

Living The Quran In Our Times

Excerpts

From the Foreword:

“One core function of all religions is to quench (as far as possible) the human thirst for the one true answer to the enigma of life and death in order to overcome the existential human anxiety and uncertainty of the future embedded in the depths of consciousness in the face of the immense vastness of the cosmos.

A religion remains alive only as long as it fulfills the above need. The moment the ‘answer to the enigma’ the religious tradition provides loses on its ‘existential appeal’ or its power of assurance and consolation to the believer it begins to decline, even though its votaries may continue, by sheer force of convention and habit, to use the same old words and observe the same rituals.”

“The objective is to reach the core of the faith and the spiritual and moral values of the tradition and to make them the focus of the believer’s loyalty and adherence instead of his having to carry the entire baggage or social cultural ‘padding’ of one’s tradition. This gives hitherto, adversarial groups the democratic freedom to forge a consensus on secondary issues - social, economic, cultural, and to enjoy equal rights and opportunities and yet preserve their religious and cultural identity in a mixed free society.”

“The present work is addressed to all those who desire to build bridges between minds and hearts that really care for unity in diversity and diversity in unity (in an equal measure) and also care to be sure of their facts before they venture to judge themselves or others.”

From the Introduction:

“The following pages are addressed to the Western educated Muslims who value the essentials of the great Islamic heritage, but feel emotionally and intellectually ‘uneasy’ that many unjustifiable beliefs, attitudes and customs have become a part of the tradition, and that Muslims generally resist the idea of reform and growth in the Islamic value system. In fact Muslims tend either to suppress their doubts or perplexities or explain them away by giving rather dubious reasons in defense of the traditional position. This inevitably leads to inner conflicts, unconscious hypocrisy ‘surface faith’, and self-alienation. As a result, many Muslims shy away from modernity even when the values in question appeal to them, rationally and emotionally.”

“All true believers (irrespective of religion) must strive for mutual understanding and accommodation of the interests of the human family as a whole. The modern inter-faith movement with its message of complete tolerance, equal respect for all races and religions, and equitable concern for the welfare of the entire human family is the need of the century and, indeed, a need for all times. Muslims in the modern global age should, now, reflect on Quranic texts with full intellectual honesty, without any fear that the traditional religious leadership might accuse them of imitating Western thinking for the sake of material ends or of indulging in political expediency.”

From Chapter 1: Perennial Islam – A Quran Based Paradigm

“Before attempting the task, I, in all humility, would like to uncover a long standing hidden assumption or semantic illusion that has shaped the Muslim mind throughout centuries past. This assumption is as follows: “The word, ‘Islam’ has only one definitive and incontrovertible meaning, and this definitive meaning is the one which my in-group professes.”

It is incontrovertible (for a Muslim) that the standard meaning of the word ‘Islam’ is the one used in the Quran. However, the human understanding of what God means by the word ‘Islam’ or any other *Quranic* word or expression is, I submit, a rather different case. Muslims must, indeed, accept the Quran as the ‘Word of God’ and Muhammad as the ‘Messenger of God’, the cosmos as the ‘creation of God’, and God as the ‘only Self-Existent, Sovereign Lord of all that exists’. However the believer cannot help understanding or interpreting the exact meaning of the above expressions according to his/her own conceptual level and range of knowledge. Human understanding of the Quran is, at bottom, a matter of continual growth in the ongoing historical process. I submit this insight is crucially significant for understanding the issue concerned. The Muslim mind must accept that plural interpretations of Islam are, indeed, inevitable, and it is eminently desirable to accept this ‘de facto’ plurality as natural and permissible. However, the believer must ever strive for conceptual clarity and practice ‘loving tolerance’ of both internal dissent and of other religious traditions.”

