

## THE QUR'AN - A CLOSER LOOK

### PART 3

#### THEOLOGICAL TEACHINGS

The two most basic doctrines of the Qur'an; the absolute Oneness of God, and the (Final) Prophethood of Muhammad, are expressed in verses like 2:163 and 34:27-28; or 38:65-66:

**"Say: truly am I a Warner: no god is there but the One God, Supreme and Irresistible - the Lord of the heavens and the earth, and all between - Exalted in Might, able to enforce His Will, forgiving again and again."**

Allah is indeed overwhelmingly THE subject of the Qur'an, as any index will show.

This Name occurs over 2500 times. From Him alone comes direction, healing, guidance, mercy (10:57). His 99 Beautiful "Names" or attributes are commonly said to be found in, or possible to infer from, the Qur'an's description of Him. Even the greatest cynic could scarcely be unaffected by the exalted language concerning God. Of all qualities, however, it is His greatness and power that predominates. No wonder the Muslim community is characterised by deep reverence.

The Qur'an frequently insists on the Oneness and uniqueness of God. **"Say, He is Allah, the One and Only"** (112:1). How is this oneness understood? In contrast to Christianity for example, with its Trinity, (frequently condemned by the Qur'an, at 5:73 and many other places), the Oneness is almost mathematical. It is a strictly Unitarian concept.

A famous controversy about the Qur'an in earlier Muslim history was indirectly connected with this uncompromising Oneness. Surah 85, 21-22 reads like this:

**"Nay, this is a Glorious Qur'an, (inscribed) in a Tablet Preserved."** These verses were interpreted to mean the Book was eternal, in Heaven. No, that can't possibly be the right understanding, said the more philosophical Mu'tazilahs. For if God's Word is eternal, it never issued from Him at a particular time; and this in turn implies that God's Word has an existence separate from Himself. "Nonsense!" replied the anti-rationalists; and their view prevailed. Such philosophical questioning has always been discouraged by the religious establishment,

sometimes with force. But the unresolved issue still raises its head from time to time.

Two of the most popular Qur'anic attributes of Al'lah, used in the phrase with which devout Muslims begin any new venture, are the Most Compassionate (Gracious), and the Most Merciful. These two and other similar descriptions of Al'lah occur in many places. They begin all but one of the 114 surahs. A fine example:

**"Your Lord has inscribed for Himself (the rule of) Mercy: verily, if any of you did evil in ignorance, and thereafter repented, and amended (his conduct), lo! He is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful"** (Surah 6, verse 54b).

Despite the emphasis on good actions (see below), all Muslims depend essentially on the mercy of God for their eternal hope.

Many Muslims believe that Muhammad will intercede for them in the Judgement. Yet even in the Traditions, there is one that says Muhammad told his own daughter Fatima not to rely on his intercession, but on her own actions. Is there any support in the Qur'an itself for the idea he will speak to Al'lah on their behalf? Surahs 9:80 and 40:18-20 seem clearly to rule it out for all wrongdoers, of whatever community. What about 20:109? Yusuf Ali's translation differs from that of most scholars (see his Note 2634). Not only the beneficiary, but even the agent of the intercession are chosen by Al'lah, he implies. This presumably applies also in 2:255, 10:3, 19:87, 39:43-44 and 53:26. The Book certainly never names Muhammad as one of those accepted.

Verses like 16:84 or 17:71 refer to witnesses, not intercessors. And in 81:19-20, a "**most honourable messenger**" in context can refer only to the angel Gabriel, not Muhammad. So the confidence that Muhammad will intercede for his faith-community seems to be based on Traditions, rather than on the Holy Book. And note also 2:48 and 123, 6:51, or 35:18, all of which seem to deny any intercession at all. Subject always to His overriding will, Al'lah's final judgement is based solely on the record of our good and bad deeds. Surah 17:13-14:

**"Every man's fate We have fastened on his own neck; on the Day of Judgement We shall bring out for him a scroll, which he will see spread open. (It will be said to him) Read thine own record; sufficient is thy soul this day to make out an account against thee".**

Judgement Day and its results for resurrected people is the second most prominent subject of the Qur'an. It assures pagan scoffers that they will rise again from death to face God: **"...Listen for the Day when the Caller will call out from a place quite near - The day when they shall hear a mighty Blast in (very) truth: that will be the Day of Resurrection. Verily it is We Who give Life and Death; and to Us is the Final Goal - The Day when the Earth will be rent asunder from (men) hurrying out; that will be a gathering together quite easy for Us."** (Surah 50, verses 41-44; a sample of many such passages).

#### THE HEREAFTER

The Qur'an's picture of the after-life is not that it is purely or mainly a spiritual experience. The bodies of all are to be re-constituted. Paradise (the English word actually related to the Qur'anic "**firdaus**") is a garden of delights. Hell is also described in equally physical and most fearful terms. People will enjoy or endure, according to their destiny, and obedience or lack of it. The Qur'an refers to a balance, which weighs people's deeds, good and bad, against each other (23:102-103):

**"Those whose scale (of good) will be heavy, will prosper: those whose scale will be light, will find their souls in perdition, for that they wrongfully treated Our Signs"** (7:8b-9).

