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UNDERSTANDING THE QURAN



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UNDERSTANDING THE QURAN

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Question 1: The last twenty years have brought forth a young generation taking more than a casual interest in the teachings of the Holy Quran. The elderly no longer try to keep the young away from the Quran saying, "Do not touch the Holy Quran! You cannot understand or make any deductions from it!"

Now, the young people themselves are eager to understand and infer from the Quran. They want to draw as many inferences from it as they can. Indeed, they have managed to come up with some valid and remarkable deductions.

At the same time, many a young person has encountered numerous deviations in understanding and interpreting the Quran. On the one hand, interpretations and exegeses have been offered which are arbitrary conclusions. On the other hand, many meanings for some Quranic teachings have been suggested.

The question is what should be done to enable the young people, with their limited

capabilities, to benefit from the Holy Quran. Could you propose a suitable method?

Ayatullah Beheshti: A few years ago, I conducted discussions on Quranic exegesis. I had given explanations including a detailed explanation of the following Quranic verse which I had prepared in advance:

هُوَ الَّذِي أَنْزَلَ عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ مِنْهُ آيَاتٌ مُحْكَمَاتٌ هُنَّ أُمُّ الْكِتَابِ
وَأُخَرُ مُتَشَابِهَاتٌ...

"He it is Who has revealed the Book to you (Muhammad), the scripture wherein are explicit revelations — they are the Mother of the Book— and others are implicit. But those in whose hearts there is perverse doubt, they follow the part of it which is implicit seeking (to cause) dissension by trying to give it (their own) exegesis. None knows its exegesis except God and those who are bound in their knowledge say, 'We believe in it — it is all from our Lord...' " (3:7)

Fortunately the explanation of the above verse has been recorded on tape. Therefore I suggest, in the first place, they may refer to the discussions which are available on cassette. If considered appropriate, then they may be placed at the disposal of those seekers of the Truth, who are interested in understanding the Quran. Otherwise, this brief reply to your question here may be com-

municated to those interested. However, it will be short and unprepared and I doubt if it will give you the full explanation. Therefore, I shall try to answer your questions distinctively, point by point.

First, there is no doubt that the Holy Quran is not more or less a prerogative of any specialized group. No doubt, the Holy Quran has been revealed for the use of everyone. This has been emphasized in many of the Quranic verses. The Quran always stresses that it is the Book of instruction to the virtuous. It clarifies and enlightens the universal truths and human duties in as much as could be directly used by anyone instructed by the Prophet, peace and the mercy of God be upon him and his descendants.

In the history of Islam, we repeatedly come across people who were non-Muslims and hostile to Islam who listened to some of the Quranic verses. From whatever they could understand from it, there arose in their hearts a sort of love and excitement towards Islam as to eventually lead them to becoming Muslims.

When a divine command was revealed or when a divine order to carry out jihad (religious and spiritual struggle in the way of God) came to the Prophet, the latter conveyed the same to the people through the oral process of the Quran. The listeners could easily comprehend what was expected of them.

There could be little doubt that both the prin-

ciples, that is, the basic concepts of the Quran and its implicit verses were meant for everyone's comprehension. This was made abundantly clear in the Quran itself and confirmed by those familiar with the history and life of the Prophet. Accordingly, the Holy Quran is not meant for a select few. It is addressed to all peoples in common.

Secondly, that which is commonly perceivable in the Quran is in the Arabic language of the Prophet's time. What is more, the Quranic revelations manifested themselves orally through one commonly understood spoken language.

The Quran has not been revealed in writing, so as to provide scope for any polemics. Its verbal character was not dissimilar to that of any explanation now, face to face. It is quite unlike the manner of reading an authored book from the beginning to the end.

A certain idea or sense was inspired in the mind of the Prophet and he passed it on verbally to the people around him. Then what the Prophet spoke was written down and memorized.

In short, three points are to be noted:

* The Quran is in the Arabic language

* The language is that of the Prophet's time

* The Quranic verses were revealed verbally and passed on from one person to another. Eventually it was memorized and recorded in writing.

Those interested in understanding the Quran should pay elaborate attention to the above points. Above all, they should know the Arabic of the Quran. This is inevitable because understanding from the original language is essential. The Arabic language must be learned thoroughly in order to easily and directly grasp the meaning of the Quranic verses.

Unfortunately these days a negative tendency is noticeable among very good, likeable and well-intentioned friends. They hasten to infer the meaning of the Quranic verses. Without acquiring proficiency in the Arabic language, they try to clarify without even a preliminary knowledge of Arabic grammar. They only rely on Arabic-Persian dictionaries and glossaries of Quranic terms. In doing

so they are liable to commit some silly and ridiculous mistakes. Nevertheless, they often accept their mistakes gracefully when pointed out and explained.

Familiarity with Arabic grammar (conjugation, inflexion, syntax) and ability to select an apt meaning from among those given in a dictionary are prime requisites for understanding the Quran. It is equally important to acquaint oneself with the kind of language and the culture of Arabs of the Hijaz, Najd and Yemen and other areas in which the Prophet addressed the people. The Quranic Arabic pertains to that year and those regions. Everyone familiar with languages know that they are dialectal changes from region to region, from one societal group to another.

It is quite possible that a word conveyed one meaning thirteen hundred years ago and the same word may have come to mean something new today. One should be careful about ascertaining the meaning, significance and nuances of the Quranic roots, so as to conform to the original connotations. If we come across a word in the Quran, the meaning of which today happens to delight us, this should not prevent us from making sure about what it had meant originally. For it is quite possible that words may have different meanings today from the original. It will not be correct to attribute today's meanings to something which was meant differently at the time of the Quranic revelations.

A case in point is that of a friend who attempted a treatise on the nature and the Quran. He extracted those verses in the Quran which had a bearing on nature. Then he proceeded to analyze and explain the same. I looked at one of his writings and noticed that he mistook the meaning of some words. He understood those words in the modern, rather than the original, context.

