

Introduction

The following pages are the result of a research project undertaken at the University of Chicago and funded by the Ford Foundation in Islamic Education. This project, which was originally conceived as part of a much larger project entitled "Islam and Social Change," directly involved a dozen young scholars besides its co-directors, myself and Professor Leonard Binder. While the younger scholars have undertaken to write monographs on the various Muslim countries they have studied in this project, I have decided to write a general work on the medieval Islamic educational system, with its major features and deficiencies, and on the modernization efforts undertaken during the past century or so. In the last chapter I have tried to delineate certain general lines along which I believe these efforts should proceed in order to be really fruitful.

As the reader will see, by "Islamic education" I do not mean physical or quasi-physical paraphernalia and instruments of instruction such as the books taught or the external educational structure, but what I call "Islamic intellectualism"; for to me this is the essence of higher Islamic education. It is the growth of a genuine, original, and adequate Islamic thought that must provide the real criterion for judging the success or failure of an Islamic educational system. The reader will also be struck by my preoccupation with the correct method of interpreting the Qur'ān and may well wonder, at first sight, why this question should stand at the center of Islamic intellectualism. The answer

is that the Qur'ān, for Muslims, is the divine word literally revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad (between 710 and 732 c.e.) in a sense in which probably no other religious document is held to be so. Further, the Qur'ān declares itself to be the most comprehensive guidance for man, both assuming and subsuming earlier revelations (12:111, 10:37, 6:114). Furthermore, the Qur'ānic revelation and the prophetic career of Muḥammad lasted for just over twenty-two years, during which period all kinds of decisions on policy in peace and in war, on legal and moral issues in private and public life were made in the face of actual situations; thus the Qur'ān had from the time of its revelation a practical and political application; it was not a *mere* devotional or personal pietistic text; Muḥammad's prophetic career was likewise geared toward the moral improvement of man in a concrete and communal sense, rather than toward the private and metaphysical. This naturally encouraged the Muslim jurists and intellectuals to look upon the Qur'ān (and the model of the Prophet) as a unique repository of answers to all sorts of questions. That this approach succeeded in practice further strengthened the original belief of the Muslims in the efficacy of the revelation in providing true answers to virtually all situations.

But the basic questions of method and hermeneutics were not squarely addressed by Muslims. The medieval systems of Islamic law worked fairly successfully partly because of the realism shown by the very early generations, who took the raw materials for this law from the customs and institutions of the conquered lands, modified them, where necessary, in the light of the Qur'ānic teaching, and integrated them with that teaching. Where interpreters attempted to deduce law from the Qur'ān in abstracto—for example, in the area of the penal law called *ḥudūd*—results were not very satisfactory. This is because the instrument for deriving law and other social institutions, called *qiyās*, or analogical reasoning, was not perfected to the requisite degree. The imperfection and imprecision of these tools was due in turn to the lack of an adequate method for understanding the Qur'ān itself, as I shall detail below. There was a general failure to understand the underlying unity of the Qur'ān, coupled with a practical insistence upon fixing on the words of various verses in isolation. The result of this “atomistic” approach

was that laws were often derived from verses that were not at all legal in intent.

For the failure to understand the Qurʾān as a deeper unity yielding a definite *weltanschauung*, the greatest penalty was paid in the realm of theological thought. Whereas in the field of law, in the relative absence of such an internally discovered unity, the incorporation of foreign materials introduced a sufficient degree of practicality, the same process of adopting foreign ideas in the field of theology—again, in the absence of such a unitary vision of the Qurʾānic *weltanschauung*—proved disastrous, at least in the case of Ashʿarism, the dominant Sunni theology throughout medieval Islam. When this Sunni theological system collided in the twelfth century C.E. with the out-and-out rational-philosophical metaphysics of the Muslim philosophers (who had erected their thought system on the basis of Greek philosophy but had nevertheless made serious efforts to accommodate Islamic orthodoxy), the former well-nigh crushed the latter by its sheer weight. Subsequently philosophy took refuge and developed in a Shīʿī intellectual-spiritual milieu or was transformed into intellectual Sufism.