“Unfortunately, the struggle for ascendancy among the warring tribes and human weaknesses of individuals and rulers conspired to dilute and then to extinguish the high idealism and ethical politics of the Prophet’s time. It is tragic that close companions of the Prophet were ranged on different sides and even resorted to civil war to capture power. Barring a few exceptions Muslim society fell victim to the politics of violence in place of the politics of consultation and peaceful solution to situational challenges that are an integral part of the human condition as such. The tragic assassination of Husain, the Prophet’s grandson, on the field of Karbala in what is now part of modern Iraq was the tragic finale of the process of moral decay and reign of ‘Realpolitik’ that displaced the earlier idealism of the Prophet’s time.”

“In answer to the above crucial question I submit that true reverence and fidelity to Prophet Muhammad consists in trying to make his basic values and objectives, rather than the details of the Prophet’s conduct, the pivot of our own lives and activities. The promotion of Prophet Muhammad’s basic values (even if this task today requires modifying his instructions given in particular situations) is the real meaning of following his example (sunnat) in an ever-changing world. This is, precisely, what *Khalifa* Omar had done. The following considerations should help perplexed Muslim believers to realize this liberating truth.”

“The Quran and Prophet Muhammad are the pivot of Islamic piety. But this should not lead to spiritual or cultural insularity in the mistaken belief that other traditions, both religious and secular, have nothing to offer Muslims. In fact, many Islamic values and ideals which born Muslims assimilate from their milieu and naturally take as exclusively Islamic are, in fact, common to all religions. The same misunderstanding prevails in other religious quarters.”

“What, then, lies behind all the hatred and strife in the name of religion? It is the human ego and the will to power, which makes us cling to the illusion that one’s own language, conceptual imagery, sacramental rites are the only and exclusive paths to truth and salvation. In the final analysis, the paths are many but the goal is the same. One should follow the path whose call stirs one to the depths of his or her being, no matter what name or label it carries.”

From Chapter 2: The Quran As a Revealed Book – Some Issues.

“The only authentic source of our information concerning the ‘event of the cave’ comes from *Hadees* literature which purports to report the sayings and doings of the Prophet. But here again, much controversy exists in reports emanating from the majority Sunni and dissident *Shia* sources within the house of Islam. In actual practice one opts to accept the set of putative authentic reports emanating from one side or the other. This is the typical ethnocentric attitude, and the vast majority of Muslim believers, be they *Sunni* or *Shia*, adopt this approach as a fish takes to water.”

“Controversies about the collection and order of surahs or verses do not touch the core of the Islamic faith, as I see it. The nuclear core of the faith is that the Quranic verses were revealed to the Prophet and were not authored or composed by him as a writer composes a book. Fully formed Arabic sentences or verses were heard by him or flashed before him while he was wide-awake and they issued forth from his lips without any volition or effort and simultaneously got fixed in his memory before he dictated the text to some scribe. It is true that the episodes of revelation were accompanied by physical stress and strain for the Prophet. Nevertheless every episode fortified and encouraged him in his faith in his Divine mission. The above core belief remains unaffected despite controversies or doubts about the arrangement of the Quranic verses in its present form that has lasted for 1500 years. No other scripture could perhaps rightly claim this high degree of textual authenticity of the original version.”

From Chapter 3: Semantics of The Quran - Some Basic Aspects

“The reader must accept and appreciate that the Quran has a style of its own, and that the Quran uses different styles of communication. At times the Quran speaks in a very direct, simple and clear style; at times in a very elliptical manner which can easily confuse the reader, if he were to interpret Arabic words in the literal sense; at times the Quran speaks in metaphors; at times in rather ambiguous/perplexing terms; at times in *prima facie* contradictory terms; at times in highly suggestive and ‘malleable’ terms; at times in the style of parable and anecdote; at times in the style of descriptive biography or history and so on.

In several texts the Quran uses ordinary Arabic words or phrases with respect to God in a manner, which, quite obviously, does not make any sense if we go by the literal meaning of the words or expressions. For instance, God ‘seeks a loan’, ‘speaks on oath’, ‘curses’ disbelievers, ‘misleads’ persons, ‘seals the hearts and blocks the ears of disbelievers’ and so on. Such verses, quite understandably, create intellectual doubts and difficulties for both Muslims as well as others. These difficulties, however, dissolve if we are aware of *Quranic* semantics. The point is that we must know when it is right and proper to interpret the text in the literal sense and when it is wrong to do so. This discretion is very important and we must have sufficient knowledge and insight to assess when to understand the text in the literal sense and when not to do so. The literal meaning of many verses can seriously mislead and perplex the reader unless he is well aware of the stylistics and semantics of the Quran.”

