

# 1

## The changeable and the unchangeable

*Abdolkarim Soroush*

The changeable and unchangeable in Islamic thought and practice is a topic with its own reformist lineage. About 45 years ago, there were articles written by a very prominent Muslim philosopher in Iran, namely Ayatollah ‘Allama Tabataba’i, the celebrated author of the *Tafsir al-Mizan*. The articles bore the title, “The Changeable and Unchangeable in Islamic Thought”. ‘Allama Tabataba’i was a persistent reader of Rashid Rida, and those who have read his *Tafsir* will realise that to a very great extent he was under Rida’s influence and had an eye on his arguments. Sometimes, perhaps most of the time, he opposed him, disliked his ideas and criticised him, but, nevertheless, he was always mindful of the arguments put forward by Rashid Rida. The idea of *al-thābit wa al-mutaḥawwil* or *al-thābit wa al-muta-ghayyir*, the changeable and the unchangeable, can be found in Rida’s writings.

I do not think any of our past prominent thinkers, such as al-Ghazali, Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, Nasir al-Din Tusi, and so on, have used the same categorisation, whether in the domain of *fiqh* (jurisprudence), or in philosophy, or elsewhere. I am not saying that they were negligent or ignorant of it, or that the idea of *ijtihād* (exerting one’s utmost efforts to find the truth) was absent. To be sure, the notions of *mujtahid* and *ijtihād* were well known to everybody, both to the layman and the learned.

However, this very division or classification of Islamic thought in theory, or Islamic teachings in practice, into *al-thābit wa al-mutaḥawwil* is a very modern classification. This modern classification, of course, means that we, as Muslims, have encountered and faced some modern challenges and problems that have induced us to introduce this idea and this categorisation of the changing and unchanging.

### *The essential and the non-essential*

Something in traditional *fiqh* which does come very close to the idea of the unchangeable, of course, is the idea of *al-ḍarūrī*. The jurists divided *al-aḥkām*, the regulations, into two, the *ḍarūrī* and the non-*ḍarūrī*, the essential and the non-essential. There has always been debate and controversy about the instances of this *ḍarūrī*, the essential and the non-essential. Everybody agreed on the fact that there are essentials and non-essentials, in principle, but as to the application of the principle, i.e. determining what the essentials and the non-essentials are, there has always been a huge controversy both in the Shi'i branch of Islam and the Sunni branch of Islam, to the extent that the idea has come under doubt. I mean to say that the words essential and non-essential have come to be somewhat loosely used, because everybody knows that it depends on individual taste or individual argument, rather than on a general, universal consensus.

The distinction between thought and practice is important here, because there are essentials in the domain of thought, and there are essentials in the domain of practice. For example, everybody says that prayer (*ṣalāh*) is essential, in the sense that it is one of the pillars of Islamic practice, so is the alms tax (*zakāh*) for example, and many other things. Essentials in the realm of thought and principles include: belief in the unity of God and belief in the prophethood of the Prophet Muhammad.

Then again, we are not very sure what falls under these essentials. The whole idea of apostasy hinges on this: If you reject one of the essentials, you are an apostate. Whether you will be considered an apostate, then, depends on what is to be counted as an essential and, since that is subject to great controversy, there will accordingly be further dispute and disagreement over the idea of apostasy. That is why it is not that simple to accuse somebody of being an apostate, i.e. of refusing their belief and rejecting Islam.

It may come as a surprise to learn that Ayatollah Khomeini – in his writings, debates and lectures in Qom as a Grand Marja', even before he became the leader of the Islamic Revolution – came very close to the idea that even rejecting the here-after would not make you an apostate. He suggests it is sufficient that you believe in the unity of God and in the prophethood of the Prophet; if you so believe, you are a Muslim, even if you do not believe that there is a next life. Khomeini did not consider belief in an afterlife an essential.

I think both Muslims and non-Muslims would agree on the importance of the belief in the world after death, in the next life, in the punishment of God, in heaven and hell. It is everywhere in the Qur'an: you find more than a thousand verses in the Qur'an about life after death. Nevertheless, a Grand Mufti like Khomeini held this view. He did not hide it, but presented it in his books and let it be published, even after he became the Leader. It is clear that the idea of essentials varies from one *faqīh* to another, from one scholar to another, so there is no universal agreement on what is to be counted.

As to the essentials in practice, one may believe that pillars of Islam such as *ṣalāh*, prayer, *zakāh*, alms tax, etc., are all essentials and so, perhaps, is *ḥijāb* (the veil), for example. But according to Khomeini, who is very explicit on this point, someone today could say: "Yes, the Prophet has commanded us to say our prayers, to pay our *zakāh* and so on, but all these belong to his age, and we are not under this command any longer, and we are not the addressee of the sayings of the Prophet in this time." Even so, that person would be a perfect Muslim. He is not denying or rejecting any essentials, because he is endorsing the belief that the prophethood of Muhammad is intact and that he has ordered his followers to pray and pay *zakāh*. He is only saying that there are conditions attached to these matters and that now there may be new conditions.

