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HOW TO INTERPRET THE QUR'ĀN: A MORAL ISSUE?

Abstract

Ci sono molti metodi diversi nell'interpretazione delle Scritture, e del Corano in particolare, e questi tendono a lavorare con diverse teorie del significato. Dopo tutto, la questione è cosa un particolare testo significhi effettivamente, e abbiamo bisogno di una teoria su come risolvere tali questioni, specialmente quando ci sono evidenti difficoltà nella comprensione del testo. Le argomentazioni tendono a spaziare su quale teoria del significato dia più senso al testo, o funzioni più adeguatamente come teoria del significato. Un metodo che non è stato adottato nel complesso è quello di vedere la questione almeno parzialmente come morale ed epistemologica. Dovremmo avere fiducia di poter comprendere interamente ciò che abbiamo davanti e come potremmo sapere di avere la risposta alle questioni semantiche che ogni testo porta con sé? Si potrebbe sostenere che un'etica della moderazione, dell'equilibrio e della moderazione sono importanti tecniche ermeneutiche che finora non sono state sufficientemente impiegate quando si discute su come comprendere e interpretare il Corano.

There are many different approaches to interpreting scripture, and the Qur'ān in particular, and these tend to work with different theories of meaning. After all, the issue is what a particular text actually means, and we need a theory about how to resolve such questions, especially when there are apparent difficulties in understanding the text. Arguments tend to range over which theory of meaning makes most sense of the text, or works most adequately as a theory of meaning. One approach which has not been taken on the whole is to see the issue as partially at least moral and epistemological. Should we have confidence that we can understand entirely what is before us, and how would we know that we have the answer to the semantic issues that any such text brings along with it? It might be

argued that an ethics of moderation, balance, and restraint are important hermeneutic techniques that up to now have not been sufficiently employed when discussing how to understand and interpret the Qur'ān.

One of the many areas in Islamic Studies that Massimo Campanini illuminated was how to approach the Qur'ān. He on the whole advocated a phenomenological approach to the topic, and what impressed me about his treatment was his idea that the Qur'ān is a text full of philosophical interest. This is something we discussed over many years and it is something on which we both agreed, although we tended to analyze the text in rather different ways. Here I would like to look at a variety of ways of approaching the Book and while I am sure there is much I shall say with which he would disagree, I am sure that he would appreciate the spirit of the inquiry. We do not tend to link issues of interpretation of scripture with morality, but it seems to me that they are linked, and much of the recent history of how to go about understanding the text fails to adopt an appropriate attitude of humility.

Wendy Shaw discusses Islamic and Jewish texts from the twelfth to thirteenth centuries and comments *the correct version of 'religion' lies not in an ur-scripture, but in the legacy of perpetually renewed interpretation*¹. This is very much of a theme of the current literature on theological issues, that we should concentrate on how there exists a variety of interpretations and also of course a variety of interpreters. We can locate them within a cultural and political context. Times change as do people and along with those changes goes interpretation. The study of religion is more about the interpretations than about the original text. There is a lot to be said for such a view, since surely our access to the original text is only through the various interpretations of it. An original text needs an interpretation, especially if it is not in the language or culture of the observer. But

¹ W. Shaw, *What is "Islamic Art"?: Between Religion and Perception*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2019, p. 231.

then of course everything needs an interpretation, even something with which we are entirely familiar. That should not be seen as a reason to underplay the significance of the original text, though. Just because it may be used in a variety of ways, the source of that variety still exists, and exists independently of the interpretations. We are used to the idea that there are different ways of reaching the same goal and looking at the same thing, The object that lies at the end of the journey or the perceptions does not lose its importance just because there are different ways of accessing it.

In recent years there have been many critiques of the traditional ways of discussing the Qur'ān and of religion in general. The notion that the study of religion should be objective, surely an important aim from an academic point of view, has resulted in a secular approach whereby it is seen primarily as an interior or private domain of belief. Or religion is seen very much from the perspective of Protestant Christianity, as though this presented a universal essence of all religion. There is often a great deal of suspicion of the motives of non-Muslim scholars, especially as some of them are actually believers in something else. Do they see the Qur'ān as trying to do what their religions try to do, and are critical of it when it does not fit into that mold? Not surprisingly, for them the Qur'ān seems a very strange work indeed, given its lack of ordering chronologically and the fact that it is presented as it to represent how the verses are to be read. The text further plays with the idea of history by placing the reader or listener in the text when it refers to past events with the phrase *remember* (33: 7). One can see the lack of normal structure in the Book as an attack on the idea of putting things in compartments, and we might conclude that following a linear pattern is not essential to a religious text, especially one designed to be heard or recited. The text is embodied as it is recited, this is an experience that brings together the physical and the spiritual in a unique manner. The thesis that the Book is untranslatable can be taken to mean that it defies authority apart from itself to pin it down. It requires according to Asad both to be read and to be lived. He suggests