“The Quran at times refers to future happenings and events as if they have already happened or have been accomplished. This is a peculiar Quranic style of expression. It does not involve any actual historical error or confusion. On the other hand, several Quranic texts refer to remarkable and then unknown natural phenomena.”

“The traditional closed Sunni approach mentioned above unconsciously equates human interpretations of *Quranic* verses with Divine revelation, per se. This approach also unconsciously presumes that only some

privileged persons have exclusive access to God's own interpretation or what God Himself meant when He revealed the concerned verses to His messenger. In other words, such people reduce belief in the infallibility of the 'Word of God' to the belief in the infallibility of some humans, whosoever they may be. This approach to *Quranic* exegesis is highly misleading."

From Chapter 4: Semantics of The Quran – The Vision Of The Quran

"The Muslim believer as well as the general reader who approaches the Quran with an open mind finds many references to what may be called a world view or a general picture of the origin and destination of humankind. This general conceptual picture, however, is not a ready made and rounded camera image that could be seen in one act of perception or conception. The reason is that the Quran is not a systematic treatise divided into inter-connected chapters. The Arabic contents of the Quran were 'revealed' over a long period in different contexts. The general conceptual picture of the universe that the Quran presents has to be patiently constructed in the light of the *Quranic* texts. Every individual who constructs such a conceptual picture of the human situation out of 'revealed' texts, therefore, inevitably injects (to some extent or other) one's own existential inputs and responses to the mystery of the cosmos. No individual's statement of the *Quranic* Vision can claim exclusive truth, and no question arises of proving or verifying it like a scientific truth-claim. However, one can and should refer to the original Arabic texts as the original datum for constructing his or her 'Vision of the Quran'. I submit every individual should enjoy the freedom of enquiry and society should ensure complete tolerance of plural interpretations of one's cherished scripture."

"Religious minded persons generally explain the problem of human conflict and hatred in terms of the human weakness to succumb to the machinations of Satan who functions as the arch- enemy to humans. There is no reason to disagree with the basic thrust of this religious or theological answer. But this answer, by itself, does not prove to be very helpful in containing or defeating the tricks of the arch- enemy. This theological answer needs to be supplemented by sociological analysis of the human situation. Sociological analysis does not contradict religious faith, but shows the practical way of removing the situational factors that create opportunities for Satan's tricks in the first place. The prayer mat, rosary, and the sermon are all very good, but they will not deliver unless social justice is added to the therapeutic prescription for curing the ills of the human family."

From Chapter 5: The Piety of the Quran

"This chapter seeks to describe the basic spiritual and moral values that are enshrined in the Quran and underpin its prescriptions or injunctions, which, to my mind, are instrumental rules for promoting the said basic values. The basic values mentioned in the Quran are not peculiar or confined to Islam, but are more or less universal. However, it is as natural for a Muslim to term them *Islamic/Quranic* values as for a Christian to term them Christian values, or for a Hindu or Sikh to term them values of the *Bhagavad Gita* or values of the *Granth Sahab*, as the case may be.

It is also noteworthy that no value term has any fixed meaning or connotation inherent to it in the sense in which a common term for a physical object or entity has a more or less determinate connotation. Indeed, every value term has a large and wide spectrum of meaning and use relative to the basic thought and value system of a living autonomous culture. This means that value terms can be defined and their number can be fixed in different ways in different societies without involving any substantial difference to their over-all value systems and the 'quality of life' of their individual members. Thus, different religions or different segments within the same religion may

use different terms to denote the same value. In any case what is of supreme importance is not how elegant or complete is the value system of any religion or society, but how much it is actually practiced by the members of any society.”