For example, his writing contained the verse:

أَلَمْ نَجْعَلِ الْأَرْضَ كِفَاتًا

"Have we not made the earth a receptacle."
(77:25)

He interpreted the above verse to mean that the earth was like a fast-flying bird and then explained the motions of the planets. This mistake arose because he had looked up the word *kifat* (receptacle) in the dictionary and selected the meaning: 'A fast-flying bird'. He concluded that from the Quranic point of view the earth moves like a bird. I advised him to see if the word *kifat* had the same meaning at the time of revelation of the Quran and find out if it had not evolved in the course of time, so as to give a different meaning now. Also, I pointed out that he should take into consideration the Quranic verse following that in which the word *kifat* appeared. For these two verses are interlinked so as to mean:

أَلَمْ نَجْعَلِ الْأَرْضَ كِفَاتًا أَحْيَاءَ وَأَمْوَاتًا

"Have We not made the earth a receptacle for

both the living and the dead."

How can the meaning of a fast-flying bird fit the reference to the dead? Clearly it does not.

Reference to standard dictionaries used in research would confirm that the earth is a receptacle (something that draws others together to itself) for the living and the dead. Inside the ground, burrowing animals live and the dead lie buried. Sometimes, layers of silt left behind by floods bury creatures which eventually become fossils. The original meaning and significance of words may be lost when some new sense used today is applied to them. This kind of paraphrasing or interpretation is not correct.

One should refrain from paraphrasing or putting new meanings into old words. One should verify whether or not a word meaning something in the Prophet's time has not come to mean something else today, especially if any modern meaning is not found in the old dictionaries, which itself indicates that the meaning one is looking for was not in vogue in the Prophet's time.

The above explanations concern the second major point of consideration for improved understanding of the Quran. It calls for verification of the meanings conveyed by the Quranic terms or verses. It is but natural that any sense conveyed verbally or in writing during one period of linguistics history reflects the socio-cultural conditions of that time. Any spoken or written word cannot be understood in the proper sense without reference to the original context.

Accordingly it is reasonable to assume that

the context of a spoken or written word facilitated proper understanding on the part of the original listener or reader. For instance, let us consider the time of the Battle of Uhud. The relevant Quranic verses were addressed to Muslim combatants in the battlefield, facting, witnessing and observing real situations and problems. They could well understand the divine revelations conveyed in the relevant Quranic verses. One who was not present in that battlefield can hardly feel the direct impact of the verses on the original listeners. One can only visualize the scene after studying the relevant history. Presence on the scene which a Quranic verse refers to, enabled the original listeners to fully understand and properly visualize its meaning and significance. This was difficult for those who were contemporaries of the fighters but not among the latter at the battlefield.

It would be all the more remote for readers of the Quranic verses in any subsequent century: 'Presence' in a situation that has occasioned a Quranic verse can only be felt through proper visualization of the same on the basis of historical evidence. By means of investigation and study of history, proper and relevant understanding of the Quran can be achieved.

In this connection there are many books written by researchers in the past concerning the occasions on which the Quran was revealed. Among these, two books are quite famous. One is *Asbab al-Nuzul Wahidi* and the other is *Asbab al-Nuzul Suyuti*. There are other interesting books, too, in this regard. Aside from those, it is necessary to

make a thorough study of Islamic history pertaining to the time of the Quranic revelations.

Third, as mentioned earlier, the Quran is not something written down to start with. It is not the same thing as a book by a writer. On the contrary, it is a collection of the divine revelations through the Prophet over a period of twenty-three years, in connection with different episodes and in relation to various conditions. Then it came out in the shape of a Book and a set of Quranic collections.

Even so, the revelations have not been arranged in their chronological order. Research into the occasions of the revelations has resulted in the position that some earlier verses (revelations) appear at the end of the subsequently revealed ones or suras.

Accordingly, if it is found that any clear and self-evident meaning of one verse is not matched by an appropriate and fully coherent relationship with the earlier or later verses, we should not hasten to any doubtful conclusion. On the contrary, we should not try to find a distinctive meaning for a verse which coheres with that of the verses preceding it.

Fourth, in many of the Quranic verses, the same auxiliary verb or adjective that is found in a verse appears at the beginning of the next one. In other word, two parts of the same long sentence appear as two verses. Many instances like that can be found in the verses of Sayhabi, wherein a line in a couplet is not a complete sentence so that the next line (in the following couplet) supplies the residual part of the sentence.

Lack of attention to this point can lead to mistakes in understanding the Quran. In the case of the aforesaid example, *Kifat*, the sentence of the first verse is completed by

أَحْيَاءَ وَأَمْوَاتًا^٢

in the next. Otherwise, viewed in isolation, the aforesaid Arabic phrase constituting a verse makes no sense, not to speak of any complete sentence by itself. The two words, *amwata* and *ibya*, are clearly part of the preceding verse. The word *kifat* could be grammatically and meaningfully related to the phrase, *ibya wa amwata* in the next verse.

If we attribute the meaning of a fast-flying bird to the word, the latter becomes a noun unrelated to the phrase *ibya wa amwata*. Even if we take it to mean a receptacle, the phrase cannot be easily related to it in grammatical terms. Then the word *kifat* can only be understood as an adjective for the words *ibya wa amwata*.

أَحْيَاءَ وَأَمْوَاتًا

Furthermore, it can be inferred that in the age when the Quran was revealed, if the original meaning of the word *kifat* were 'a fast-flying bird' its use in the context of the sense conveyed by the two verses weighs heavily in favor of the conclusion that it means a 'receptacle' rather than a 'fast-flying bird'.

Fifth, there are verses revealed at different times but referring to the same subject. The revelation of one verse may have been followed by some other relevant ones revealed two years later, bearing on the same subject but under new circumstances. The subsequent verses reflect the newer

conditions while completing the sense conveyed in the preceding verses. This is a normal thing employed by practically every speaker or writer.

For instance, if we want to find out what Islam says about a certain subject, we should properly identify all the relevant Quranic verses and arrange them in chronological order, so as to ascertain the final position of the Quran on the subject. That is why the Quran is described as being arranged so as to allow one part of it to determine the meaning and significance of the other.

