of sound instruction say: We believe therein, the whole is from our Lord; but only men of understanding really heed.

III

The verses revealed in the Meccan period generally deal with the unity, majesty, omnipotence and mercy of God, life after death, the need for reflecting on the phenomena of nature and the inner life of the self, faith and

righteous action, the record of nations in the past and their fate, tolerance, —in other words, the basic elements of faith (*iman*); the verses revealed in the Medinian period generally deal with rules and regulations of prayer, fasting and personal laws (chiefly marriage and inheritance) with a bare sprinkling of socio-economic or political prescriptions. The exceptions to the above only go to show the interrelationship between the two themes in the corpus of the Quran.

The above distribution of themes is perfectly understandable and logical in the light of the sociology of knowledge, as the themes of revelation match the needs and demands of the situation. The diction and style of the Quran also match the theme. Medinian prescriptive verses are written in a crisp, matter-of-fact, and lucid prose, while the Meccan 'evocative' verses have been expressed in semi-rhymed poetic prose of the utmost simplicity and power that overwhelm the receptive reader, shaking him to the roots of his being, as it were. He is struck by their elemental spiritual force as one is struck by the fury of a storm in the forest or the ocean, or by the majesty of the calm sea at sunset or of snow-laden mountain peaks in bright sunshine. The full impact of such verses can be felt only in the original Arabic, translations being a very poor substitute.¹⁴ Here are a few examples:

(2:17-19)

Their likeness is as the likeness of one who kindleth fire, and when it sheddeth its light around him Allah taketh away their light and leaveth them in darkness, where they cannot see, deaf, dumb and blind; and they return not.

Or like a rainstorm from the sky, wherein is darkness, thunder and the flash of lighting. They thrust their fingers in their ears by reason of the thunderclaps, for fear of death. Allah encompasseth the disbelievers (in His guidance).

(69:13-16)

And when the trumpet shall sound one blast. And the earth with the mountains shall be lifted up and crushed with one crash. Then on that day will the Event befall? And the heaven will split asunder, for that day it will be frail.

(69:38-52)

*But nay I swear by all that ye see And all that ye see not
That it is indeed the speech of an illustrious messenger. It
is not poet's speech—little is it that ye believe! Nor diviner's
speech—little is that ye remember! It is a revelation from
the Lord of the Worlds. And if he had invented false sayings
concerning Us, We assuredly had taken him by the right
hand, And then severed his life-artery, And not one of you
could have held Us off from him. And lo! it is a warrant
unto those who ward off (evil). And lo! We know that some
among you will deny (it) And lo! it is indeed an anguish for
the disbelievers. And lo! it is absolute truth. So glorify the
name of thy Tremendous Lord.*

(70:6-14)

*Lo! they behold it afar off While We behold it nigh: The day
when the sky will become as molten copper, And the hills
become as flakes of wool, And no familiar friend will ask a
question of his friend though they will be given sight of them.
The guilty man will long to be able to ransom himself from
the punishment of that day at the price of his children. And
his spouse and his brother. And his kin that harbored him
and all that are in the earth, if then it might deliver him.*

(78:40)

*Lo! We warn you of a doom at hand, a day whereon a man
will look on that which his own hands have sent before, and
the disbeliever will cry: "Would that I were dust!"*

(2:115)

*Unto Allah belong the East and the West and whithersoever
ye turn, there is Allah's countenance. Lo! Allah is All-em-
bracing, All-knowing.*

(2:255)

Allah! there is no God save Him, the Alive, the Eternal. Neither slumber nor sleep over taketh Him. Unto Him belongeth whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is in the earth. Who is he that intercedeth with Him save by His leave? He knoweth that which is in front of them and that which is behind them, while they encompass nothing of His knowledge save what He will. His throne includeth the heavens and earth, and He is never weary of preserving them. He is the Sublime, the Tremendous.

(57:1-3)

All that is in the heavens and the earth glorifieth Allah. And He is the Mighty and the Wise. His is the sovereignty of the heavens and the earth; He quickeneth and He giveth death; and He is able to do all things. He is the First and the Last, and the Outward and the Inward: and He is Knower of all things.