The philosophers, and often the Sufis, did understand the Qurʾān as a unity, but this unity was imposed upon the Qurʾān (and Islam in general) from without rather than derived from a study of the Qurʾān itself. Certain thought systems and thought orientations were adopted from outside sources (not necessarily wholly antagonistic to the Qurʾān but certainly alien to and not infrequently incompatible with it), adapted somewhat to the Islamic mental milieu, and expressed mostly in Islamic terminology, but this thin veneer could not hide the fact that their basic structure of ideas was not drawn from within the Qurʾān itself.

It is this more or less artificial Islamic character of these intellectual constructs—be it Ibn Sīnā's philosophy or Ibn ʿArabī's mysticism—that invited the severe attack by the representatives of Islamic orthodoxy. Despite the inner weakness and inadequacy of the orthodox system itself—particularly of the Ashʿarite theology, which, in its cardinal tenets of the inefficacy of the human will and purposelessness of the divine law, was in conflict with the Qurʾān—it was nevertheless not difficult for an al-Ghazālī or an Ibn Taymiya (and several others) to locate the basic discrepancy between Ibn Sīnā's metaphysics or Ibn ʿArabī's the-

osophy and the Islamic teaching. The upshot of this is that Islamic intellectualism has remained truncated.

This piecemeal, ad hoc, and often quite extrinsic treatment of the Qurʾān has not ceased in modern times; indeed, in some respects it has worsened. The pressures exerted by modern ideas and forces of social change, together with the colonial interregnum in Muslim lands, has brought about a situation in which the adoption of certain key modern Western ideas and institutions is resolutely defended by some Muslims and often justified through the Qurʾān, the wholesale rejection of modernity is vehemently advocated by others, and the production of “apologetic” literature that substitutes self-glorification for reform is virtually endless. Against this background the evolving of some adequate hermeneutical method seems imperative. Such a method, in my view, involves certain factors and excludes certain others: it is exclusively concerned with the cognitive aspect of the revelation and not with its aesthetic-appreciative or power-appreciative aspects. All revelation is a work of art and inspires a sense of the beautiful and a sense of awesome majesty (in Sufi terminology *jamāl* and *jalāl*). But above all it inspires that irreducible attitude of the mind called faith, which is both captivating and demanding. The Qurʾān is preeminently so. But the method of Qurʾānic hermeneutics I am talking about is concerned with an understanding of its message that will enable those who have faith in it and want to live by its guidance—in both their individual and collective lives—to do so coherently and meaningfully. In this purely cognitive effort both Muslims and, in certain areas, non-Muslims can share, provided the latter have the necessary sympathy and sincerity; but faith, which provides the motivation necessary to live by it, is of course characteristic only of those who are genuine Muslims. I do not deny that faith may be born out of this cognitive effort itself or that, more patently, faith may and ought to lead to such a cognitive effort, but the point is that pure cognition and emotive faith can be practically separated.

When I talk about “pure cognition” this does not mean cognition of historical facts to the exclusion of values; on the contrary, my central preoccupation is precisely with values—their meaning and their interpretation. But a cognition of *historical* values is also possible, with an adequate understanding, but without necessarily involving faith (although, of course, faith may be generated through an understanding of values, if that faith is

not simply dogmatic). However my use of the term “historical values” must also be made clear. All values that are properly moral—and it is these with which we shall be concerned—have also an extrahistorical, “transcendental” being, and their location at a point in history does not exhaust their practical impact or, one might even say, their meaning. This category of values is different from certain other categories—for example, purely economic values. A certain economic value, represented by a certain society at a certain past time, exhausts its life within that socioeconomic context, and its meaning does not overflow that context; but not so with a moral value.

