

First Method: The Formal Aspect of Religion

The Different Facets of the Formal Aspect of Religion

It has become clear from what has been said thus far that the Holy Qur'an, which is the principal source of religious thought in Islam has given full authority to the external meanings of its words for those who give ear to its message. The same external meaning of the Qur'anic verses has made the sayings of the Prophet complementary to the words of the Qur'an and has declared them to be authoritative like the Qur'an. For as the Qur'an says:

وَأَنْزَلْنَا إِلَيْكَ الذِّكْرَ لِتُبَيِّنَ لِلنَّاسِ مَا نُزِّلَ إِلَيْهِمْ وَلَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ

And We have revealed Unto thee the Remembrance that thou mayst explain to mankind that which hath been revealed for them. (16: 44).

And

هُوَ الَّذِي بَعَثَ فِي الْأُمِّيِّينَ رَسُولًا مِنْهُمْ يَتْلُو عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتِهِ وَيُزَكِّيهِمْ وَيُعَلِّمُهُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ

He it is Who hath sent among the unlettered ones a messenger of their own, to recite unto them His revelations and to make them grow, and to teach them the Scripture and wisdom (62:2)

And

وَمَا آتَاكُمُ الرَّسُولُ فَخُذُوهُ وَمَا نَهَاكُمْ عَنْهُ فَانْتَهُوا ۚ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ شَدِيدُ
الْعِقَابِ

And whatsoever the messenger giveth you, take it And whatsoever he forbiddeth, abstain (from it) (59: 7).

And,

لَقَدْ كَانَ لَكُمْ فِي رَسُولِ اللَّهِ أُسْوَةٌ حَسَنَةٌ

Verily! in the messenger of Allah ye have a good example (33: 21).

It is quite evident that such verses would not have any real meaning if the words and deeds of the Prophet and even his silence and approval were not authority for us just as the Qur'an itself is. Thus the words of the Prophet are authoritative and must be accepted by those who have heard them orally or received them through reliable transmission. Moreover, through such a completely authentic chain of transmission it is known that the Holy Prophet said:

"I leave two things of value amidst you in trust which, if you hold on to, you will never go astray, the Qur'an and the members of my household. These will never be separated until the Day of Judgment".

According to this and other definitely established hadith the words of the Family and Household of the Prophet form a corpus that is complementary to the prophetic hadith. The Household of the Prophet in Islam has authority in religious sciences and is inherent in the explanation of the teachings and injunctions of Islam. Their sayings, received orally or through reliable transmission, are reliable and authoritative.

Therefore, it is clear that the traditional source from which the formal and external aspect of religion is derived, which is an authoritative document and which is also the basic source for the religious thought of Islam, consists of two parts: the Book (the Qur'an) and the Sunnah. By the Book is meant the external aspect of the verses of the Holy Qur'an; and by the Sunnah, hadith received from the Prophet and his revered Household.

Traditions of the Companions

In Shi'ism hadith transmitted through the companions are dealt with according to this principle: if they deal with the words and actions of the Prophet and do not contradict the hadith of the Household of the Prophet, they are acceptable.

If they contain only the views or opinions of the companions themselves and not those of the Prophet, they are not authoritative as sources for religious injunctions. In this respect the ruling of the companions is like the ruling of any other Muslim.

In the same way, the companions themselves dealt with other companions in questions of Islamic law as they would with any Muslim, not as someone special.

The Book and Tradition

The Book of God, the Holy Qur'an, is the principal source of every form of Islamic thought. It is the Qur'an which gives religious validity and authority to every other religious source in Islam. Therefore, it must be comprehensible to all.

Moreover, the Qur'an describes itself as the light which illuminates all things. Also it challenges men and requests them to ponder over its verses and observe that there are no disparities of contradictions in them. It invites them to compose a similar work, if they can, to replace it. It is clear that if the Holy Qur'an were not comprehensible to all there would be no place for such assertions.

To say that the Qur'an is in itself comprehensible to all is not in any way contradictory to the previous assertion that the Prophet and his Household are religious authorities in the Islamic sciences, which are in reality only elaboration of the content of the Qur'an.