*the nontranslatability of the Qur'ān in a liturgical context makes it difficult for political as well as ecclesiastical authority to control Qur'ānic meaning. The original is always present, generating unlimited possibilities of meaning.*²

This can be taken in a number of different ways. One is that the text cannot be domesticated, made to fit easily into demanding that it be interpreted in particular ways. There are many such views in the study of religion, where a vast range of meanings are attributed to a text as possible, and the idea is to get away from the notion that it can have only one meaning. Then the representatives of religious authority, insisting as they do on certain interpretations, can be passed over since they are in favour of only when many exist. There is another way of looking at it though, since if there are many ways of approaching the text, we would surely need guidance on which was right, or at least more feasible, as compared with the others. One way of limiting meaning is as Asad shows in his book by living with the text, and those who do this soon discover that certain meanings work while others do not. The Qur'ān is a guide to action and the reading and hearing is supposed to go along with an acting and doing, and that combination soon enlightens us on what could work and what looks improbable. On the other hand, and rather worryingly for any notion of orthodoxy, surely a whole variety of alternative readings would seem plausible on this model, while the religion of Islam does seem to privilege certain fixed readings, or at least did in the past, and does today within certain faith communities and countries.

² T. Asad, *Secular Translations: Nation-State, Modern Self, and Calculative Reason*, Columbia University Press, New York 2018, pp. 60-61.

1. *Our relationship with the text*

Modern hermeneutics is all about not being bullied by the text. Actually there is nothing unique in this respect to Islam. Many commentators on religion take this line, and not just to religion of course. The idea that the text is the representative of the religion is chided and insulted by being labeled essentialist, as though the idea was that all you need to do to understand a religion is to examine its major text. No one would argue this, and everyone interested in religion would accept that texts have to be applied and discussed and argued over. To have the text looming over everything looks like the worst sort of autocracy, and just wrong, since a text has to be read and understood, and there are a variety of ways of going about this. We need some sense of balance here between attention to the text and attention to how its followers behave, so that we can interrogate that relationship and use it help us understand what varieties of meaning actually might or might not work. What makes religions interesting is the tension that often exists between a text and how it is lived. The text says something and it is difficult to see how that can really be meant to be taken literally, given the implications that it would have for our lives. At one time there might have been no problem, or appeared to be no problem, but now there is, and we wonder how God could have meant us to behave in such a way (text do have authors, after all). We could just say that we can find an interpretation that will make the text benign and there are a variety of ways of doing this. We can translate it differently, we can link it with other verses that soften its impact, we may read it together with hadith that moderate or change it, and we may reflect on the history of the Prophet and/or the Imams to find indications of alternative ways of living that text cannot be taken as it appears to indicate.

All religions have to cope with what are called difficult issues. This is where it looks like a religion is doing something that is just wrong, or advocating something very dubious. Sometimes interpreters say that although what is advocated is not nowadays what we

would do, at that time it was an advance on what people used to do, so then it made sense and perhaps the text can be extended to suggest that the general principle should be extended into the present. For example, at the time of the Prophet we are told that it was a custom to bury female children, since women had a much lower status than men and were often not welcomed as members of the family. Islam criticizes this and yet at the same time does have some practices that seem to treat women as less significant than men. By contrast, we are told that the Prophet always treated women with respect and there are constant addresses to the believers as both men and women. Yet in Islamic law women seem to have a slightly lower status as compared with men, we are told they are a degree inferior, and we are not dealing here with a patriarchal system of interpretation but directly with the Qur'ān. It is quite clear that according to the Book women have rights, but fewer rights than men. Perhaps this is a step up from a time when women had no rights at all, and perhaps the gradual amelioration of women's status was all that was possible at that time and place. On the other hand, we are talking about the final revelation here and we would expect it to be really final in laying out forever what God wants us to do. The idea that he selected a second best option of being realistic does not really accord with the dignity of the divine. It might work if one had some theory of how God expected divine law to change in the future as we moved it along according to the principles we see Him use in the Qur'ān. This in fact is very much how the progressives and religious reformers argue, and we need to discuss how plausible this strategy is.