«الْقُرْآنُ يُفَسِّرُ بَعْضُهُ بَعْضًا»

Six, when we say that the Quran was revealed under particular conditions of history so as to be specific to the problems of the time and place we should not ignore the fact that the Book is of timeless and universal significance. The Quranic verses could never have been meant just for any specific circumstances of the historical period of its revelation. The Quran is meant to be applied to other epochs and places too.

The universal significance of the Quran is mentioned in the Book itself when it describes the Prophet as

لِلْعَالَمِينَ نَذِيرًا (كَافَّةً لِلنَّاسِ)

The Prophet's mission could not be restricted to his time. The Quranic verses imply their universal applicability to other places and times as well.

To spread the message of the Quran everywhere and through successive periods of time is a

task greater than any ordinary effort at simply understanding of the Quran. It requires far more qualitative understanding and mastery of the entire Quran.

We cannot believe that the above task is possible for just anyone. Even an Arab listener of the Prophet fortunately present at the times and places of the Quranic revelations could not have easily understood the far reaching meaning and significance of the verses, extending in historical time and space. This extraordinary task is one that calls for special knowledge.

Seven, the Quran applies to the various interwoven dispositions of human beings including their spiritual and/or psychological motivations in particular. The Quranic impact on humanity is variable, too.

A Quranic verse may fire the imagination of one person. It may register no more than just ordinary reading effect on another. No wonder, different people understand and interpret the same Quranic verse in different ways.

Sometimes one may come across a promising young person with willingness to learn and quench his thirst for knowledge. He may well achieve a lively and interesting comprehension of the Quran. Anyone, including a specialist, who lacks the motivation and positive elan mentioned above cannot deduce any really appealing and fine points from the Quran. This is something to be borne in mind with regard to the study of the Quran as well as other matters of religions and human significance.

On my part, I shall be always happy to notice

exceptional and remarkable deductions from the Quran provided these satisfy one condition. The condition is that the person who makes the deduction should clarify that it is his own deduction and it may not represent the true position. Why so? It is because of the need to safeguard the originality of the Quranic verses and to allow others to infer, too. None can really claim that what he has interpreted over the extent and sense of the original meaning. There always remains the possibility that someone else may come up later on with a far more progressive, satisfying and intricate but clear explanation. If so, how can we close the door on the latter?

I have myself believed in the dynamic possibility of understanding and interpreting the meaning and significance of the Quranic verses. In my discussions on how to make use of the Quran, I have always been tempted to attribute a particular meaning to a Quranic verse. However, I have tried not to confuse my understanding or deduction with any need to translate it literally into Persian.

My advice is that one should keep his understanding of a Quranic verse separate from his interpretation of the same. This is for the simple reason that a far better understanding by someone else is possible or it exists. That means just as one treats his deduction with self-importance, one should also allow another the latter's own sense of importance. This is what is meant by dynamic understanding and inferences, which may differ in degrees of comprehension, too.

Eight, there could be strange deviations in the

dynamic process of deductions. To cite an example, I came across a former theological student who had successfully completed his course of study and had passed the level called *sath* (that is, completed the courses dealing with the texts) which he began to teach in his town. He brought a 300 page explanation of two initial Quranic verses for my perusal. He wanted my comments before having it printed. He said that it was just possible that once published as it was, it might create problems later on which could be avoided if caught before being printed. He thought it would be better to subject its controversial points for my examination.

I read its first twelve pages and felt obliged to readily write down a seven page critique about twelve pages. Then I wrote to the author asking him to consider the justice of expecting a critic to write 250 to 500 pages on a 300 page treatise, as he could imagine from the 7 page write up on the first twelve pages of his. I proceeded with my scrutiny of the subsequent pages. I shall now recount what I encountered in them.

The young author translated the Quranic verse:

أَقِمِ الصَّلَاةَ إِنَّ الصَّلَاةَ تَنْهَىٰ عَنِ الْفَحْشَاءِ وَالْمُنْكَرِ

Establish ritual prayer, surely prayer keeps (one) away from indecency and evil. (29:45)

He translated the above verse as: "Establish the fire of revolution.." He explained that *salat* means the 'fire' of revolution for the Quran says, "...ritual prayer is a prevention of vice and oppres-

sive acts." We have hundreds of millions of Muslims of whom at least three hundred million may regularly perform their ritual prayer. However, the ritual prayers do not prevent them from committing vice and sins. Where there are ritual prayers and mosques, we see also prostitution and religiously forbidden acts. It shows that the ritual prayers we see among Muslims do not prevent vice and forbidden acts on their part. Yet the Quran is explicit in saying:

إِنَّ الصَّلَاةَ تَنْهَىٰ عَنِ الْفَحْشَاءِ وَالْمُنْكَرِ

Surely prayer keeps (one) away from indecency and evil.

If the word *salat* is taken to mean ritual prayer, it would appear that the Quran's claim may turn out to be incorrect. In order not to attribute something false to the Quran, it is necessary to consider another meaning of the word *salat*.

Then, the young man proceeded to redefine the 'arising' before starting to perform the ritual prayer:

وَأَقِيمُوا الصَّلَاةَ

as "the fire of revolution is now established."

Well, the foregoing is an example of the outcome of interpreting a Quranic verse according to one's own preconceived notions or opinions. This is something unacceptable to every sensible person (not to say 'every individual Muslim' or 'everyone

devoted to God and the Quran,) including a non-Muslim or even an agnostic. They may well turn around and say, "That's enough. Don't project your wishful thinking into the objective task of interpreting the Quran."

Now in reply to the writer of the foregoing explanation of *salat* we may point out: Yes. The Quran is a book of revolution. Islam is a religion of revolution. Quranic verses of revolutionary content are many. But there is no shortage of Quranic verses of revolutionary significance that we must single out *qad qamat al-salat* for an interpretation such as mentioned above. Dear sir! If you see three hundred million persons who perform the ritual prayer and their ritual prayers do not prevent them from vice and forbidden acts that is because their ritual prayers are neither real nor effective. The Quran says ritual prayers are capable of preventing vice. But their ritual prayers are more or less superficial.

The ritual prayer is a kind of contemplation and remembrance of God. For one who contemplates God and constantly reviews one's awareness of God with all one's heart and soul five times a day, the ritual prayer is indeed effective in safeguarding that person from any evil.