I am only relating the ideas of Ayatollah Khomeini. I am sure that, if I were to make these claims, I would be accused of apostasy, but since the claims have the backing of a Grand Mufti, one will perhaps give it a second thought.

The discussion so far may all seem very theoretical, but a very clear and vivid historical example is the *jum'a* (the Friday prayers). The Friday prayer is not prescribed in a *ḥadīth*, but in the Qur'an – everybody knows it: "... When the call is proclaimed to prayer on Friday, hasten earnestly to the Remembrance of Allah, and leave off business ..." (62:9).

Now, the Shi'ites actually abandoned and cancelled this *jum'a* prayer for twelve centuries. Even though it was in the Qur'an, even though everybody knew that the Prophet himself held the Friday prayers, and that the *khulafā'* (caliphs) held Friday prayers, the Shi'ites did not do it at all. It was not because they did not think that it was Islamic, and it was not because they did not think that it was an essential part of Islam. After all, the Shi'i *fuqahā'* (jurists) were pious '*ulimā'*' (scholars), but they thought and argued that there are conditions for holding Friday prayers. For twelve centuries after the Twelfth Imam, they held that those conditions were not, and could not, be fulfilled. They thought that the Friday prayers should be held by the Islamic state, and, if there was no Islamic state, there would be no Friday prayer whatsoever. I am not saying that this argument was right, nor that it was wrong – I am only recalling a very important piece of the history of *fiqh* in Islam.

So, there are essentials and non-essentials, changeables and unchangeables, but exactly what those changeables and unchangeables are, is at the mercy of the *faqīh*,

and not in a loose sense of the words: it depends on the arguments and conditions one puts forward and on the principles one goes along with. *Jum'a* prayer offers a very vivid example, and there are other examples.

There are now jurists in Iran, grand jurists, who think that religious penalties, such as cutting off the hand of the thief, should not be applied at all. Some of these kinds of brutal physical punishment are in the Qur'an and some are in the *ḥadīth*. Cutting off the hands of thieves is in the Qur'an, not in a *ḥadīth*, and the text is very strong. Stoning is not in the Qur'an, but of course, it is present in the *ḥadīth* and in the practice of Muslims. Nevertheless there are *fuqahā'* in Iran now, and there have been some in the past, who think that these punishments should not be applied: like the Friday prayer, their application depends on the state, and since we do not have an Islamic state in the sense that a Prophet or an Imam is the head of the state, all this should be cancelled and abandoned. This is not a reformist idea, it is held by the traditional jurists. They have their own arguments, distinguishing the essential from what is not essential.

So, though we share the idea of the *ḍarūrī* and the non-*ḍarūrī*, one should be very careful and be aware that the instances are very varied. They vary from one *faqīh* to another, each of whom has his own argument.

### *The ambiguous and the non-ambiguous*

These were some examples of the archaeology, so to speak, of the problem of the changeable and unchangeable. To consolidate my argument, one important point to which I would like to draw your attention is this: we have the classification of the *āyāt* (verses) of the Qur'an into *muḥkamāt* and *mutashābahāt*. It is found in the Qur'an itself: "He it is Who has sent down to thee the Book: In it are verses *muḥkamāt*; they are the foundation of the Book: others are *mutashābahāt*" (3:7).

A very loose translation of these terms, on which we might provisionally agree, is the ambiguous and the non-ambiguous. The non-ambiguous verses (*muḥkamāt*) are the foundation or central part of the book – literally, the Mother of the Book (*umm al-kitāb*). The ambiguous verses (*mutashābahāt*), the ones that are not *muḥkamāt*, form the rest of the book. There have been many interpretations of which verses are the *muḥkamāt* and which the *mutashābahāt*. Strangely enough, this verse, which is supposedly one of the non-ambiguous ones, has received many different interpretations. Tabataba'i said that "this verse is no doubt among the *muḥkamāt*." But why and how can we say that? That is his view about the interpretation of this verse, but there are at least twenty other views. This surprising fact is very telling and we have to draw a lesson from it.

This too has a clear bearing on the point at hand here. We all agree that there are *muḥkamāt*, to be sure, and there are *mutashābahāt*, but which verses are which,

exactly? That, again, is at the mercy of the interpretation of the commentators of the Qur'an. Ever since the first commentators, like al-Tabari, down to the present age, one will see that there have been many differences and disagreements among them. Some people have said that the verses about God and His attributes are *mutashābahāt*. Some people have said that only the verses about the religious rituals are *muḥkamāt*. Some said that only the letters at the beginning of some suras are *mutashābahāt*, the rest are *muḥkamāt*, and so on and so forth. As with the essentials and the non-essentials, again we have a classification into two kinds of verses. In principle we all agree on the classification, but when it comes to its application in practice, we disagree – it depends on the individual commentator or interpreter.