2. *Rules and their rationale*

This idea that we should look at the principles behind what God does as our criterion of what can change, and what cannot, is influential. We often distinguish between *furū'* and *usūl* in religious law, in what is essential as a rule and what is just a detail, like the contrast

between the branches of a tree and the tree itself. The trouble is that the contrast is not so easy to establish and some important rules seem to have no convincing rationale except for the fact that God commands them. Why did God create animals that Muslims are not supposed to eat, for example, and what did He have against the male foreskin? Of course it is easy to find reasons for the dietary laws and male circumcision but they are not good reasons. Many people seem to live quite acceptably with their foreskins and bacon sandwiches, and they are not obviously evil characters or living lives of misery. We are not told why these rules are rules for the very good reason that there is no reason. That is not a problem, any organization can set its own rules, and they are often entirely arbitrary, like what people wear or how they behave. The general rule to be extracted here though is that these rules accord with the general rules of the organization, nothing else. There is good reason for an organization to have rules, it fosters what Ibn Khaldūn calls *'asabiyya* or communal allegiance, but the details of the rules themselves are entirely arbitrary.

Another line that we could take is that the rules are not arbitrary but have a rationale known only to God and that actually fits in much better with the tone of the Qur'ān. Naturally God knows much more than we do so if He establishes a rule we know we should follow it, regardless or not of whether we should know why. This is what we typically do when dealing with what we are told by someone far more advanced in a particular area than we are, we do what they say even if we do not understand why. In fact, we could put this more strongly and say that if we could understand why the rule is a rule we would not need to consult an expert, but we do not and so have to rely on them. How much more is this the case for God, who is omniscient and also our creator. He knows far more about us than we do and so we can be confident that if He tells us to do something He knows why. This gives us a good reason for obeying the rule, but the only general principles we can extract from them is that it is worth obeying God. That is not a rule that gives us any leeway for

changing things, except perhaps if we were to argue that the point of the rules is to do things which benefit us and it could be that at some point in the future different ways of doing things would be helpful. This Mu‘tazilite interpretation of the *maqāsid* or principles of law seems a bit far-fetched when we try to reconcile it with the text of the Book itself. They argue that the point of religious law is to represent what is good in itself. Many of the rules seem to have little if anything to do with avoiding the wrong and pursuing the right, when it comes down to the level of what we should eat and drink, or how we should dress. The general principle involved seems to be about doing what God tells us to do.

What does it mean to say that we follow rules and do not know the point of those rules? It is the sort of thing that parents say to children, just do what I say, do not question it. The assumption there is that the children do not yet know why they should behave in certain ways, but one day they will find out. The analogy with us could be that we will find out in the next life, and the idea that God knows and we do not, even prophets like Musa, is a theme in the Qur’ān. Sometimes you just have to obey someone who is more knowledgeable or skilled at doing something than we are and we constantly do. If a device breaks down for example many of us spend some time trying to fix it but in the end we may have to take it to be fixed by a professional. I remember a chat show in America in which a lawyer answered questions from a phone in audience, and people would often ask if they really needed a lawyer for a particular case that they were thinking of pursuing. He would sarcastically respond that of course not, they could read it all up in a book, and similarly if they needed heart surgery or dental work they could do the same. Although most of the Islamic philosophers were at the same time lawyers, physicians, administrators, and of course theologians, they did emphasize the importance of going to the right person to get a particular job done. It is just that they would have thought themselves competent to do many jobs. In some ways we might think that if we are rational and prepared to work on a problem then we should

be able to solve it, and so there is no need to rely on the authority of others. To a degree this is true, and we do often like to tinker around our houses and vehicles sorting out problems and seeing what we can accomplish by ourselves. Usually this takes a lot longer than a professional would take, but then we have time and few of the skills, or tools, of those who spend all their time dealing with such issues.