The process of interpretation proposed here consists of a double movement, from the present situation to Qur’ānic times, then back to the present. The Qur’ān is the divine response, through the Prophet’s mind, to the moral-social situation of the Prophet’s Arabia, particularly to the problems of the commercial Meccan society of his day. The Qur’ān, quite early, speaks of a “burden that was breaking your back,” which was relieved by the revelation (94:1–3). The revelation, of course entailed a further “burdensome call” (73:5). The early suras of the Qur’ān make it abundantly clear that the acute problems in that society were polytheism (idol worship), exploitation of the poor, malpractices in trade, and general irresponsibility toward society (which there is good reason to believe the Qur’ān perceived as interconnected). The Qur’ān put forward the idea of a unique God to whom all humans are responsible and the goal of eradication of gross socioeconomic inequity. Qur’ānic theology and moral and legal teachings then gradually unfolded themselves in the political arena: the Meccans’ rejection of Muḥammad’s message, the protracted debates that followed, and later, in the Medinan phase of his life, the controversy waged against Jews and to some extent against Christians formed the backdrop against which the Qur’ān was revealed.

We see, then, that the Qur’ān and the genesis of the Islamic community occurred in the light of history and against a social-historical background. The Qur’ān is a response to that situation, and for the most part it consists of moral, religious, and social pronouncements that respond to specific problems confronted in concrete historical situations. Sometimes the Qur’ān simply gives an answer to a question or a problem, but usually these answers are stated in terms of an explicit or semiexplicit *ratio*

legis, while there are also certain general laws enunciated from time to time. But, even where simple answers are given, it is possible to understand their reasons and hence deduce general laws by studying the background materials, which for the most part have been fairly intelligibly presented by the commentators.

The first of the two movements mentioned above, then, consists of two steps. First, one must understand the import or meaning of a given statement by studying the historical situation or problem to which it was the answer. Of course, before coming to the study of specific texts in the light of specific situations, a general study of the macrosituation in terms of society, religion, customs, and institutions, indeed, of life as a whole in Arabia on the eve of Islam and particularly in and around Mecca—not excluding the Perso-Byzantine Wars—will have to be made. The first step of the first movement, then, consists of understanding the meaning of the Qurʾān as a whole as well as in terms of the specific tenets that constitute responses to specific situations. The second step is to generalize those specific answers and enunciate them as statements of general moral-social objectives that can be “distilled” from specific texts in light of the sociohistorical background and the often-stated *rationes legis*. Indeed, the first step—the understanding of the meaning of the specific text—itself implies the second step and will lead to it. Throughout this process due regard must be paid to the tenor of the teaching of the Qurʾān as a whole so that each given meaning understood, each law enunciated, and each objective formulated will cohere with the rest. The Qurʾān as a whole does inculcate a definite attitude toward life and does have a concrete *weltanschauung*; it also claims that its teaching has “no inner contradiction” but coheres as a whole.

I shall presently remark upon the nature and the feasibility of this task of understanding. I should note here, however, that (besides language, grammar, style, etc.) a study of the views of Muslims—most particularly those of the earliest generations—will be helpful. But these views must occupy a secondary place to the objective materials outlined above, since historical interpretations of the Qurʾān, although they will be of help, are also to be judged by the understanding gained from the Qurʾān itself. There are several reasons for this: first, little attempt has ever been made to understand the Qurʾān as a unity; further, with the passage of time and the rise, growth, and hardening of dif-

ferent points of view and preconceived notions, subjective interpretations have multiplied. The historical tradition will therefore be more an object of judgment for the new understanding than an aid to it, although this historical traditional product can undoubtedly yield insights.

Whereas the first movement has been from the specifics of the Qurʾān to the eliciting and systematizing of its general principles, values, and long-range objectives, the second is to be from this general view to the specific view that is to be formulated and realized *now*. That is, the general has to be embodied in the present concrete sociohistorical context. This once again requires the careful study of the present situation and the analysis of its various component elements so we can assess the current situation and change the present to whatever extent necessary, and so we can determine priorities afresh in order to implement the Qurʾānic values afresh. To the extent that we achieve both moments of this double movement successfully, the Qurʾān's imperatives will become alive and effective once again. While the first task is primarily the work of the historian, in the performance of the second the instrumentality of the social scientist is obviously indispensable, but the actual "effective orientation" and "ethical engineering" are the work of the ethicist.