If righteous, they will recline on thrones or couches enjoying the favours of beautiful virgins, eating luscious fruit and flesh, drinking a wine that does not intoxicate (56:1-38 and many other passages). All this might not appeal so much to women! The description is certainly meant to delight men in particular. But in later surahs, the Qur'an does promise Paradise, or at least some version of it, to both men and women who have served God and Islam:

**"Never will I suffer to be lost the work of any of you, be he male or female: you are members one of another; those who have left their homes, and were driven out therefrom, and suffered harm in My Cause, and fought and were slain - verily, I will blot out from them their iniquities, and admit them into Gardens with rivers flowing beneath - a reward from the Presence of Allah, and from His Presence is the best of rewards"** (3:195, see also 4:124, 13:23 and 33:35).

The re-creation of bodies in the case of the unrighteous will be repeated: for every time their skins are consumed in the flame, they will be renewed for continued torment by fire and boiling water. For more details, see 4:56, or surahs 50-56: all of which appeared when the Muslim cause was hard. The way the Qur'an repeats the graphic details, seems to cast doubt on

the more 'spiritualised' interpretation favoured by some modern Muslims. Yes, there is to be a new earth (40:48-49): but a physical one. Not only humans, but also jinns (see chapter 4), and perhaps animals, will be subject to the Judgement (6:38).

There is a difficult passage in Surah 7, verses 46 and 47. Yusuf Ali favours the interpretation that makes those "**on the Heights**" to be angels or great saints, who know in advance the qualities of people, and can assure them of Paradise before they get there. But it seems strange for the Qur'an to refer to angels and prophets as just "men". Others believe it refers to a kind of temporary limbo between Paradise and Hell, while some borderline cases are being decided.

Also, the vast majority of Muslims today believe in a kind of purgatory, available only to themselves, or possibly to other People of the Book, but certainly not to the heathen. This is seen as a way to atone for minor sins, before finally being admitted to the joys of Paradise. Only Muslims with really serious sins will ever stay in Hell. This belief finds little support in the Qur'an. There is one verse that speaks of all having to pass "**over**" or "**near**" Hell (19:71). On this slender basis, along with Tradition, a whole doctrine has been built. Yet in 5:37, 6:128 and 43:74-77, the Afterlife is said to be permanent. A phrase in 11:107, "**all the time that the heavens and earth endure**", has however again caused great controversy among Muslim theologians. See Yusuf Ali's notes, and 14:48.

There is a great emphasis in Islam on this life being a testing ground, where Al'lah can see our faith and obedience. This is a very common subject of conversation among Muslim people amid the trials of life. See 29:2-3; and 34:21 sums it all up:

**"But (Satan) had no authority over them - except that We might test the man who believes in the Hereafter".**

FATALISTIC?

Does the Qur'an teach an unbalanced and complete fatalism, as some claim? See 6:39 or 74:31. Yes, there is a heavy emphasis on human actions being ordained in advance by Al'lah. In

one way at least, humans are unable to do anything other than what Al'lah has planned for them to do. This can and sometimes does lead to an acceptance of unnecessary suffering. In the matter of salvation too, the Qur'an does say:

**"Al'lah leaves straying those whom He pleases, and guides whom He pleases.."** (14:4; compare 32:13). That is not however to be taken as an excuse, for it is balanced by this:

**"...He causes not to stray, except those who forsake (the path)"** (2:26). Muslims may be utterly in Al'lah's power, but "acquire" at least an appearance of free will ("**ikhtiyar**"), and are certainly not given any licence by the Qur'an to be mere fatalists about salvation. See 10:30, 14:51, and 52:38-41. People are urged to repent, especially of idolatry and "**shirk**" (the ascribing of partners to Al'lah). They are assured in many, many places that Al'lah is forgiving, merciful.

On the other hand, despite the many promises for the obedient, we find that Al'lah commits Himself in advance to accept no particular individual. That would compromise His absolute prerogative, including, it seems, the right to justify the bad and condemn the good. So at no point does the Qur'an say that anyone can be sure now, in this life, of gaining Paradise. The sovereignty of Al'lah is such that He may or may not forgive. It is entirely up to Him; see 5:40. **"The righteous will be in bliss"** - but who can number himself without doubt among these righteous? No-one, not even Muhammad himself, is given an absolute guarantee by the Qur'an. 48:2 says his sins (see chapter 5 on the Arabic word used here) **"MAY be forgiven"**.

There is but one exception to this uncertainty. The Qur'an apparently promises Paradise to those killed in the service of Islam, during Holy War (possibly also, while on Pilgrimage):

**"And if ye are slain, or die in the way of Allah, forgiveness and mercy from Allah are far better than all they could amass"** (Surah 3, verse 157; compare 3:169-171). Subject as always to Al'lah's will, this does seem a clear promise. Its implication is probably that to die in Al'lah's warfare is enough to blot out all sins, or at least to ensure forgiveness and acceptance. Certainly thousands have died happily in battle, banking on this.