But, then, do people 'fired' with revolutionary zeal find that it has prevented them one hundred percent from all evil? Even the ritual prayer of the devotee may not be one hundred percent effective. Which revolutionary country is there that can claim absolute control of vice? The ritual prayer of the righteous, after all, is only one

factor in distancing them from evil, vice and betrayal

The meaning of 'arising to establish the ritual prayer' is not difficult to understand. We say in Persian: 'The formalities of a celebration have been established', or 'the preliminaries for thanks-giving have been established.' These are of idiomatic significance. In English they 'say ritual prayers' and not 'recite' the same. That is how idioms are used. Every language has its peculiar way of explaining things. This is not of any crucial importance. If you say in Persian: "Have you said your ritual prayers?" Probably it would cause laughter. One should say, "Have you recited your ritual prayers?" In Arabic, if we say, "Have you said your ritual prayers?" هَلْ قَرَأْتَ الصَّلَاةَ it would seem ridiculous. We should instead ask, "Have you prayed?" هَلْ صَلَّيْتَ This is indicative of the different ways of interpreting things in different languages.

Moreover, *qiyam*, arising, is a normal procedural requirement of the ritual prayers. It comes before the bowing forward. These names assume particular significance in the context of ritual prayers and, as such, do not warrant consideration of any other possible meaning such as the 'fire of revolution' tied up to 'establishing' the same.

The foregoing illustrates how the meaning of Quranic verses is altered at will by some opinionated interpreters. Can one of our dear, faithful and chaste young men agree to mould a Quranic sense like soft and pliable wax, or in any manner one likes? Is it possible when the Quran has a definitive ideological framework, specific dimension of

thought and a certain world perspective?

Sometimes it is said that the language of the Quran is a coded and symbolic one. It is to be clarified whether or not the secretiveness of the Quranic terminology is the same as that of cypher exchanges of today's political administrators and the military, based on a key to the codes available with the recipients for decyphering. Neither we nor you can accept this suggestion. There is nothing totally secret or mysterious about the Quran. It is on the whole a very understandable Book. The basic Islamic concepts enunciated in the Quran have simple meanings and straight forward indications for everyone's easy understanding.

Nine, an above average understanding of the Quran requires special efforts. At some higher levels of comprehension it is facilitated by revelation which constitutes its source. The Prophet had the utmost understanding through revelation, which constitutes its source. Higher understanding of the Quran was possible for the Imams too. Others could have access to their superior understanding through their Traditions.

The abovementioned superior understanding concerns either the mysterious and symbolic meaning explained or a broader meaning than that literally signified by the Quranic terms. In the latter case, it is quite possible that the explanation in depth may still be unclear to many. Only the Prophet and the Imams could have explained them further.

Just as the Prophet was inspired to bring us the Quran, he could be expected to have been similarly motivated to give conceptual explana-

tions, as well. That the Prophet and the *abl al-bait* (the Prophet's household) have been attributed extraordinary ability to explain the Quran is clear from their Traditions and sayings, too.

Exceptional understanding of the kind mentioned above is inevitable when the relationship between a Quranic word and its meaning is established without necessarily improving the understanding. Another kind of symbolic understanding concerns the relationship between a Quranic word and its meaning, which has been established in not so simple and clear a manner as to make its initial understanding possible only for those who can put in meaningful and dedicated efforts.

However, once someone comes up with a clear explanation, the others find it no longer difficult to understand and recognize the new meaning attributed to a verse. This is also a kind of deducing from the Quran but different from that of the Prophet and the Imams.

Even in the above manner of deducing, we should be very careful not to project our wishful thinking into any explanation which would mean an undesirable opinionated interpretation. Any personal bias or projection of one's own opinion into an explanation of a Quranic verse, such as illustrated in an example given earlier concerning ritual prayer, has been strictly opposed by the Prophet and the Imams.

The writer of the 300 page explanation of two Quranic suras was looking for what he wanted to justify in terms of revolutionary content of the Quran. He went about seeking revolutionary sense

in the Quranic verses. The outcome was something that anyone could see in their deviation from the actual meaning of the Quranic words.

The question of elaborating the meaning and significance of the Quranic verses according to emergent needs in time and place also warrants caution. It is based on the position that, beside special knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence, one should be knowledgeable in other matters and skills as well. An example of comprehensive understanding was demonstrated by the Imams. Projecting a Quranic injunction on to a time and place different from its own, calls for an adequate intellectual ability and capacity to do so which is hardly noticeable in every scholar or researcher. An Imam has that ability and capacity. So does any able leader who can discern the implications of a real situation.

Accordingly appropriate elaboration of the Quranic verses fell within the competence of the Imamate. If what is signified by the Imamate is taken in its absolute sense, the aforesaid inherent ability to elaborate on the implicit and explicit verses of the Quran could be construed as pertaining to the successive Imam.

If it can be applied to other Imams in the general sense of the term, then it will mean one's personal, intellectual attainments approaching that of the earlier Imams. Otherwise, even the most erudite Islamic scholar will most likely find it difficult to elaborate on the meaning and significance of an intricate Quranic verse.

Ten, there are implicit verses in the Quran.

Also, there are words, the meaning of which are not very explicit, such as *alif lam mim*, *yasin*, *kaf ba ya 'ain sad* and similar terms. Furthermore there are words and sentences which convey some obscure or mystical sense. Any focusing of attention on these for elaborate discussion will not be a worthwhile or correct procedure. On the contrary, it will lead to attributing different meanings to the Quranic verses which cannot be supported by clear and proper evidence.

When a commentator formally declares that his commentary is indicative of solutions to mysteries, or allusions, or symbols, or sarcasm, why does he want to base his solutions on a book? We should insist upon his unraveling the mystery without first resorting to any key for the solution. No doubt, there are some who profess to explain Quranic terms like *kaf ba ya 'ain sad* away by suggesting that it was indicative of the abc's of Arabic to the reappearance of Imam Zaman. Others explained it in their own particular ways. These attempts are really of a deviationist kind. These should be avoided.