3. Taqwā

It is often said that the best person to trust is God. *Taqwā*, compared to something we can wear (7: 26), is a term that is sometimes translated as piety and it means to think of God. It is not a complicated notion, to think of God is not difficult although to know Him obviously is, given His very different level of being. When it comes to rituals we are sometimes told that they hardly matter, but what matters is our orientation. The Qur'ān speaking on the topic of annual sacrifice says *neither their meat nor their blood reaches God but your piety (taqwā) (22: 37) and carrying out rites should only be to show piety of their hearts (22: 32)*. We are told of Adam's two sons *both had offered a sacrifice, yet it was accepted from one and not the other because God only accepts the sacrifice of those who are mindful of Him (al-muttaqūn) (5: 27) [my emphasis]*. This is very much a theme of biblical literature also. On the other hand we should pay attention to these quotations since they do not suggest that the ritual is not important, just that it is not all that is important. The ritual requires the right intention, (*niyya*) and there is no suggestion that the latter could replace the former. We typically show we have *taqwā* in carrying out the ritual, the ritual is a necessary but not sufficient condition of *taqwā*. The hadith offer many details on this issue, especially with respect to prayer. This is important for many reasons, primarily here because it implies we cannot derive general principles of *taqwā* that transcend the rituals that embody it.

Let us compare *taqwā* with another kind of mindfulness, that so prevalent in popular psychology and often compared with what amounts to a fairly basic level of meditation in Buddhist and Vedantic thought. Mindfulness is advocated widely and involves concentrating on what we are doing and avoiding judgment. The importance of the latter is to allow us to relax and so focus on what we are doing in a narrow sense, without being immediately concerned about further consequences. Meditation, by contrast, is far from relaxing in itself, although it may eventually lead to relaxation. It is a rather complex thinking process in which judgments flourish and lead to knowledge. This knowledge is regarded as very important since it leads to progress on the route to enlightenment. It is not just a reflection on experience, although this is how it might start. There is a lot of thinking about the nature of the world as we experience it and as it is in itself, and this is taken to bring us knowledge, and very important knowledge at that. As a result of this contemplation we understand more about the world and ourselves, or at least that is the aim, and so is very different from what is often called mindfulness. Mindfulness is more like meditation lite, perhaps the first stage of something more protracted and complex, a process of which it is the first stage, or maybe better part of the first stage.

4. *Feelings and actions*

This is a useful analogy with *taqwā*, since obviously there are degrees of being mindful of God. One can obey the rules of religion without really thinking about them, or why one is doing them, and that sounds like a good example of not being mindful. We should be careful here though and acknowledge that for many people being religious is like using a language, it is something they do without much thought about why or how they do it. Sometimes it is because they have done it for such a long time that it becomes part of their everyday life and fairly automatic. This seemed terrible to al-Ghazālī, and

he wrote his huge *Ihya' ulūm al-dīn* to revive religion, something we are told in a hadith will be done in every hundred years. He analyzes common religious activities in terms of the appropriate intentions that go along with them, and all very much with a Sufi orientation, so that religion has to have the right sort of feeling. It is certainly true that religions, like everything else, can get stale, and the more we carry out the rituals the staler they seem. On the other hand there are other things to think about apart from religion and not everyone can have that sort of direct and passionate relationship to their faith. It is like a long marriage, it may be that the partners are comfortable together but have certainly lost the passion of younger years. The marriage may be no less significant though since it is when people learn to put up with each other when they start to get on each other's nerves that an interesting stage arises, and has to be got through. Or it is like bringing up children, there is a stage where parents are enthusiastic about it but after a bit it becomes routine and perhaps rather boring, but it needs to be done and it is a good thing that people are prepared to do it. These examples of marriage and bringing up children suggest that there is more to doing things that are worth doing than having the right sorts of feelings about them all the time.

These feelings could be made the basis of a general principle describing *taqwā* and placing the emphasis on their subjective flavour. The rituals could be seen as the *zāhir* or exoteric aspects of religion while our feelings are the *bātin* or the inner. Clearly we could be thinking about anything at all while we are carrying out our rituals and so there is a point to such a dichotomy. Yet some people could be carrying out their religious duties without any special feelings about why those individual tasks are required, but the whole is immensely satisfying as a project to answer God's call to serve Him. Someone may believe in the general activity and yet have no particular enthusiasm for its parts, they are just what one does as religious duties. We often enjoy fitting our lives into a pattern, and if it has a rationale that gives it more status. No special feeling has to go along with it, though, like the dutiful husband feeding his wife

long after she has lost all idea of who he is, he does what he thinks he should but without any great pleasure in the task and its end. Is he being mindful of her? Very much so in a physical sense, but his private feelings may be very different. It seems invidious to be critical since he takes care of what we might well think is the important part of his relationship with his wife.

