

# Introduction

**I**t is an integral part of the Islamic faith that the Quran is the infallible ‘Word of God’. Yet, the plain fact is that there is woeful disagreement among the faithful over what the revealed texts mean or imply in regard to a great many matters and issues. The air is thick with polemics and apologetics.\* The present work analyses the reason or reasons for this state of affairs and suggests a better method of interpreting the Quranic texts.

Even if one accepts on faith (as I do) that the Quran is a revealed scripture, the proper understanding of the Islamic scripture requires that the believer not only understands the literal meaning of the Arabic text, but also knows the context of the revelation together with (to some extent at least) the ‘usage’ of Quranic Arabic. Neglecting any of three basic factors – the text, the context and ‘usage’ of the language of revelation confuses and will ever mislead both Muslim believers and others.

Many disagreements arise because several Quranic texts admit of plural interpretations depending on the individual’s level of understanding and the broad conceptual framework he has come to acquire through his exposure to the factual knowledge and ‘spirit of the times’. This is how educated Muslims today (easily and honestly) can explain Quranic verses dealing with cosmology or God’s creative activity in a way quite different from the way medieval Muslims did when the body of modern science had not emerged. I submit that this approach should be extended

to the basic moral and spiritual values enshrined in the Quran. In short, the task of interpreting the Quran should never end.

Another basic source of disagreement in regard to Quranic injunctions is that one does not make a clear distinction between basic 'intrinsic' values (spiritual and moral) and the 'instrumental' rules\* of conduct for promoting the said basic values. It will never be easy to sort out basic moral and spiritual values from the instrumental ones since many Quranic prescriptions or injunctions are bound to be mixed. Yet, it is part of essential wisdom that the Muslim believer maintain and continually apply this distinction in judging what is ethically right or wrong.

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.

The analytical-existentialist\* approach to the Quran (as suggested in this work) should remove inner perplexities and honest doubts of Muslims without their deviating from the essence of the Quranic teachings. This will facilitate Muslims in reaching higher levels of inner integration and peace while remaining fully rooted in their traditions. Many followers of other religions are also in the same situation. Using this approach both Muslims and non-Muslims would promote inter-faith and inter-ethnic harmony between all segments of humanity, including those who decry religion for some reason or other, yet are ethically upright.

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.

The semantic approach\* to the Quran, in a broad sense, was actually practiced in the past by eminent creative Muslim intellectuals and thinkers such as, Tabaari, Ghazzaali, Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd, Ibn Khaldun et al. But this approach never trickled down to reach the vast majority of the faithful. Quranic studies gradually ossified into a rigid and isolated discipline and Muslim scholars became almost totally cut off from the natural and social sciences of the West. Sufi poets and thinkers, however, were an exception. The Aligarh Movement inaugurated by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and his associates in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had this objective in mind. Iqbaal and Azaad also strove to carry forward the legacy of the Syed, but not much has been done to date. Rather, thanks to Abul Aala Mawdudi and his activist associates in Pakistan and elsewhere, numerous highly intelligent, educated, and relatively progressive Muslim believers, in different parts of the world have been bewitched by the slogan of '*Islamization of knowledge*' and of society and state. However, they should not be dubbed as 'fundamentalists' in a bad sense, or as terrorists. They are as intelligent and well meaning as any other group interested in reforming state and society.

I regard the present work as a companion volume to my earlier work, *Quest for Islam*, (1977). The focus of the earlier work was on a philosophical analysis of the basic concepts and values of Islam in the light of modern thought. The focus of the present work is on Quranic texts in the light of functional linguistic analysis of Scripture and a broad religious existentialism.

Chapter 1 of the work briefly delineates a Quranic paradigm of the Islamic faith, as I understand it. Chapter 2 critically analyses the concept of revelation (*wahee*) in the light of modern thought and discusses some basic issues connected with the Islamic faith that the Quran is the 'Word of God'. Chapter 3 applies the basic principles of elementary Semantics and Cambridge linguistic analysis to the proper understanding of Quranic texts. Chapters 4 and 5 comprise, mainly, a selection of Quranic texts (in English translation) that describe the Quranic thought and value system.

Chapter 6 deals with some problems that arise when one tries to implement Quranic injunctions in the literal sense without reference to any coherent theory of ethical values. Indeed, I have, on purpose, avoided citing prescriptive texts of the Quran in this chapter as I wanted to focus the reader's attention on the crucial need to create a balanced and sound rationale for interpreting the moral imperatives of the Quran. The Epilogue is my authentic response to the perennial human situation, as I see it. The extensive notes are an integral part of the main text and I request the reader kindly to bear with me in this matter.

Before closing the introduction I simply must refer to the work, *Interpreting the Quran* (2006) by Prof. Abdullah Saeed of Melbourne University, Australia. This well-informed, wide ranging, objective and balanced study of the Quran came to my knowledge much after I had completed my own work. I admire Saeed's approach and the wealth of his background historical information relevant to the subject and the clarity of his analysis. It seems there is almost total agreement between my own and his method of interpreting the Quran.

The Quranic paradigm of perennial\* Islam, as here stated, may sound strange and even shocking to many good and intelligent Muslim believers as well as other sober and sympathetic students of Islam. In all humility, may I say that whether one realizes it or not, at this point of time, Muslims all over the world (slowly but steadily and unknowingly) are actually moving in this direction, and further that this is a good thing, indeed. However, God alone knows the full truth, and we humans should ever beware of possessing exclusive truth and falling into the pit of spiritual conceit.