In the Quranic sura entitled *'ali imran* it is said that the verses were further explicable by God Himself and His Messenger, the Prophet and the subsequent Imams. Accordingly, one ought to be careful about the Quranic verses susceptible to differential interpretation.

In my experience, I have come across two kinds of lexicographic ambiguity concerning the Quranic terms: First, total ambiguity, as in the case of *alif lam mim* and similar other Quranic expres-

sions and second, relative ambiguity, in that a Quranic term's meaning is partially clear, so that beyond it the sense becomes implicit, impeding the progress of the Quranic study and understanding. In this event, one should absolutely refrain from rewording or paraphrasing the keywords in a Quranic verse.

In both cases above, any attempt at rewording or paraphrasing a Quranic expression in the relative context must be avoided. Sometimes a Quranic word could be understood equally in two senses and grasping of one to the exclusion of the other will entail doubt and uncertainty. In that case, one should refrain from interpreting its meaning beyond the point of clear comprehension so as to avoid the likelihood of attributing a false meaning to the Quranic word as it happens when one does not fully understand the Quranic use of the word.

With regard to a Quranic word's relative implicitness, it is quite possible that it gives clear meaning up to a point. Beyond it, one aspect of meaning may be superseded by multifarious others, so as to make its implicitness relative to whatever other meaning is applied. To the extent that the same aspect or meaning is conveyed by the Quranic word, the latter gives solid meaning and beyond that, it remains implicit.

However, in drawing evidence from the Quran, care should be taken to seriously avoid controversial words and phrases such as indicated above. This is emphasized in the Quran itself since taking the multi-faceted words as the basis of one's interpretation is tantamount to creating seditions,

disputes and avoidable differences, instead of imparting anything positive and beneficial. That is why the Quran enjoins:

فَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ فِي قُلُوبِهِمْ زَيْغٌ فَيَتَّبِعُونَ مَا تَشَابَهَ مِنْهُ ابْتِغَاءَ الْفِتْنَةِ
وَأَبْغَاءَ نَارٍ لِلَّهِ.

"...as for those in whose hearts there is perverse doubt, they follow the part of it which is implicit, seeking to (cause) dissension, trying to give it (their own) exegesis..." (3:6)

Reading this we come to believe that we know the exegesis and then the verses of the Quran and their deep meaning whereas *وَمَا يَعْلَمُ تَأْوِيلَهُ إِلَّا اللَّهُ* "no one know their exegesis but God and those firmly rooted in knowledge..." that is, the Prophet and the pure Imams who came to know the exegesis from God, the Most High are the ones who can exegesize a verse.

While believing in the foregoing position, we maintain that we are not like the Akhbaris (an Islamic traditionalist subsect), who believed that to understand each and every Quranic verse we should fall back upon the sayings, narrations and Traditions pertaining to the Holy Prophet and the pious Imams. This is because we do not determine that understanding the Quran had been specially confined to the Prophet and the Imams only.

We say that some Quranic verses are explicit and not intrinsically susceptible to any implicit interpretation and some others evidence clear pers-

pectives. All people can understand these provided they know the Arabic language — that, too, of the Quran. They should be familiar also with the historical circumstances of the revelations of the Quranic verses. Above all, they should either refrain from going beyond the point of their easy comprehension or go beyond it by observing the procedural constraints mentioned earlier.

Eleven, there are some who, once they find a Tradition or a narrative explaining some part of the Quran, they jump to the conclusion that it represented what the Prophet or Imam had said. We should like to ask them as to who could say with certainty that every Tradition or narrative in every book was really attributable to the Prophet or Imam. Yes, if only we could be sure about it we would certainly hold it in great esteem.

If the Traditions concerning the Prophet and the Imams are those compiled by the Muslim scholar, and are only authenticated, we can testify to the fact that we have definite evidence to refer to in understanding the Quran. However, how many of these Traditions could be verified as correct interpretations of what the Prophet and the Imams had said?

There is no doubt that many of the Traditions cited in Quranic explanations lack documentary evidence to substantiate the same. Whatever documentary proof is cited is mostly unreliable due to alterations in the course of time. Even if this is not so, they may well represent the only source of information inasmuch as these could not be regarded as evidence conclusive in itself.

The foregoing makes it clear that our Quranic exegesis gives the consideration to the Traditions without depending entirely on them. This position has been endorsed by a majority of the great ulema. We accept those Traditions which can be only authenticated and the evidence for which is irrefutable and consider them to be reliable in explaining the Quranic verses. The explanatory contributions of the Prophet and the Imams to our Islamic heritage have been collected in some books of Traditions.

However, Traditions lacking in supporting evidence remain indefinite and inconclusive so that we have no right to assign them a determining role in the Quranic exegesis.

Our argument against unauthentic Traditions is tenable since it does not involve any private or individualistic viewpoint. It is shared by all our researchers in general. They approve of Traditions fully substantiated by documentary proof and other evidence. They readily accept Traditions, the contents of which are not implicit, but clear in themselves, for verification.

Anything inferior to the quality indicated above has no determining or contributory role whatever. It is of historical interest only. One needs it as one does any history. Most of the Traditions by way of the Quranic exegesis are not substantiated by documentary evidence and many of their meanings, too, are not clear.

In the exegesis of Ali ibn Ibrahim and that of Imam Hasan Askari, peace be upon him, Traditions have been discussed which included even those in

al-Kulayni's book, *kitab al-kafi*. Which learned man today can claim that Traditions such as mentioned above are final in themselves? The late Ayatullah Burougerdi in his lectures on jurisprudence often used the Traditions from *Kitab al-Kafi*. He discarded some of them, set aside some other contradictory ones.

All this goes to show that in jurisprudence, one has to be very cautious about the Traditions used for exegesis. This is necessary in order to identify all those Traditions pertaining to the Prophet and Imams. They deserve every credit and treatment with respect to them. They should not be mistaken.

In one of the books on Traditions, we come across a narrative concerning the Prophet to the effect that there are always many speakers of falsehood who attribute to the Prophet a saying that is untrue. It is, therefore, not advisable to accept everything they say. In fact, if they ascribe any saying to the Prophet, its conformity with the Quran should be verified. If it goes against the letter and spirit of the Quran, it should be rejected.