(59:23-24)

He is Allah, than whom there is no other god, the Sovereign Lord, the Holy One, Peace, the Keeper of Faith, the Guardian, the Majestic, the Compeller, the Superb, glorified be Allah from all that they ascribe as partner (Unto Him). He is Allah, the Creator, the Shaper out of naught, the Fashioner. His are the most beautiful names. All that is in the heavens and/the earth glorifieth Him, and He is the Mighty, the Wiser.

(3:26-27)

Say: Oh Allah! Owner of Sovereignty! Thou givest sovereignty unto whom Thou wilt, and Thou with drawest sovereignty from whom Thou wilt. Thou exaltest whom Thou wilt and

*Thou abasest whom Thou wilt. In Thy hand is the good.
Lo! Thou art able to do all things. Thou causest the night
to pass into the day, and Thou causest the day to pass into
the night. And Thou bringest forth the living from the dead,
and Thou bringest forth the dead from the living. And Thou
givest sustenance to whom Thou choosest, without stint.*

Such verses as the above serve to bring about a spiritual quickening of the 'heart' or the spiritual potentialities of the individual and to reinforce man's faith that there is a spiritual dimension of the cosmos and that religion is essentially the active recognition of this vital and crucial truth about the universe. This function of the Quran may be called the 'ontogenetic' function, since it creates and reinforces an independent and irreducible dimension of human response, which enriches and enhances the inner quality of life or being. This function is not performed (directly) by the purely descriptive and legal or ethical verses.¹⁵

The 'ontogenetic' function, at its best and most effective form, is to be seen in the Prophet's ﷺ character and inmost being, which were shaped by the Quran. The experience of revelation also inwardly confirmed and reinforced his faith in the unseen, and every fresh revelatory episode provided a fresh confirmation. That is one reason why the Quran was revealed piecemeal rather than all at once or in a few extended episodes.

(25:32)

*And those who disbelieve say: Why is the Quran not re-
vealed unto him all at once? (It is revealed) thus that We
may strengthen thy heart therewith; and We have arranged
it in right order.*

Keeping in view the above distinction in the Quranic themes of the Meccan and Medinian periods, it is, perhaps, advisable to study the Quran, neither in the present conventional order, nor in the strictly chronological order (as advocated by some western scholars and commentators), but to focus one's attention, by and large, upon the Meccan verses prior to reading the Medinian ones. There cannot be any rigid plan of reading the Quran, just as there cannot be any one perfect or ideal plan of enjoying

the beauties of nature. One must discover for oneself the order proper for his own reading. This will be readily appreciated once we realize that the Quran is not a systematic book with interconnected chapters, but rather a universe to which one should respond in his own authentic manner. I, for one, suggest that after finishing the first and second *surahs* one reads *surah* 57, *Al-Hadid* (The Iron), and after that the *surahs* composing the last part numbered thirty. This should be followed by the shorter *surahs* composing parts 25-29. The reader may then turn to the longer *surahs* composing parts 3-5. This much reading would cover exactly one-third of the contents of the Quran. The remaining two-thirds of the Quran can be studied in any order whatsoever.

In my view, the reading of the above-mentioned third of the Quran would cover all the themes it contains, and even at this stage the reader will come across plentiful variations on the same basic themes. This, however, does not mean that the remaining part is merely repetitive. Indeed gems of rare beauty and insight remain scattered and embedded throughout the Quran. Moreover, no topic is exhaustively dealt with in any one single place. One is thus most likely to misjudge the full import of a verse if one does not consult all the relevant but scattered verses. One is also most likely to misjudge unless one understands the historical situation or the context (*shane-nuzul*) of the revelation.