“The historical Islamic tradition itself makes a distinction between ‘deen’ and ‘shariah’ and also between ‘farz’ and ‘sunnah’. I submit that Muslim believers living in the modern age must pursue this line of thought to its logical conclusion. This means that while caring for and respecting the instrumental rules of the traditional shariah the focus of the Muslim believer must be on the spirit of Quranic piety and he or she should be very clear that ‘righteous action’ means authentic commitment to basic Quranic values rather than rigid adherence to instrumental rules. It is imperative to realize that structural and technological changes in human society may well erode the therapeutic effectiveness of any stagnant value system (be it religious or secular) that does not allow periodic objective evaluations of its instrumental rules under the conditions actually prevailing.”

“Fear of God: The expression ‘fear of God’ frequently occurs in the *Quranic* value system. A comprehensive conceptual analysis makes it quite clear that the fear of God is, not the fear of an external wrathful Creator, but the fear of the humble and diffident human soul of losing its mystical nearness and spiritual closeness to the Supreme Source of all creation through committing some lapse or error of judgment. In other words, the fear relates to the loss of Divine grace rather than to retribution or the terrors of hell.”

From Chapter 6: The Injunctions of the Quran: Some Issues

“The breakup number of verses in different categories mentioned above is approx. as follows: Sacramental regulations—16; rules of gender ethics—9; rules of marriage and divorce—18; rules of inheritance—4; food regulations—7; social and economic issues—21; penalties—5. The total of the above categories of verses comes to approximately 80. The remaining number of the (approx.) 120 injunctive verses are so general that they practically fall in the category of evaluations and exhortations. The number of ‘hard’ injunctive verses is, thus, infinitesimally small as compared to ‘soft’ injunctions, which exhort more than prescribe. However, the basic *Quranic* injunction that believers should follow ‘the example of the Prophet’ effectively serves to give practical and concrete content to the, relatively, generalized guidance found in the Quran. This is how the Islamic tradition soon led to the theory and practice of ‘bracketing the Book and the Example’ as severally and jointly binding (in equal measure) upon the believers. This practice is, perhaps, the main factor that blurred or watered down the distinction between intrinsic values and instrumental rules in the great Islamic tradition. This position remains the deep and living faith of Islamic orthodoxy dispersed in every part of the globe.”

“A Quranic injunction (for a Muslim believer) is, by definition, a Divine command and is, therefore, mandatory. It is perfectly natural and logical (for a Muslim believer) to regard each and every Quranic injunction as mandatory. However, the distinction between intrinsic values and instrumental rules is also undeniable and becomes transparently clear after a little reflection. To my mind, this distinction holds good even in the case of the Quranic value system. The question arises, how would the believer know whether a particular Quranic injunction refers to intrinsic values or to instrumental rules? Well, reflective analysis of the Quranic text and its situational context, on the one hand, and the conceptual analysis of the spiritual or moral values concerned, on the other, suffice to clarify whether the Quranic injunction refers to a basic value or to an instrumental rule. Thus, Quranic verses which command the believer to be truthful, to do one’s duty, to be compassionate, to judge impartially, to weigh with the right measure, to respect all life, to be kind and loving, to be generous and forgiving, to be modest and sexually chaste, and so on and so forth, refer to intrinsic values and enunciate the foundational core of the permanent Quranic value system. On the other hand, verses, which prescribe or spell

out details, refer to instrumental rules that (by the very nature of the case) are variables dependent upon specific conditions of human life in the broadest sense. Intrinsic values never lose their existential grip and power upon the human conscience, while instrumental rules may well lose their optimum efficacy in the natural course or flux of history."

"May I close this section on a beautiful anecdote I heard from a remarkable Hindu social reformer and freedom fighter of modern India, Raja Mahendra Pratap (d.1979) whom I was privileged to know personally. A saint going on a long pilgrimage to a distant place instructed his very dutiful son to water the house plants, without fail, twice daily at specified times. When the saint returned home after several months he found that all the plants had died. What happened was that when the saint left home it was the peak of dry summer, but when he returned it was the end of a long and wet rainy season. The son's literal obedience to his father's orders had led to the over-watering of the plants."