What the book says is a timeless truth, whether or not viewed in the context of Islam. Its veracity was evident before Islam, acknowledged by all religions, recognized in every school of thought and respected in every society. The liars and deceivers who cover the truth and give false reports are everywhere in every walk of life.

Kitab al-Kafi and similar other books are esteemable and carry intrinsic values, too, but these do not fall in the category of absolutely true

evidence. In other words, *al-Kafi* is not in any way as authentic as the Quran. Its author, al-Kulayni, is indeed an enlightened and highly respectable scholar but *al-Kafi* stands no comparison with the integrity of the Quran. Even the *Nabj al-Balagha* cannot match the Quran. Books of the late Sadduq, are not as valuable as the Quranic verses. Summaries of none of these books can be construed as offering as good evidence as the Quran itself. These are books which call for further research and re-evaluation.

The Quran's conclusive proof is its medium of revelation, the Prophet. It is, therefore, authentic and original. Likewise, Traditions attributed to the Prophet and the Imams are similar to and as acceptable as the Quranic evidence, provided they are as authentic as the latter.

Utilization of the Traditions and sayings in the task of properly understanding the Quran is at once a delicate and rigorous one — something which requires suitable expertise and specialization. Why? It is simply because some of the Traditions are fabricated and, as such, unreliable and misleading.

The foregoing explanations represent what I could manage to say extempore, for this interview has afforded no time for me to prepare my answer to your questions vigorously.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize one point. Those acquainted with the intricacies of problems of social and ethical importance, as well as of professional and intellectual significance, are experienced, so as to be naturally able to make use

of the Quran in a lively and worthwhile manner. Never should one underestimate the findings of knowledgeable exegesists, nor should one ignore their interpretations in any way, except where a process of opinionation sets in, exceeding the limits of proper exegesis, or where meanings begin to be imposed on the Quranic expressions.

There are indeed very interesting and useful Traditions in regard to the Quranic exegesis. These are worth mentioning in one's own exegesis. However, often they cannot be construed as determining factors in one's own proper exegesis. The determinants in understanding and interpreting the Quran can be only those Traditions which are completely reliable and satisfactory, recalling whatever saying is attributed to the Prophet or an Imam.

Suspect Traditions, even correct ones which conform to the Science of Hadith and those for which secondary or substantive evidence is obtainable through jurisprudence, if not finalized as correct, cannot really help in understanding the Quran in any conclusive or complete manner.

With regard to a correct narrative, we define it as one whose narrator was a Shi'ite and a just person. It does not always represent any finality for acceptance once and for all. It can be an unsubstantiated statement by a reliable person. It may be a proof in the context of jurisprudence but in the exegesis of the Quran it does not necessarily represent any conclusive evidence. Only correct and substantiated narrations, which contain no implicitness, can be used to determine a sense as conveyed in the Quran. Other Traditions are at best worth

mentioning and no more.

With these reiterations I conclude, hoping that the criteria suggested will be useful in understanding the Book of God, that is, the Quran, which represents enlightenment and clarity, pinpointing the straight and righteous path for our guidance.

بَا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ.... قَدْ جَاءَكُمْ مِنَ اللَّهِ نُورٌ وَكِتَابٌ مُبِينٌ يَهْدِي
بِهِ اللَّهُ مَنِ اتَّبَعَ رِضْوَانَهُ سُبُلَ السَّلَامِ

"Oh followers of the Book! Indeed Our apostle has come to you making clear to you much of what you concealed of the Book and passing over much; indeed, there has come to you light and a clear Book from God." (5:15)

Finally, I am really hopeful that all of us will diligently endeavour to seek enlightenment as God enjoins us in the above verse. As it says, the Quran has come from God with all its illuminating and clear teachings, helpful in promoting safe, secure and peaceful ways for mankind. This is in order to enable human beings to act with rectitude, so as to deserve God's blessings and not for acting in any self-seeking manner. Let us hope that we all will make use of the Quran in response to the invitation in the abovementioned verse.

Question 2: With regard to explaining and interpreting the Quran, there is the question of one's propensity to opinion. Usually the exegesists in the past have been known to have considered various

aspects of philosophy and other branches of knowledge and learning. Unfortunately, however, they seldom considered the Quran in the context of sociology. The fact that today we find the sociological approach to Quranic exegesis is on the increase could have been prompted by the very rare attention paid to it in the past. What has been truly and distinctively highlighted in the earlier interpretations was the Quran's ability to inculcate and direct steadfast faith as well as universal outlook in man. However, the previous interpretations did not fully reflect the Quran's conceptualization of an Islamic society. Now, so much attention has been paid to the sociological aspects of Islam that revolutionary inferences have come to be drawn in a predominant sociological context.

In the above context, the question arises as to whether or not a philosopher or any other learned intellectual (who is not an agnostic) tends to project personal opinions in drawing inferences from the Quran, so as to give the interpretations a personal bias. At the same time, what could be done to compensate for lack of attention to Islamic sociology in the past?

Ayatullah Beheshti: I submit that my preceding explanation distinctly covers the question just posed and similar others, as well. Whatever a philosopher or a gnostic or even a novice postulates as an interpretation of the Quran is included in the viewpoint discussed in response to the first question. It is quite possible that a philosopher or a gnostic may discern something not perceived by people of lesser calibre. If so, there is no justifica-

tion in condemning the high-calibre thinker's interpretation as an opinionated or biased one.

One must always try to ascertain as to whether or not a particular interpretation is in conformity with the Quran. If it does, the interpretation should be as acceptable as the Quranic passage itself. If it does not conform to the letter and spirit of the Quranic verse, then obviously it is unacceptable. In the latter case, the interpreter could at best claim that the Quranic verse had created a certain impression on him.

In view of what has already been said, the correct approach lies in neither rejecting nor accepting an interpretation straight away. For if we go by merely personal and social standing or fame of a philosopher or gnostic, respected for his ethical conduct, and accepts whatever he says, then, we may well be proven wrong. It is essential, therefore, to apply the standing criteria for evaluating an interpretation. Once it has been properly evaluated, one can proceed with the assessment of the extent to which it is worthy and acceptable.