IV

Next in number to the evocative verses of the Quran praising the glory, power and mercy of God, stand the exhortative verses prompting the believer to be good and do the right—to speak the truth and testify to what is true, to be just and kind, to have faith in God and act righteously, to keep up prayer and pay the wealth-tax, to strive and spend liberally in the way of God, to assist and help the needy and the poor and the wayfarer and the orphan and the widow, to be patient in adversity, to control one's passions, to be modest and chaste, to be kind to women and children, to beware of the temptations of Satan, to be kind and respectful to one's parents, to reflect on the wonders of nature, to glorify and thank God, and so on. Next come the historical or biographical verses, which relate the stories of the messengers and warners sent by God in earlier times. The number of such verses is very large indeed, but they all serve to warn, exhort and comfort

rather than give much factual or historical information. The parabolic verses of the Quran are very few in number, but they also serve to exhort and morally educate.

The exhortative verses are couched in general terms, and this is why they possess a timeless and universal relevance and appeal, which they would have lost if they had partaken of casuistry. Moreover, the spelling out of details would have blurred the crucial distinction between intrinsic values and instrumental rules for realizing them in an ever-changing human situation.

Space does not permit an elaboration of the spirit of the numerous exhortative verses comprising almost one-fifth of the Quranic text. The stress of these verses is undoubtedly on faith and righteous action (*iman wa amal e salih*), and, after this, on keeping up obligatory prayers and paying the wealth-tax for the benefit of the poor and the needy.¹⁶ Of the four following verses the first two have been repeated time and again:

(18:108)

Lo! those who believe and do good works theirs are the Gardens of Paradise for welcome.

(32:19)

But as for those who believe and do good works, for them are the Gardens of Retreat—a welcome (in reward) for what they used to do.

(103:2, 3)

Lo! Man is in a state of loss, Save those who believe and do good works

(107:1-3)

Hast thou observed him who beliieth religion? That is he who repelleth the orphan. And urgeth not the feeding of the needy.

Faith without action is lame; right action without being rooted in some faith is blind. Ad hoc right actions are liable to be displaced by wrong deeds at the slightest blowing of the wind of impulse in the wrong direction. The Quran, therefore, stresses faith flowering in righteous action or righteous action rooted in faith. Now the field of righteous action includes man's obligations to God (*ibadaat*) and obligations to society (*moamilaat*). The former obligations fall in the transcendental '*I-Thou*' sphere, while the latter in the social 'you-me-they' sphere. The major area of righteous action belongs to the social sphere.

Social behavior (*moamilaat*) involves man-to-man transactions, while praying and fasting involve the man-God relationship. Now, the mistake of the popular value system lies precisely in abstracting a part from the whole and treating the part as the whole. Says the Quran:

(2:177)

It is not righteousness that ye turn your faces to the East and the West, but righteous is he who believeth in Allah and the Last Day and the angels and the Scripture and the Prophets; and giveth his wealth for love of Him to kinsfolk and to orphans and the needy and the wayfarer and to those who ask, and to set slaves free; and observeth proper worship and payeth the poor-due. And those who keep their treaty when they make one, and the patient in tribulation and adversity and time of stress. Such are they who are sincere. Such are the God-fearing.

Turning to the popular Muslim conception of the supreme vices, the cardinal vice, according to the plain texts of the Quran, is certainly not consuming alcohol/pork and fornication, but hypocrisy and backbiting. This is what the Quran says about alcohol:

(2:219)

They question thee about strong drink and games of chance. Say: In both is great sin, and (some) utility for men; but the sin of them is greater than their usefulness.

(5:90, 91)

O ye who believe! Strong drink and games of chance and idols and divining arrows are only an infamy of Satan's handiwork. Leave it aside in order that ye may succeed. Satan seeketh only to cast among you enmity and hatred by means of strong drink and games of chance, and to turn you from remembrance of Allah and from (His) worship. Will ye then have done.

Now consider what the Quran says about backbiting:

(49:12)

O ye who believe! Shun much suspicion; for lo! some suspicion is a crime. And spy not, neither backbite one another. Would one of you love to eat the flesh of his dead brother? ...