For instance, in the part of the Islamic sciences which comprise the injunctions and laws of the Shari'ah the Qur'an contains only the general principles. The clarification and elaboration of their details, such as the manner of accomplishing the daily prayers, fasting, exchanging merchandise, and in fact all acts of worship (ibadat) and transactions (mu'amalat), can be achieved only by referring to the traditions of the Holy Prophet and his Household.

As for the other part of the Islamic sciences dealing with doctrines and ethical methods and practices although their content and details can be comprehended by all, the understanding of their full meaning depends on accepting the method of the Household of the Prophet. Also each verse of the Qur'an must be explained and interpreted by means of other Qur'anic verses, not by views which have become acceptable and familiar to us only through habit and custom.

Imam Ali has said:

“Some parts of the Qur'an speak with other parts of it revealing to us their meaning and some parts attest to the meaning of others”.

And the Prophet has said,

“Parts of the Qur'an verify other parts”.

And also:

“Whosoever interprets the Qur'an according to his own opinion has made a place for himself in the fire”.

As a simple example of the commentary of the Qur'an through the Qur'an may be cited the story of the torture of the people of Lot about whom in one place God says,

“And we rained on them a rain,”

and in another place He has changed this phrase to,

“Lo! We sent a storm of stones upon them (all).”

By relating the second verse to the first it becomes clear that by “*rain*” is meant “*stones*” from heaven. Whoever has studied with care the hadith of the Household of the Prophet, and the outstanding companions who were the followers of the Prophet, will have no doubt that the commentary of the Qur'an through the Qur'an is the sole method of Qur'anic commentary taught by the Household of the Prophet.

The Outward and Inward Aspects of the Qur'an

It has been explained that the Holy Qur'an elucidates religious aims through its own words and gives commands to mankind in matters of doctrine and action. But the meaning of the Qur'an is not limited to this level.

Rather, behind these same expressions and within these same meanings there are deeper and wider levels of meaning, which only the spiritual elite who possess pure hearts can comprehend.

The Prophet, who is the divinely appointed teacher of the Qur'an, says:

“The Qur'an has a beautiful exterior and a profound interior”.

He has also said,

“The Qur'an has an inner dimension, and that inner dimension has an inner dimension up to seven inner dimensions”.

Also, in the sayings of the Imams there are numerous references to the inner aspect of the Qur'an.

The main support of these assertions is a symbol, which God has mentioned in Chapter 13, verse 17, of the Qur'an. In this verse divine gifts are symbolized by rain that falls from heaven and upon which depends the life of the earth and its inhabitants. With the coming of the rain, floods begin to flow and each riverbed accepts a certain amount of the flood, depending on its capacity. As it flows, the flood is covered with foam, but beneath the foam there is that same water which is life giving and beneficial to

mankind.

As is indicated by this symbolic story, the capacity for comprehension of divine sciences, which are the source of man's inner life, differs among people. There are those for whom there is no reality beyond physical existence and the material life of this world which lasts but a few days.

Such people are attached to material appetites and physical desires alone and fear nothing but the loss of material benefits and sensory enjoyment. Such people, taking into consideration the differences of degree among them, can at best accept the divine sciences on the level of believing in a summary fashion in the doctrines and performing the practical commands of Islam in a purely outward manner without any comprehension. They worship God with the hope of recompense or fear of punishment in the next world.

There are also those who because of the purity of their nature, do not consider their well being to lie in attachment to the transient pleasures of the fleeting life of this world. The losses and gains and bitter and sweet experiences of this world are for them no more than an attractive illusion.

Memory of those who have passed before them in the caravan of existence, who were pleasure-seekers yesterday and no more than subjects of stories today, is a warning that is continuously present before their eyes. Such men who possess pure hearts are naturally attracted to the world of eternity. They view the different phenomena of this passing world as symbols and portents of the higher world, not as persisting and independent realities.

It is at this point that through earthly and heavenly signs, upon the horizons and within the souls of men, they "observe" in a spiritual vision the Infinite Light of the Majesty and Glory of God. Their hearts become completely enamored with the longing to reach and understanding of the secret symbols of creation. Instead of being imprisoned in the dark and narrow well of personal gain and selfishness they begin to fly in the unlimited space of the world of eternity and advance ever onwards toward the zenith of the spiritual world.