If a philosopher or gnostic or a moralist has come up with something allegedly meaningful, but on scrutiny found to be invalid, he should be told that his finding was no more than a speculation which is not proper for Quranic exegesis.

In my book, *Khuda as Didgab Quran* (God from the Quranic Viewpoint), I have made a detailed and explicit appraisal of an example of speculative interpretation or exegesis. It concerned a Quranic verse which was interpreted and commented upon by no less personages than Sadr al-

Din Shirazi (d. 1050 A.H.L. or 1640 A.D.), popularly known as Mulla Sadra, Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and Khwaja Nasir al-Din Tusi (d. 672 A.H.L./1274 A.D.) from both philosophical and scientific points of view.

My assessment showed that the interpretations or observations given by the abovementioned outstanding scholars of their times and similar others before them concerning the Quranic verse were inappropriate for unreserved acceptance. The verse in question was:

سُرِبِهِمْ آيَاتِنَا فِي الْأَفَاقِ وَفِي أَنْفُسِهِمْ حَتَّىٰ يَتَبَيَّنَ لَهُمْ أَنَّهُ
الْحَقُّ أَوَلَمْ يَكْفِ بِرَبِّكَ أَنَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ شَهِيدٌ

"We shall show them Our signs upon the horizons and within their hearts until it becomes quite clear to them that it is the Truth. Does not your Lord suffice since He is Witness over all things?"
(1:53)

The abovementioned philosophers and gnostics interpreted this verse, so as to attribute the pronoun 'it' in 'it is the Truth' (*anna l'haqq*) to God, whereas, based on the Quran's external characteristics, it should have been taken to refer to the Book itself. Consequently, the substantial observations in this regard made by Mulla Sadra, Ibn Sina and Khwaja Nasir became rather irrelevant to this verse.

The great esteem and deference I have for Ibn Sina, Khwaja Nasir and Mulla Sadra have not

prevented me from criticising them. I did so emboldened by the fact that Quranic exegesis was involved and not by treating philosophy rather lightly. Whatever might have been the philosophy behind their respective interpretation, it was not substantiated by the Quranic verse in question.

Now, I should refer to your supplementary question about how to cover the gap in Quranic exegesis from the sociological point of view since the exegesis in the past concentrated on philosophy, gnostic learning and ethics.

It is true that Islam constitutes the way for individual self-improvement and there can be several dimensions to this process. Due attention to the individual and social development aspects should have been given on a continuing basis. After all, Islam does not envisage any single dimensional enhancement of individual qualities.

On the contrary, human beings possess the capability for appropriate self-improvement and evolution towards excellence at the societal level, as well. No doubt, the sociological problems should be given the importance at all times and their relevance to the Quran should never be overlooked.

In the present era, the need is urgent for an appropriate interpretation of the Quran in relation to the Islamic societal requirements and problems. Since efforts in this direction were lacking in the past, we can find no great assistance from the earlier interpretations. We must, of course, investigate further and very diligently, too.

As pointed out earlier, one should comprehend the recurring subject of all the Quranic verses,

i.e. the human being, in its varied dimensions. This will also mean identification of the material relevant to a sociological understanding of the Quran, including the individual relationship with the society (and vice versa) and its intricate variations mentioned in the Quranic verses. This will enable appropriate and comprehensive identification of the verses concerning individual and societal development. Just as the ancient savants excelled in perceiving the intricacies of certain Quranic verses from the philosophical, intellectual and moral standpoints, the modern exegesists can try to do the same in an evolutionary manner in the sociological context.

Today's readers of the Quran should be particular about acquiring broader understanding of its sociological framework. With presence of mind, they should try to discern the meaning and significance of the Quranic indications concerning matters of sociological importance. Also, they should tell others about their findings. Care should be taken to avoid projecting or superimposing one's own views or opinions on the Quranic verse. Above all, the interpreters or exegesists should recognize the fact that what they deduce may not represent the ultimate in exegesis; there can be other superior interpretations.

Question 3: To what extent and in what way does the procedure employed (in various interpretations of the Quran) with regard to comparing non-Islamic ideologies or schools of thought, become permissible? For instance, you participated in a debate on Islam and existentialism, which was

quite interesting. It pinpointed the need for a thorough grasp of the new schools of thought vis-a-vis the ideological framework of Islam. Accordingly, to what extent are we free to compare any relevant non-Islamic interpretation of problems with that of our own versions of the relevant Quranic verses?

Ayatullah Beheshti: On the whole, there is hardly any doubt that followers of any particular school of thought encountering the beliefs and convictions of others are bound to raise and answer questions on the basis of their own ideology.

In connection with a logical and adequate study of the Quran, I have considered what other schools of thought, such as existentialism and similar ones have propounded concerning human beings and their relationships.

In doing so, I took it upon myself to fully investigate and understand these non-Islamic schools of thought and identify the problems answerable on the basis of the Quran. Reference to the Quran should not be affected by any preconceived notion of finding the same solution to a problem as indicated by the relevant modernistic school of thought. This happens when one accepts existentialism and proceeds to justify the same from the Quran, which procedure is fraught with great danger of deviation in the understanding and interpretation of the Quran.

The correct procedure is to first examine the new schools of thought such as existentialism, with a view to finding out if any interesting problems are dealt with and solutions proposed in it. Then

only one should refer to the Quran to see whether or not a comparable problem and its solution are mentioned in it — in positive or negative terms.

The comparison should be done with an open mind so that we exclude any personal bias or prejudice from the comparative study. However, this principle has often been ignored to the disadvantage of Islam and its school of thought. For instance, we see people intellectually acquainted with Marxism. Marxism, with its philosophical and socio-economic justifications, concludes that private ownership of property or wealth is one of the most important factors in alienation of self-stranged individuals from one another and adverse transformation of the humanity of mankind. If it is intended to eliminate the adverse conditions arising from the prevalence of personal and private ownership of property, the only way is to do away with all kinds of personal and private ownership.

They contend that the very idea of personal/private ownership necessarily involves a kind of man's decline from the pre-eminence of the human position. This argument represents an admixture of intellectual, ethical and socio-economic views, such as Marxism has brought into being.