Do not the wordings of the above Quranic verses make it manifest that the degree of evil inherent in backbiting and hypocrisy is infinitely greater than that of consuming alcohol? But backbiting is an extremely common social phenomenon, and hardly appears to be as serious an evil as the Quranic text makes out. A little reflection, however, amply confirms the Quranic view, since backbiting and hypocrisy are essentially cases of fear of truth, and it is this fear that is the seed of *all* evil.¹⁷

Likewise, the belief fairly common among both Muslims and non-Muslims that the Quran prohibits Muslims to befriend non-Muslims has arisen due to confusing a conditional Quranic advice not to befriend or trust the aggressive and unethical opponents of the Prophet ﷺ with a permanent ban on friendly relations with non-Muslims. The Quranic verses concerned are as follows:

(3:28)

Let not the believers take disbelievers for their friends in preference to believers. Whoso doeth that hath no connection with Allah unless (it be) that ye but guard yourselves against them, taking (as it were) security.

(4:144)

O ye who believe! Choose not disbelievers for (your) friends in place of believers. Would ye give Allah a clear warrant against you?

(5:51)

O ye who believe! Take not the Jews and the Christians for friends. They are friends one to another. He among you who taketh them for friends is (one) of them. Lo! Allah guideth not wrongdoing folk.

Now the above verses, when read in isolation and without full knowledge of the historical situation or the background of their revelation, do lend themselves to the interpretation that has actually been placed upon them that the Quran bans friendly relations and mutual trust between Muslims and non-Muslims. But if the verses are read carefully to determine their exact import, and if *all* the relevant verses (which are scattered at different places in the Quran) are examined in the historical context of their revelation, it becomes pretty clear that the anti-humanist interpretation of the Quranic verses in question is not justified. Indeed, it can be said with full intellectual honesty that the Quranic texts encourage inter-religious tolerance and universal kindness, holding that religious or cultural plurality is part of God's plan and that God could have obliterated all differences, had He so wished. Consider the following verses of the Quran:

(60:7-9)

It may be that Allah will ordain love between you and those of them with whom ye are at enmity. Allah is Mighty, and Allah is Forgiving, Merciful. Allah forbiddeth you not those who warred not against you on account of religion and drove you not out from your homes, that ye should show them kindness and deal justly with them. Lo! Allah loveth the just dealers. Allah forbiddeth you only those who warred against you on account of religion and have driven you out from your homes and helped to drive you out, that ye make

friends of them. Whosoever maketh friends of them—(all) such are wrong-doers.

(3:113-115)

They are not all alike. Of the people of the Scripture there is a staunch community who recite the revelations of Allah in the right season, falling prostrate (before Him). They believe in Allah and the Last Day, and enjoin right conduct and forbid indecency, and vie one with another in good works. They are of the righteous. And whatever good they do they will not be denied the meed thereof. Allah is aware of those who ward off (evil).

(5:69)

Lo! those who believe and those who are Jews, and Sabaeans, and Christians—whosoever believeth in Allah and the Last Day and doeth right—there shall no fear come upon them neither shall they grieve.

(49:13)

O mankind, Lo! We have created you male and female and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one and another. Lo! the noblest of you, in the sight of Allah, is the best in conduct. Lo! Allah is Knower, Aware.

(10:100)

And if thy Lord willed all who are in the earth would have believed together. Wouldst thou (Muhammad) compel men until they believe?

(5:48)

For each We have appointed a Divine Law and a traced out way. Had Allah willed He could have made you one community. But that He may try you by that which He hath given you (He hath made you as ye are) so vie one with another in good works. Unto Allah ye will all return, and He will then inform you of that wherein ye differ.

Let us now turn to the prescriptive or directive verses of the Quran. These verses deal with **(a)** transcendental ‘I-Thou’ matters—prayers, fasting, essential rites, method of ablution, **(b)** matters of personal law—rules of inheritance, marriage, dowry, divorce, prohibited degrees, food and drink, **(c)** matters of social law—crime and punishment, adultery, perjury, rules of evidence, and finally **(d)** political and economic matters—prohibition of usury, rules of peace and war, etc.