One lesson or implication I would like to draw from this is that, ontologically speaking, there are no *muḥkamāt* and *mutashābahāt*. There is nothing ambiguous or non-ambiguous, changeable or unchangeable, as things *per se*. The distinction is epistemological or hermeneutical, that is to say, for each one of us some things are changeable and some are non-changeable, some *āyāt* are *muḥkamāt* and some are *mutashābahāt*. To put it another way, it is in the process and in the context of interpretation that *muḥkamāt* and *mutashābahāt* are distinguished from each other, that the changeable and unchangeable actually emerges. It is not already given. We cannot say that God has revealed some ambiguous verses to his Prophet and some non-ambiguous ones. That is not the case. In the process of interpretation, that is, for us, some verses emerge as ambiguous ones and some as non-ambiguous. For me as an individual, some verses are ambiguous and some non-ambiguous; another person would draw the line between them differently. It is exactly the same as with the changeable and unchangeable.

### *The metaphorical and the literal*

Another example, which is again important in the process of interpretation, is the distinction between the metaphorical and the non-metaphorical. To be sure, there was a small group of commentators in Islamic history who thought that God only speaks literally and does not use metaphors. Indeed, they thought that it would be a shortcoming on the part of God if he took refuge in metaphorical pictures, because He does not need to, being all-powerful and able to use language in whatever way he wants in order to convey his message. However, that was only a small group. The rest of the commentators, as far as I know, all agree that there are allegorical and metaphorical discourses in the Qur'an as well as literal ones.

Again, in principle we agree that there are metaphors. For example, in the context of the next life, the Qur'an speaks of "a Day that will make children hoary-headed" (73:17). They say that this is a metaphorical way of saying what a hard

day it will be, that people will suffer such a hardship that small children become like old men. There are many other instances of metaphorical expressions in the Qur'an, and it is no wonder that we find them there. The Qur'an is after all very poetic; the Qur'an is a higher poetry, one might say.

But again, what exactly are those verses in which metaphors have been used, and what are the verses that we have to take only in their literal meaning? Is there a fixed group or class of verses which are to be interpreted literally and a fixed class of verses which are to be interpreted metaphorically? Again, ontologically speaking, there is no such thing: the question is epistemological or hermeneutical. The distinction is something that emerges in the process and in the context of interpretation.

### *The ocean of interpretation*

By interpreting, a metaphorical interpretation or a literal interpretation is created. In the process of interpretation you distinguish the essential and the non-essential, the *muḥkamāt* and the *mutashābahāt*. It is by interpreting that you create the changeable and the unchangeable. The whole history of *fiqh* and the whole history of Qur'anic interpretation demonstrates this fact: there has been no fixed set of changeables and unchangeables, no fixed set of *muḥkamāt* and *mutashābahāt*.

The principle that I have followed as my main thesis in Islamic and Qur'anic interpretation, and which I have elaborated extensively in my books, can be summed up in a very simple sentence: Islam is nothing but a series of interpretations of Islam.

Likewise, Christianity is nothing but a series of interpretations of Christianity, and so on and so forth. For the same reason and by the same token, in the Bible, there are *muḥkamāt* and *mutashābahāt*; in Rumi, a mystic poet, there are *muḥkamāt* and *mutashābahāt*. These are texts, after all, and you have to interpret them. The very act of interpretation produces *muḥkamāt* and *mutashābahāt*, literal and metaphorical interpretations.

The nature of interpretation is that it is ongoing, that it changes. It cannot be arrested. It is not up to any particular body. One will find this to be the case whenever there is a set of fixed principles and a class of interpreters, but when I say that everything is contingent on interpretation, this does not necessarily mean that interpretations will diverge. Sometimes they converge. In the case of the five daily prayers, for example, all the interpretations actually do draw together.

Therefore, when we talk about interpretations, it does not mean that sooner or later, we will come up with bizarre ideas about the prayers or about *zakāh*. It does not mean a chaotic process. It is not by any means chaotic, because the texts, the

principles, the methodology and the consensus of the community of scholars, all underlie the process of interpretation. There is a tradition of interpretation because there is a convergence of interpretation.

It also does not mean that there are no true and false interpretations. You can argue that your own interpretation is true, and that mine is false. We can have this argument on the individual level but, sociologically, science is a collective enterprise. It is not about my personal ideas, or anybody else's personal ideas, but the ideas of the community of believers. In the community of believers, everyone puts forward his own ideas, interpretations and theories. Looking at the community and the tradition in history, we see that some interpretations have been more resistant to criticism and refutation. These ideas are now prevalent and form orthodoxy. There are principles and methodologies underlying the process of interpretation, then, and there is a convergence of interpretations, and there is a collective enterprise that forms an orthodoxy. None of this annuls the idea of interpretation. Understanding is dependent on interpretation, just as all colours depend on light.

So we are immersed in an ocean of interpretations. If you put forward another interpretation, you are immersing yourself more and more into that ocean. Let us not talk about the text. Let us talk about the interpretation of the text, for that is what we gain from the text. The interpretation is what is available to us, not the text itself.

We agree on the categories, but let us not be dogmatic about their application, because the application of the essential and non-essential, the changeable and unchangeable, has been a matter of dispute and disagreement among Muslims. But there is one absolute essential and one unchangeable. That is the *Kitāb* (book) and the *Sunna*. In order to be a Muslim, you always have to refer to the *Kitāb* and the *Sunna*. The prophethood of the Prophet, and the *Kitāb*, and the *Sunna*: these are the unchangeable, the essential. As to the rest, they are always subject to interpretation.

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