When they hear that God has forbidden the worship of idols, which outwardly means bowing down before an idol, they understand this command to mean that they should not obey other than God, for them to obey means to bow down before someone and to serve him. Beyond that meaning they understand that they should not have hope or fear of other than God: beyond that, they should not surrender to the demands of their selfish appetites; and beyond that, they should not concentrate on anything except God, May His Name be Glorified.

Likewise when they hear from the Qur'an that they should pray, the external meaning of which is to perform the particular rites of prayers, through its inner meaning they comprehend that they must worship and obey God with all their hearts and souls. Beyond that they comprehend that before God they must consider themselves as nothing, must forget themselves and remember only God.

It can be seen that the inner meaning present in these two examples is not due to the outward expression of the command and prohibition in question. Yet the comprehension of this meaning is unavoidable for anyone who has begun to meditate upon a more universal order and has preferred to gain a vision of the universe of reality rather than his own ego, who has preferred objectivity to an egocentric subjectivism.

From this discussion the meaning of the outward and inward aspects of the Qur'an has become clear. It has also become evident that the inner meaning of the Qur'an does not eradicate or invalidate its outward meaning. Rather, it is like the soul, which gives life to the body.

Islam, which is a universal and eternal religion and places the greatest emphasis upon the “reformation” of mankind, can never dispense with its external laws which are for the benefit of society, nor with its simple doctrines which are the guardians and preservers of these laws.

How can a society, on the pretense that religion is only a matter of the heart, that man's heart should be pure and that there is no value to actions, live in disorder and yet attain happiness? How can impure deeds and words cause the cultivation of a pure heart? Or how can impure words emanate from a pure heart? God says in His Book,

الْخَبِيثَاتُ لِلْخَبِيثِينَ وَالْخَبِيثُونَ لِلْخَبِيثَاتِ ۖ وَالطَّيِّبَاتُ لِلطَّيِّبِينَ وَالطَّيِّبُونَ
لِلطَّيِّبَاتِ ۖ أُولَئِكَ مَبْرُؤُونَ مِمَّا يَقُولُونَ ۖ لَهُمْ مَغْفِرَةٌ وَرِزْقٌ كَرِيمٌ

“Vile women are for vile men, and vile men for vile women. Good women are for good men, and good men for good women”. (24: 26).

He also says,

وَالْبَلَدُ الطَّيِّبُ يَخْرُجُ نَبَاتُهُ بِإِذْنِ رَبِّهِ ۖ وَالَّذِي خَبثَ لَا يَخْرُجُ إِلَّا نَكِدًا ۖ

“As for the good land, its vegetation cometh forth by permission of its Lord, while as for that which is bad, only evil cometh forth (from it)” (7: 58).

Thus it becomes evident that the Holy Qur'an has an outward and an inward aspect and the inward aspect itself has different levels of meaning. The hadith literature, which explains the content of the Qur'an also contains these various aspects.

The Principles of Interpretation of the Qur'an

At the beginning of Islam it was commonly believed by some Sunnis that if there were sufficient reason one could ignore the outward meaning of Qur'anic verses and ascribe to them a contrary meaning. Usually the meaning which opposed the outward literal meaning was called ta'wil, and what is called "ta'wil of the Qur'an" in Sunni Islam is usually understood in this sense.

In the religious works of Sunni scholars as well as in the controversies that have been recorded as taking place between different schools, one often observes that if a particular point of doctrine (that has been established through the consensus of the ulama (scholars) of a school or through some other means) is opposed to the outward meaning of a verse of the Qur'an that verse is interpreted by ta'wil to have a meaning contrary to its apparent meaning.

Sometimes two contending sides support two opposing views and present Qur'anic verses in proof of their contentions. Each side interprets the verses presented by the other side through ta'wil. This method has also penetrated more or less into Shi'ism and can be seen in some Shi'ite theological works.

Yet, sufficient deliberation upon Qur'anic verses and the hadith of the Household of the Prophet demonstrates clearly that the Holy Qur'an with its attractive language and eloquent and lucid expression never uses enigmatic or puzzling methods of exposition and always expounds any subject in a language suitable for that subject.

What has been rightly called ta'wil, or hermeneutic interpretation, of the Holy Qur'an is not concerned simply with the denotation of words. Rather, it is concerned with certain truths and realities that transcend the comprehension of the common run of men; yet it is from these truths and realities that the principles of doctrine and the practical injunctions of the Qur'an issue forth.