All the prescriptive verses put together number approximately 170 out of a total approximately 6,250 verses of the Quran, and the majority of these prescriptive verses deal with the transcendental sphere and personal laws. These prescriptive verses also do not go into concrete details, with a few exceptions which are worth mentioning—rules of ablution (in the transcendental sphere); rule of inheritance, prohibited degrees, divorce, adultery (in the sphere of personal laws); perjury and rules of evidence (in the sphere of social laws) and perhaps one or two other matters. The general or ‘open’ character of even the prescriptive or directive verses of the Quran, with the few exceptions noted above, quite understandably led to the view that the Quranic prescriptions are inadequate, as source of guidance to the believers, unless they are supplemented by the sayings and the example of the Prophet ﷺ. In other words, it led to the bracketing of the ‘Book’ and the ‘example’ (*al-Kitab wal sunnat*) on an almost equal footing as the supreme source of guidance for the Muslim community in all matters. However, if we look at the matter with an open mind instead of blindly adhering to the traditional approach we shall come to realize that the proper role of the sayings and the example of the Prophet ﷺ lies in the transcendental sphere rather than in the political, economic, social and cultural. In all the latter spheres ‘creative fidelity’ to the spirit of the Quran is the only valid response of the Muslim in an ever-changing world.¹⁸

The bracketing of the Quran and the *sunnat* and holding Islam to be a complete code of conduct for every aspect of human life (a view which I call the 'totalistic' approach to Islam) has been the chief cause of injecting regimentation and rigidity in Muslim societies. This approach is being vigorously propagated in many parts of the Islamic world today, though the emphasis is on a dynamic (in place of the long accepted static or closed) approach to *shariah*. It is hardly realized by the champions of this well-organized, well-financed and somewhat militant movement that the 'totalistic' approach was the common feature of all religions until the 18th century and is, by no means, a peculiar feature of Islam.

The totalistic approach to Christianity was greatly weakened in Western Europe due to the broad cultural impact of the rapid growth of the natural and social sciences from mid 18th century onwards. But Islamic religious thought has yet to appreciate this crucial change in the religious thinking of some of the most intelligent, and morally developed Christian thinkers and also lay scholars of the history of ideas without any Christian missionary interest.¹⁹

I long to see the day when the Muslim mind would realize, on the basis of a mature orthogenetic movement of religious thought, rather than in the spirit of imitating the West, that the primary function of the Quran and of religion, as such, is inspirational and humanistic rather than legal and authoritarian in the totalistic sense. Unless this is realized the intelligent, well-informed, authentic Muslim cannot appreciate the power and beauty of the Quran, and creatively nourish the cultural heritage of Islam in the spirit of a ceaseless quest for value.

V

This concluding section discusses the problem of a possible conscientious objection to any portion of the Quran, which a Muslim accepts as an infallible scripture. At first sight it seems that believing the word of God to be infallible leaves the Muslim with no freedom to exercise his independent reasoning and with no option but to surrender before the Scripture. But the matter is not so simple as this. The word of God has first to be understood by the believer before he can properly evaluate or act upon it. And proper

understanding of all discourse requires knowing not merely the literal meanings of atomic words in isolation from their situational context, but the concrete usage of the words and expressions of a natural language as also the various uses or logical grammar of human language in general. In other words, understanding of any language system requires semantic interpretation, be it the word of man or Divine communication. The interpretation of the language of the Quran is thus a precondition for purposeful action by the believer rather than the favorite but dispensable preoccupation of the learned. And no human interpretatic could claim finality or infallibility.

The infallibility of Divine revelation does not imply the infallibility of its human interpretations, no matter how learned or spiritually elevated a person might be, since the faith that the Quran was revealed to the Prophet ﷺ does not imply that its interpretation was also revealed, even when the interpretation was made by or accepted by the Prophet ﷺ himself. Just as faith in the Divine revelation of the Quran does not imply any particular theory of revelation, similarly, faith in its infallibility does not imply that any particular interpretation of the text is sacrosanct and immutable. Indeed, theories of revelation and the interpretation of revealed Quranic texts both require a conceptual framework which is bound to change as human knowledge and insight grow and man's analytical tools improve. The interpretation of the Quran must, therefore, be viewed as a continuous creative process or task.