Despite what al-Ghazālī and the Sufis suggest, we should be careful when insisting on the right feelings accompanying action. Often having those immediate feelings hinders efficient action. We want medical help to be able to help us, we do not expect those involved to be overwhelmed by their feelings, and indeed we hope they will not be, since it would impede our treatment. In general terms of course we would hope that they would have the right attitude to us and to our welfare, since they are in a caring profession. On the other hand they may have carried out a certain procedure so many times that they hardly notice wider aspects of it. We should not rule them out as unmindful, since the activity in general is profoundly mindful of humanity and its needs. The same can be said of religion, the ritual is not just the exterior appearance of the internal feeling, it has a life and authenticity of its own. Islam sees itself as advocating a religion for people in the middle, in between the asceticism of Christianity and the materialism of Judaism, as it characterizes those religions and their followers. In the middle we need to balance all the different parts of our lives, the economic, the beautiful, the moral, and our attitude to what lies beyond the world, God. That balance requires us to think of a whole range of things apart from God. That is not to suggest that we are supposed to put God in a compartment and not link Him up with the other things we do. Muslims mention God all the time and seek his aid in all their dealings, and yet they do not forego practical action in order to further their interests. Within that description of a relationship a whole continuum of attitudes to God exists. For some He is always at the forefront of their thinking, for some He is certainly there somewhere but more distantly. These represent different levels of mindfulness and it would be misleading

to suggest that only the most obvious and direct represent the appropriate attitude.

5. *Knives and fools in religion*

We have moved a long way from examining the idea that when looking at a religion we should be not obsessed by the central text of the religion. We should also examine how that text is interpreted and what people actually do. That is all true, but it is worth going back to concentrating on the text, since the variety of interpretation and human performance are all based on the text. What is the connection between the issue of hermeneutics and *taqwā*? Just in the same way that *taqwā* requires moderation and balance, so does the interpretation of the Qur'ān. There is nothing unique about the Qur'ān here, all scripture requires these virtues when they are examined. In the *Tale of the Tub* Jonathan Swift alluded to this when he contrasted the knave and the fool. The fool takes things as they appear, at face value, and the text is viewed as literally true. The knave takes the opposite line and sees something deeper in the text which gives it its meaning. As these labels suggest, neither approach has much to be said for it, in his view. The fool just repeats the text in his interpretation, putting it in different words but not really looking at it critically. The knave is suspicious of the truth of the text as it presents itself, and finds its meaning as lying within it but only subtly. This might be described as the contrast between the exoteric and the esoteric, and selecting just one of the alternatives seems to be misplaced to Swift. The text often has issues about it that means it cannot just be accepted, one has to find ways of reconciling inconsistencies or what are often called difficult passages. Just saying it is all literally true may seem to be the line that a faithful believer should take, but is not, it is naïve and displays insufficient respect for rationality, it might even be argued that it does not respect the frequent invitations by the Qur'ān to use our reason in thinking about its claims. The knave constantly looks for an internal and hidden meaning, and this seems

to adopt a rather casual attitude to the letter of the text itself. After all, the link between the text and what is said to be its inner meaning can be quite loose, and gives those inclined to knavery a lot of room for creativity and self-serving. This is of course a familiar feature of religious practice.

Maimonides has no time for the fool. In his introduction to his commentary on the *Pereq Helek* he says:

It is important for you to know that there are three classes who differ in their interpretation of the words of the Sages, of blessed memory. The first class comprises the majority ... they understand the words of the Sages literally and do not interpret them at all. To them all impossibilities are necessary events. They only do this because of their ignorance of the sciences and their being distant from ... knowledge ... they think that the intent of the Sages in all their precise and carefully stated remarks is only what they can comprehend and that these are to be understood literally. This is despite the fact that in their literal sense some of the words of the Sages would seem to be so ... absurd that if they were related to the uneducated masses in their literal sense, and all the more so to the wise, they would look upon them with amazement and exclaim: How is it possible that there exists in the world anyone who would think in this manner or believe that such statements are correct, much less approve of them! This class is poor and one should pity their folly. In their own minds, they think they are honoring and exalting the Sages, but they are actually degrading them to the lowest depths. And they do not perceive that, as God lives, it is this class of thinkers that destroys the splendor of the Torah of God into saying the opposite ... God said in His perfect Torah: This is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the nations, which shall hear all these statutes and say: Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.³