The whole of the Qur'an possesses the sense of ta'wil, of esoteric meaning, which cannot be comprehended directly through human thought alone. Only the prophets and the pure among the saints of God who are free from the dross of human imperfection can contemplate these meanings while living on the present plane of existence. On the Day of Resurrection the ta'wil of the Qur'an will be revealed to every one.

This assertion can be explained by pointing to the fact that what forces man to use speech, create words and make use of expressions is nothing other than his social and material needs. In his social life man is forced to try to make his fellow men understand his thoughts and intentions and the feelings which exist within his soul.

To accomplish this end he makes use of sounds and hearing. Occasionally also he uses to a degree his eyes and gestures. That is why between the mute and the blind there can never be any mutual comprehension. For whatever the blind man says the deaf cannot hear, and whatever the mute makes

understood through gestures the blind man cannot see.

The creation of words and the naming of objects have been accomplished mostly with a material end in view. Expressions have been created for those objects, states, and conditions that are material and available to the senses or near to the sensible world.

As can be seen in those cases where the person addressed lacks one of the physical senses, if we wish to speak of matters which can be comprehended through the missing sense we employ a kind of allegory and similitude. For example, if we wish to describe light of color to one who is born blind, or the pleasures of sex to a child that has not reached the age of adolescence, we seek to achieve our purpose through comparison and allegory and through providing appropriate examples.

Therefore, if we accept the hypothesis that in the scale of Universal Existence there are immense levels of reality which are independent of the world of matter (and this is in reality the case), and that in each generation there are among mankind but a handful who have the capability of comprehending and having a vision of these realities, then questions pertaining to these higher worlds cannot be understood through common verbal expressions and modes of thought. They cannot be referred to except by allusion and through symbolism. Since religious realities are of this kind, the expression of the Qur'an in such matters must of necessity be symbolic.

God says in His Book:

إِنَّا جَعَلْنَاهُ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا لَعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ وَإِنَّهُ فِي أُمِّ الْكِتَابِ لَدَيْنَا لَعَلِيٌّ حَكِيمٌ

“Lo! We have appointed it a Lecture in Arabic that haply ye may understand. And Lo! in the Source of Decrees, which We possess, it is indeed sublime, decisive. (Common comprehension cannot understand it or penetrate into it.)” (43: 3-4).

He also says:

إِنَّهُ لَقُرْآنٌ كَرِيمٌ فِي كِتَابٍ مَكْنُونٍ لَا يَمَسُّهُ إِلَّا الْمُطَهَّرُونَ {79}

That (this) is indeed a noble Qur'an. In a book kept hidden, which none toucheth save the purified. (56: 77-79)

Concerning the Prophet and his Household he says:

إِنَّمَا يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ لِيُذْهِبَ عَنْكُمُ الرِّجْسَ أَهْلَ الْبَيْتِ وَيُطَهِّرَكُمْ تَطْهِيرًا

Allah's wish is but to remove uncleanness far from you, O Folk of the Household, and cleanse you with a thorough cleansing. (33: 33).

As proved by these verses, the Holy Qur'an emanates from sources beyond the comprehension of common man. No one can have a full comprehension of the Qur'an save those servants of God whom He has chosen to purify. And the Household of the Prophet are among those pure beings. In another place God says:

بَلْ كَذَّبُوا بِمَا لَمْ يُحِيطُوا بِعِلْمِهِ وَلَمَّا يَأْتِهِمْ تَأْوِيلُهُ ۚ كَذَلِكَ كَذَّبَ الَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِهِمْ

“Nay, but they denied that (the Qur'an), the knowledge whereof they could not compass, and whereof the interpretation (in events) [ta'wil] hath not yet come into them”. (10: 39), (meaning the day of Resurrection when the truth of things will become known).

And again He says,

يَوْمَ يَأْتِي تَأْوِيلُهُ يَقُولُ الَّذِينَ نَسُوهُ مِن قَبْلُ قَدْ جَاءتِ رُسُلُ رَبِّنَا بِالْحَقِّ

“On the day (the Day of Resurrection) when the fulfillment [ta'wil] thereof (of the whole Qur'an) cometh, those who were before forgetful thereof will say. The messengers of our Lord did bring the Truth”! (7: 53).

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