Some like this Marxist theory to begin with. Then they search for evidence in the Quran to support the Marxist approach. They come up with verses like:

"Everything in the heavens and the earth belongs to God."

They interpret the meaning to suit their pre-conceived notions. They say that the Quran

teaches that whatever exists in the earth and in the heavens belongs to God. Thus, they hasten to conclude that personal and private ownership is out of the question!

Again, the above Quranic interpretation is based on paraphrasing of the verse by way of deviation. It indicates that one has negated private ownership first in his own mind and then searched for Quranic justification. Clearly this is a case of simultaneous deception (or even self-deception).

On the other hand, a person who wants to compare Marxism with Islam may be expected to set out with a positive spirit and intention to define the Marxist approach to private ownership as a basically negative concept. He tries to know whether or not Islam or the Quran rule out private ownership. If he finds that Islam, too, is averse to private ownership, he becomes inclined to accept the relevant Marxist theory. If not, he rejects the Marxist interpretation or assessment.

(If he happened to remain aware of the Quran in an incomplete way, any hasty endorsement by him of the Marxist theory would reflect deficient comparisons!)

If we deduce from the Quran in the manner indicated above, there will be no difficulty, so long as one does not set out to justify whatever has appealed to him in the first instance.

No doubt, we can study the new philosophical intellectual, ethical and socio-economic and personal development theories in depth. We can examine the premises on which non-Islamic schools of thought are based, together with the problems

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tackled and solutions produced by them. Then it is quite natural to refer to our own school of thought and see what it says on the matter. When consulting the Quran we should not expect beforehand it either approves or condemns the question under examination, just as we should not let any inclination on one's part for the new theory affect the procedure of verification.

That sort of objective spirit is very desirable in productive investigation or comparative study. In this process we may well find that many problems tackled by the new schools of thought have been dealt with in the Quran nearly fourteen centuries ago, provided one is not biased or prejudiced to start with. But if we only approach the Quran for seeking its backing to a particular issue, this is dangerous and will more than likely cause us to deviate.

Question 4: In this discussion you have endorsed the leadership of the Prophet and the Imams as well as the others capability to lead in the matter of deducing from the Quran. What kind of leadership the others can offer in respect to understanding the Quran? Are all the various interpretations given by a socio-political leader, who has fully assimilated the Quran, acceptable in principle? To what extent can they be ranked as deputy Imam or just a religious leader?

Ayatullah Beheshti: This question has no direct bearing on what we have discussed. It is relevant to the Imamate and Islamic leadership from the Shi'ite point of view. It converges on the situations as of the lifetime of the twelfth Imam

and his subsequent (and continuing) occultation. In the relevant discussions, we have dealt with these matters in sufficient detail. Now I can explain briefly that any kind of independent leader should be just in what he decrees as a *mujtabid*.

His leadership is based on his abilities for *ijtihad* (dictates on matters of religious jurisprudence) and competence as a discerning ideologist. His sense of justice should be evident in his handling of affairs and projection of expertise and knowledgeability in his work. Those are the basic requirements. Accordingly, in this era of the twelfth Imam's occultation, he has a naturally broader scope for deriving viable inferences from the Quran on the basis of the leadership qualities mentioned above in a manner superior to those who lack these qualities.

However if a leader discharges his duties under the guidance of a superior leader, it is not necessary that he should be a *mujtabid*. For he can always consult with his superior.

Question 5: The universe and the Quran have something in common. That is they are both God's creations. The more humanity progresses in the direction of identifying the universe, the less will be their ignorance. The universal laws, being eternal, are not susceptible to change. It is the status of human awareness which changes with every advancement of knowledge concerning the universe. The Quran represents the unchanging universal laws for us all and for all ages. Accordingly, should we not consider the Quran as part of the inexorable statutes of the universe?

Yes No.....

Ayatullah Beheshti: Clearly there are indications in the Quran, the understanding of which has a direct relationship with the evolution of human thinking. However, this is not in the sense that any progress in human knowledge should necessarily alter a Muslim's understanding of the Quran or comprehension of the Quran should keep pace with mankind's knowledgeability about the universe.

Question 6: There are matters which have not been clarified in the Quran. For example it does not specify a ritual prayer cycle. Also it does not say that one should perform two cycles in the morning and three in the evening. There are similar other matters relevant to, but not specified in, the Quran. It may not be always possible to tap the Quran for answers to every kind of question. It is not necessary, therefore, to follow what the Prophet and the Imams have established as traditions.

Ayatullah Beheshti: This question, too, is not quite relevant to our present discussion, except in so far as it represents one of our current problems. I will try to answer it as concisely as possible.

Actually, the questions pertain to those who seek to identify Islam from practically one source, that is, the Quran. The Quran's relationship with the Sunna (Traditions) is based on the position that the Book contains two kinds of verses: First, those which are understandable without reference to traditional explanations and second, those which cannot be understood without the guidance of the Traditions. The understanding of the latter category of the Quranic verses is allied to the

Traditions. Accordingly, the process of identifying Islam depends on an evaluation of the traditional interpretations, too.

Moreover, detailed explanations of the duties and obligations under Islam cannot be expected to be found in the Quran. In fact, the formulation of the Islamic laws and regulations has been a process not dependent solely on the Quranic framework.

In the above context, a question arises as to whether or not all the divine revelations through the Prophet are contained in the Quran. It is possible that the Prophet received divine revelation other than those incorporated in the Quran. The latest research in this regard involving data from both the Shi'ite and Sunni sources clearly shows that the Prophet's inspirations extended beyond those of the Quran.

Then one considers why all the revelations of the Prophet have not been collected and incorporated in the Quran.

It would appear that the reason lies in the factual position that the contents of the Quran commonly reflect the procedural quality typical of the miracle-like nature of the Quranic revelations.

There have been other revelations, too, which are qualitatively unlike those of the Quran. These are inspired by God, but they are not the same as that of the Quran. We should try to identify and understand both these kinds of prophetic revelations. This can be done in the process of research to find evidence in support of our comprehensive understanding of the Quran.

END

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