It is worth thinking about what a middle position would be between the fool and the knave. It would mean respecting the text, but

³ Deuteronomy 4:6.

not necessarily being dominated by it exclusively. It would mean thinking about what the text might mean without its explicitly saying so. That is not to treat it in any different way from any other text we might have in front of us, or even from any conversation we have with someone. We sometimes have to wonder what they mean although we understand what they are saying, and we sometimes have to think about something inside them that is the reason for what they are saying. We need to blend these approaches to arrive at a balanced view of what was said. Of course, some language is completely obvious and some irretrievably obscure, but most is somewhere in the middle, and this is particularly the case when the language is beautiful or moving and so on, typically like much religious language. As al-Fārābī pointed out referring to all religions, some language wants to be assessed by our imagination, it appeals to that faculty because it is intent on applying to our emotions. *Aphorism 55* goes:

Every instruction is composed of two things: (a) making what is being studied comprehensible and causing its idea to be established in the soul, and (b) causing others to assent to what is comprehended and established in the soul. There are two ways of making a thing comprehensible, first, by causing its essence to be perceived by the intellect and second by causing it to be imagined through the similitude that imitates it.⁴

6. The significance of balance

That is not to say that there is anything wrong with it, or that it is not true. It can be true and at the same time expressed in a way designed to move us is how the Peripatetic school saw Aristotle's organon of different levels of reasoning, ranging from demonstration at the peak with poetry being at the bottom. At every level what

⁴ Al-Fārābī, *The Attainment of Happiness*. *Alfarabi: Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, Tr. M. Mahdi, Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY 2001, p. 40.

is going on represents the expression of truth, but in very different ways and for different purposes. We may not grasp the truth but use the language to understand how we should act, something we could work out for ourselves if we were able to see the truth clearly right from the start. Being balanced means understanding that different kinds of language have different functions. We can assess how successfully they satisfy those functions and set out to link the truth value of the claim with how it is expressed. So we do not just go for one and ignore the other, since the whole variety of ways of expression is significant. Demonstration and poetry may express the same truth, albeit in very different ways, and with varying levels of clarity.

This may seem to be disrespectful to the Qur'ān which is often called miraculous, clear, comprehensible and beautiful. Yet the argument seems to be that a balanced view of meaning applies to every text, even one produced by God. A text is a text, and Arabic is a language like other languages, after all. Balance is important in all matters, even in *taqwa*, as we saw. We should not overdo *taqwa*, that is inappropriate and not something of which Islam approves. Yet we should not forget God and his role in our lives, and carrying out ritual duties is one way of achieving the right degree of mindfulness here. Giving charity is constantly praised in the Book but we are not supposed to give everything away. One reason is that if we give everything away we will not be able to give in the future. Commerce is not criticized in the Qur'ān provided it is fair and compassionate, and is surely part of the balanced life many of us are encouraged to live. Prayer is important but not something we should do all the time, our lives should include along with prayer, marriage, friendship, work, and so on. It is worth thinking how prayer is a combination of words and movement. It is prepared in a certain way, there are different prayers on different occasions and places, and so on, and when it comes to an end there is a way of bringing down those involved in the practice. There is a very significant balance here between a range of human likes and dislikes, our potential and what we tend to be able to achieve, our relationships with other people and

those in our immediate group or family. It would be rash to claim that it is easy to establish that sort of balance, but it makes sense to suggest that religions suggest ways of accomplishing it.

Al-Ghazālī distinguishes between three levels of *tawakkūl*, trust in God (*Ihya* IV, 255). The first is when one trusts God in the same way one trusts one's guardian, it is a relationship which is far from automatic and has to be developed, and a higher level is like that between a child and a mother. Here there is no doubt that his prayer is heard and will be answered once he makes his petition (*du'a*). The third and highest state is familiar to those involved in Sufism, it is where one has complete trust in God, al-Ghazālī uses the wonderful example of being a body in the hands of the body washer. This feeling rarely occurs and does not last long, and obviously does not actually get experienced by the corpse. It is inappropriate for everyday application since it is so all-encompassing. Even prayer is transcended in this experience. A more balanced notion of *tawakkūl* is needed for any practical application of religion. We can move from this concept to the whole notion of how we relate to God, how we see Him, *tashbīh* or *tanzīh*? Is He more like us or is He entirely transcendent?