This second moment will also act as a corrective of the results of the first, that is, of understanding and interpretation. For if the results of understanding fail in application now, then either there has been a failure to assess the present situation correctly or a failure in understanding the Qurʾān. For it is not possible that something that could be and actually was realized in the specific texture of the past, cannot, allowing for the difference in the specifics of the present situation, be realized in the present context—where "allowing for the difference in the specifics of the present situation" includes both changing the rules of the past in conformity with the altered situation of the present (provided this changing does not violate the general principles and values derived from the past) and changing the present situation, where necessary, so it is brought into conformity with these general principles and values. Both tasks imply intellectual *jihād*, the second implying also a moral *jihād* or endeavor in addition to the intellectual.

The intellectual endeavor or *jihād*, including the intellectual elements of both the moments—past and present—is technically

called *ijtihād*, which means “the effort to understand the meaning of a relevant text or precedent in the past, containing a rule, and to alter that rule by extending or restricting or otherwise modifying it in such a manner that a new situation can be subsumed under it by a new solution.” This definition itself implies that a text or precedent can be generalized as a principle and that the principle can then be formulated as a new rule. This implies that the meaning of a past text or precedent, the present situation, and the intervening tradition can be sufficiently objectively known and that the tradition can be fairly objectively brought under the judgment of the (normative) meaning of the past under whose impact the tradition arose. It follows from this that tradition can be studied with adequate historical objectivity and separated not only from the present but also from the normative factors that are supposed to have generated it.

In modern hermeneutical theory, the “objectivity school” has insisted that one must first of all ascertain the meaning intended by the mind that authored the object of study. According to E. Betti, a contemporary representative of this school, the process of understanding is a “reversal” of the original creative process: the forms that we try to understand and interpret now are to be led back to the creative mind whose original contents they were, not as isolated items but as a coherent whole, and made to live again in the mind of the understanding subject.¹ It should be pointed out, however, that this unity of forms cannot be attributed simply to the mind; one must also consider the situation to which it is a response. This, of course, admits of varying degrees, but certainly, in the case of the Qurʾān, the objective situation is a *sine qua non* for understanding, particularly since, in view of its absolute normativity for Muslims, it is literally God’s response through Muḥammad’s mind (this latter factor has been radically underplayed by the Islamic orthodoxy) to a historic situation (a factor likewise drastically restricted by the Islamic orthodoxy in a real understanding of the Qurʾān).

The view of the “objectivity” school has been criticized by Hans Georg Gadamer in the work cited above as “psychologism” and as subjective. While it is true that representatives of this school often speak as though the being of ideas in the author’s mind is crucial to understanding them (cf. Betti’s view described above,

1. Cited in Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), p. 465.

where he seeks to trace back ideas to the original mind in order to understand them as a true unity, whereas I have contended that the invisible context of ideas is not just mental but environmental as well), they surely do not conceive of ideas only as mental events; for while their occurrence is in a mind, their *intentio* or meaning is "referred" outside the mind. Against this view, Gadamer maintains his phenomenological doctrine according to which all experience of understanding presupposes a preconditioning of the experiencing subject and therefore, without due acknowledgment of this fact of being predetermined (which is the essence of Gadamer's entire hermeneutical theory), any attempt to understand anything is doomed to unscientific vitiation. What so predetermines me as an understanding subject is what Gadamer calls "the effective history," that is, not only the historical influence of the object of investigation, but the totality of other influences that make up the very texture of my being. Thus there is no question of any "objective" understanding of anything at all. Even when we become aware of this predetermination—that is, develop an "effective-historical consciousness" as distinguished from ordinary "historical consciousness"—the former is so limited that it cannot overcome this preconditioning. It is, of course, clear that this doctrine is radically opposed to what I have contended above by way of the hermeneutics of the Qur'ān. If Gadamer's thesis is correct, then the double-movement theory I have put forward has no meaning at all. No wonder a thinker like Betti rejects Gadamer's view as hopelessly subjective.