The infallibility of the Quran, thus, does not rule out the possibility of plural interpretations of the text in the light of man's growing knowledge and insight, provided the interpretation is not forced and does not violate any clear and categorical Quranic injunction.

The above approach to the Quran does not imply any disrespect towards the Prophet or denigration of his unique status among God's numerous messengers in the course of history. The above view certainly does not reduce the status of the Prophet ﷺ to that of a mere 'postman' who delivers but does not interpret God's communications.²⁰ This approach does not compromise the supreme spiritual status and ethical excellence of the Prophet ﷺ and the value of his authentic precepts and example; it merely holds that infallibility belongs to God alone. Indeed, the Quran itself refers to the occasional mistakes or errors of the Prophet ﷺ. Also it is well established that on quite a few occasions *Khalifa* Umar disagreed with the Prophet ﷺ who modified

his own judgment after discussion. The reader may refer to the following Quranic verses:

(66:1)

O Prophet! Why bannest thou that which Allah had made lawful for thee, seeking to please thy wives? And Allah is Forgiving, Merciful.

(80:5-10)

As for him who thinketh himself independent, Unto him thou payest regard.. But as for him who cometh unto thee with earnest purpose And hath fear, From him thou art distracted.

The crucial distinction made above between the infallibility of revelation and the fallibility of its human interpretations should enable Muslims to solve any possible conflict between faith and reason. But a conflict may well arise in an honest believer between his authentic conscience and a Quranic text which cannot possibly have more than one interpretation. The issue of the Quranic punishment for theft and adultery or the issue of the unequal status of women witnesses as compared with men may be mentioned in this context. The relevant Quranic verses are as follows:

(5:38)

As for the thief, both male and female, cut off their hands. It is the reward of their own deeds, an exemplary punishment from Allah. Allah is Mighty, Wise.

(24:2)

The adulterer and the adulteress scourge ye each one of them (with) a hundred stripes and let not pity for the twain withhold you from obedience to Allah, if ye believe in Allah

and the Last Day. And let a party of believers witness their punishment.

(2:282)

. . . And call to witness, from among your men two witnesses, And if two men be not (at hand) then a man and two women, of such as ye approve as witnesses, so that if the one erreth (through forgetfulness) the other will remember

In case an honest Muslim believer has a conscientious objection to the above contents of the Quran, several responses are possible: **(a)** one may rationalize (in the Freudian pejorative sense) in favor of the Quranic text; **(b)** one may suppress one's judgment and suffer from internal uneasiness; **(c)** one may joyfully surrender one's autonomy to the postulated higher inscrutable wisdom of revelation; **(d)** one may suspend one's judgment hoping that further self-reflection or Divine grace would resolve the conflict; **(e)** one may suspend one's judgment and reconcile himself to a perpetual tension or polarity between the text and his reason in relation to the issue concerned; and **(f)** one may hold that no God's revelation to any 'revelatee' can, in principle, claim to be infallible in the absolute or infinite sense which is applicable to God and to God alone. In other words, spatio-temporal traces or limitations (which are inseparable from all revelatory situations or processes) lead to 'nuclear' rather than 'molecular' infallibility.²¹ Thus the Quranic perfection is that of a seed that grows leading to new dimensions and levels of perfection, and not the static perfection of an inert prefabricated structure which is incompatible with any movement or inner growth.

Of all the above responses open to the believer only the first two are clearly objectionable and undesirable; all others are legitimate possibilities out of which the believer should make his own authentic existential choice.²² To my mind, an integrated total response (harmoniously blending the functioning of perception, reason and faith in their appropriate spheres) to the essential mystery of the universe is possible. However, no one style or mode of an integrated response can claim exclusive validity.