There is a well known passage in the Qur'ān which reflects this dichotomy. 8:17 refers to Muhammad when it comments *You did not throw when you threw, but God threw*. Of course, the Prophet did throw, but ultimately it was God who threw, since it is God who does everything and what we think we accomplish is only because of God. The sentence seems to be contradictory but is supposed to point to two ways of considering God. On the transcendent level God is far above physical actions like throwing, unlike us. On the other hand He is like us in the sense that He makes it possible for us to do things like throwing, and in the end human action is entirely dependent on Him, so He is the thrower. Are we like the body in the hands of the body washer, as al-Ghazālī has it, or are we able to relate to God rather in the same way that we relate to other people? We are told at 18:39 that only God has power, which fits in nicely

with the body washer example, and yet at the same time we are often told to do things as though we do have agency, and we are punished and rewarded in the next world for what we do here. *And God has disposed (qaddara) everything and then guided (87: 3)*. The guidance seems to come too late here, since once He has determined how things are going to be, what scope is there for us to act freely? Perhaps the determination is not total but represents His knowing what we are going to do before we do it, in just the same way that someone could predict that on a rainy day I would take an umbrella with me when leaving the house. I am not forced to do so, but this is invariably my practice. As always, we need to work out a more balanced interpretation that discovers a way in which all these propositions may be true together. The very worst thing is to take an *aya* from the Qur'ān and think it represents everything that there is to say on the topic. As with all scripture, one should be encouraged to attempt to harmonize a plethora of passages and here balance is very much the name of the game.

The rules of Islam are quite mild, especially when it comes to what Muslims can eat. *Eat of the good things that we have provided for you (5: 4-5)*, Muslims are told. *You that believe, do not forbid such good things as God has allowed to you ... eat of what God had provided you as lawful and good (5: 87-8)*. Anything the People of the Book can eat is acceptable, although this presumably only refers to the People of the Book who are Jews. The same does not apply to drink of course, but the descriptions of food in paradise are sumptuous, so the idea that people are supposed to deny themselves anything significant in this life or indeed the next, when the scope for legal drinking seems to widen, is difficult to find in the Qur'ān. This is all part of what Islam sees as balance, being mindful of God does not mean being mindful of nothing else. We can be mindful when carrying out our religious tasks and of course we can, and should not, carry them out and not be mindful, but the normal pleasures of the body also provide an opportunity to acknowledge the role of God in our lives, After all, it is God who has created us in such

a way that we can enjoy that body and its pleasures. As al-Ghazālī points out in his *Ihya*, the link between ritual and our feelings is profoundly unstable. The more we think of God the more the ritual seems unnecessary, the more we perform the ritual the harder it may be to think of God, and we need some way of bringing both what we do and what we think together in some harmonious way. This he argues is what Islam sets out to do, it brings together the hand and the heart, it imbues our everyday activities with mindfulness of God, and gives that mindfulness a material form of representation. There are those who very much stress how we orient our thinking towards God and there are those to emphasize our religious rituals, and what both these strategies lack is balance, the *Ihya* suggests. The Peripatetic thinkers argued that all religions provide, or seek to provide, that sort of balance, but Islam does it best. For one thing the Prophet was the most capable expositor of religious truths, so his audience was able to step up from their traditional thinking to take on board his vivid defense of monotheism in his hadith and life style. He managed to use his imagination to illustrate the divine message in such a way that it resonated with as many people as possible, and the *Qur'ān* itself of course is also miraculously written to bring about this end. Al-Ghazālī is not so convinced of the merits of other religions, but he also is quite clear in the *Ihya* on the role of imagination in bringing about a successful description of religion and what it involves.