"Obviously the burden of my argument," writes Gadamer, "is that this quality of being determined by effective-history still dominates the modern historical and scientific consciousness and that beyond any possible knowledge of this domination. The effective-historical consciousness is so radically finite that our whole being, achieved in the totality of our destiny, inevitably transcends its knowledge of itself."² Again, "In fact history does not belong to us, but we belong to it. Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society and state in which we live. . . . The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life."³ The

2. Ibid., p. xxii.

3. Ibid., p. 245.

task of philosophical hermeneutics is to clarify precisely this pre-determination; hence, "from the viewpoint of philosophical hermeneutics, the contrast between historical and dogmatic method has no absolute validity."⁴

The principle of effective history stated blandly, of course, will not work. It is obvious that there have been changes in human traditions, sometimes radical. In Christianity, the effective history of a fifth-century Augustine, a thirteenth-century Aquinas, and a sixteenth-century Luther could not have been quite the same; but what is even more important than that is that the conscious thought product of those men brought vast and vital changes into the subsequent effective history. So is the case with a tenth-century al-Ash'arī, an eleventh-century al-Ghazālī, and a fourteenth-century Ibn Taymiya: Islamic tradition was never the same again after the conscious activity of each and all of them. Every critique or modification of a tradition involves a consciousness of what is being criticized or rejected and hence, to that extent, self-awareness. In view of the revolutionary changes wrought by some men in their traditions, it is therefore not proper to say that "the self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life." It is also untenable to say that their responses were predetermined, and primarily by their effective histories. What seems reasonable to hold is that all conscious responses to the past involve two moments that must be distinguished. One is the objective ascertaining of the past (—which Gadamer does not allow), which is possible in principle provided requisite evidence is available; the other is the response itself, which necessarily involves values and which is determined (not predetermined) by my present situation, of which effective history is a part but of which my conscious effort and self-aware activity also constitute an important part. For Gadamer these two moments are utterly inseparable and indistinguishable.

By his statement that there is no absolute contrast between the historical and the dogmatic methods, Professor Gadamer wants to say that both are limited by the effective-historical element but that both are able to question tradition, there being only a difference of degree between the two. One might point out that questioning in the historical method is the questioning of *histor-*

4. Ibid., p. xxi.

ical facts, since by definition and as an ideal it does not concern itself with values, whereas questioning in the dogmatic method is primarily the questioning of traditional values. First of all, it is highly doubtful if even in the “dogmatic” questioning process some “historical” consciousness is not involved, since the fact that the tradition is the tradition *of the past* presupposes some “historical” distance. But, more important, one wonders if the term “dogmatic” is proper in this context, since what Gadamer has characterized as the “dogmatic” (i.e., nonhistorical or prehistorical) method of questioning tradition emerges on closer examination as a “rational” method of questioning. When Augustine or Luther questioned their traditions, their questioning was within the dogmatic field, but surely their method of questioning was rational—that is, they believed that certain parts of their tradition were incompatible with and contradictory to other more basic parts of that tradition. Here, then, in place of the “historical” distance or space, a rational space mediates between the past and the present, although, as I have said, a historical consciousness is not lacking completely but perhaps is present as a secondary phenomenon.

Thus if one asks, “What is the predetermining effective history of a certain tradition?” there is no straightforward answer, since it depends on an answer to the further question, “For whom?” In the case of a consciousness that has been able to work deliberate change in that tradition, the answer would be, “the tradition minus the change that that particular consciousness has wrought.” This means that the process of questioning and changing a tradition—in the interests of preserving or restoring its normative quality in the case of its normative elements—can continue indefinitely and that there is no fixed or privileged point at which the predetermining effective history is immune from such questioning and then being consciously confirmed or consciously changed. This is what is required for an adequate hermeneutical method of the Qurʾān, as I have outlined it herein.

ISLAM
&
MODERNITY

Transformation
of an
Intellectual Tradition

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