7. *Al-Ghazālī and the hadīth*

In some ways this is evidenced by his extraordinarily cavalier way of operating with the hadīth. It is almost as though he is working on the principle that if you can choose between a more and less reliable hadīth, always go for the latter. Not that this interferes with the argument since he tends to use the hadīth to illustrate the emotional aspects of his thesis, not to play a role in the structure of the

argument itself. He is trying to move his readers emotionally and the heavy lifting of argument is kept well aware from the use of the hadīth. There are strict rules on how to use hadīth, and what levels of trust we can have in them, and it is as though he abandoned all those rules to play about with them in whatever way takes his fancy. This was at a time when hadīth were treated with great seriousness by many of the *ulama* and *fuqaha*, and it must have been quite shocking then and continues to surprise now. But that is the point of the enterprise on which he is engaged, to wake people up, to stir their enthusiasm for a religion that is getting a bit tired and needs a *mujaddid*, someone who comes every hundred years and renews everything. This might seem to contradict the idea of balance that it was argued is at the heart of accounts of Islam and the *Ihya*, but in fact the reverse is the case. Al-Ghazālī is intent on balancing the exciting and challenging things he says about well-worn rituals with the rituals themselves. Since the point of most rituals is to do something in public, and the point of most Sufism is to do something in private, bringing them together in the way he does is an exercise in balance in just the way that the Qur'ān has it when it says: *Do not raise your voice in prayer, nor whisper it, but seek a middle way* (17: 110). This passage starts by talking about God's names being all beautiful, and it is worth noting that those names are variously *jamal* and *jalil*, some have to do with His power and some with His aesthetic qualities, they are balanced finely. A distinction is typically made between *jalal* and *jamal*, and rightly so. Some of the names of God are gentler and some are more based on power, and we are always asked to notice how this establishes a sort of balance in our approach to Him and His attributes. Some names though already incorporate that balance, *majid* for example, the glorious one, someone with perfect power and high status, full of compassion, generosity and kindness (11: 73).

It might be said that al-Ghazālī's treatment of the hadīth is a bit like Khalafallah's treatment of the Qur'ān. The latter took a largely rhetorical approach to the Qur'ān, and he made a firm distinction

between the historical accuracy of the contents and their aesthetic qualities. He points out that the point of the text is admonition (*'ihra*) and exhortation (*'iza*) and not history. For him, the historical accuracy of the text is besides the point. As Abū Zayd says, this looks like it is arguing that the Book is not accurate nor true, but that is not the claim. The claim is that the Book is not about history but about how people should live their lives, and a much stronger claim may be made about the hadīth which, with the rare exception of the *hadīth qudsi*, have no divine credentials at all. The hadīth all work imaginatively though to stimulate the emotions and instruct their audience as to how to behave. That is their function and they carry it out well. They invite us to compare and contrast, to make distinctions and ponder over the meaning of actions, they embody within reflection on them patience, restraint and balance.

8. *The adab of tasfīr*

We looked at the apparent difficulty of knowing how to approach a text like the Qur'ān. There are of course a huge range of theories about how to do this, ranging from literary theory to rhetoric and so on, and no doubt they all have a contribution to make to the issue. The basic dichotomy we examined was between those who take a literal approach and those who seek some hidden meaning. Neither approach works, the former makes the text sound wrong and the latter runs the danger of losing control of the text completely. Anything goes is not a good strategy to adopt when considering what something means, since of course anything can mean anything as Humpty Dumpty says in *Alice in Wonderland*, but then communication becomes difficult. Humpty Dumpty says it is a matter of who is to be master, yet God wants to communicate with us in the Qur'ān, so He is both master and at the same time not in total control of the meanings of the language He uses. The Qur'ān is replete with references to the excellence of its mode of delivery precisely of meaning, and

this could hardly be a reference to some hidden esoteric meaning. The point of language is to communicate, although of course not the only point, and although not everything needs to be explicit, much of it does if it is to work in conveying a message. This is precisely how the Qur'ān sees itself. So those theories of how to read the Qur'ān which place the emphasis on something other than the text are all problematic, impressive and subtle though they sound.

Religions tend to place a lot of emphasis on modesty. This is familiar to us when it comes to clothing and how the body should and should not be displayed, but modesty does not just concern physical matters. Modesty applies also to what we say and do, and to how we interpret texts. Any claim that there is just one way of doing it is immodest and lacks humility, another religious virtue. Modesty, humility, and moderation all go together, and are suitable hermeneutic principles. Good manners (*adab*) and restraint apply just as much to *tafsīr*, to the interpretation of scripture, as they do to anything else. Unfortunately we live in times where precisely the opposite strategy is popular. However, this merely calls on us to practice yet another religious virtue, patience, before good sense and balance in Qur'ānic interpretation is restored.

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