The strong, repeated emphasis on Al'lah not being obligated to anyone, is only part of a

general insistence that He is utterly transcendent and "other". Even the 99 Beautiful Names do not properly describe Him. In fact, no human thought or words can. See 6:103, 57:3, 112:4. Yet He is also said to be "near" to believers, and to all men (2:186, 34:50, 50:16, 56:85, 57:4). How can these two things be reconciled? 50:16 gives us the clue:

**"It was We Who created man, and we know what dark suggestions his soul makes to him: for We are nearer to him than his jugular vein."** Al'lah's "nearness" is essentially

omnipresence. (Note 1). He is everywhere, Himself unseen, but seeing all our deeds, good and bad, hearing our every word, knowing even our thoughts. But the Qur'an certainly does not teach that Al'lah can come to dwell spiritually within us. Al'lah and mankind are absolutely separate. The Christian teaching for example of the indwelling Holy Spirit is rejected by implication.

What relationship can we then have with God, according to the Qur'an? Only that of slaves to a Master, obeying and loving Him (19:93). And as stewards and viceregents of the Creator, responsible for the earth where we live (2:30, 6:165). The Arabic word translated here by Yusuf Ali "vicegerent" is "**khaleefah**". We shall meet it again in a slightly different context. No other relationship than these is possible. We shall also deal later with the strong opposition in the Qur'an to calling God "Father", or ourselves His "children" (even through creation). 5:18 denies claims to this relationship by Jews and Christians.

One title of Al'lah is "The Loving" (**Al Wadood**), and the Qur'an does say that God "loves" those who obey Him. But it appears to be a love of action only, not emotion. (Note 2). It means only that God rewards or favours believers who obey:

**"Say: 'if ye do love Al'lah, follow me: Al'lah will love you and forgive you your sins: for Al'lah is oft-forgiving, Most Merciful'"** (3:31; see also 5:54, 19:96 and many other places).

The idea that God enters into any emotional relationship with us is generally held to be blasphemous, for He is without need (29:6, 31:26). Nor does His love involve Him in any sacrifice. He can suffer no loss by our actions or attitude:

**"Those who reject Allah, hinder men from the Path of Allah, and resist the Messenger, after Guidance has been clearly shown to them, will not injure Allah in the least, but He will make their deeds of no effect"** (47:32, compare 46:32). He is far above any personal

profit or loss from men. He needs nothing. See Yusuf Ali on 6:133. Abraham (4:125) was God's "**friend**", but this term merely asserts the fullness of his obedience. The Qur'an does speak of "**seeking the face of Al'lah**" (6:52, etc.), but that is in this life. 9:22 and 50:35 give just a hint that Al'lah will join those in Paradise. 3:15 and 75:22-23 seem clearer on this; but being in Al'lah's presence does not seem to be the primary reward.

Al'lah's decrees or decisions or predestinations are absolute and beyond challenge. Good or evil, truth or falsehood, have no independent or absolute meaning in the Qur'an. Al'lah's moral laws and behaviour are not necessary reflections of His nature or character; they are arbitrary. Whatever Al'lah ordains, is by definition good. Whatever He forbids, is bad.

#### THE ORIGIN OF EVIL

Here again the rationalistic Mu'tazilahs raised a question. If Al'lah's sovereignty is so unqualified, where does evil come from? The Qur'anic, or Islamic, teaching on predestination seems to make Him the author of everything, both good and evil. Other religions too of course face the philosophical problem of evil's origin, where they think of God as "good". But in Islam it is a particularly sharp question, for there is no concept of even partial autonomy for men or angels.

Islamic history includes the emergence of a large number of groups, preceding and following the Mu'tazilahs, who were all exercised by slightly different aspects of this great problem. Without any formal and universal pronouncement, in the end, the somewhat mediating view of the As'haris prevailed. In this as in other mysteries, submission is everything; no-one can question or analyse Al'lah (5:101-102). The very word "**Islam**" means "submission", and a Muslim is one who submits without question, of philosophical or other kind. An essential part of the Qur'an's power is that it discourages rational or ethical questioning of its credentials, and through the community it sets up, can punish and even kill any who do dare doubt it.

#### THE CRY OF THE HEART

With such uncompromising teaching about God's "otherness", yet the hunger of the human heart to know Him personally, the wide appeal of mysticism and holy men in the Muslim world is not at all surprising. The mystical Soofee movement is found throughout Muslim communities. Fervent preaching by pious Soofee merchants, rather than force of arms, was the key to the expansion of Islam in several countries outside the Middle East.

Centring on men noted for their spiritual power, and secret knowledge of how to attain it, Soofism is organised in tightly knit groups around the spiritual master, alive, or as in the next paragraph, even dead. These men are variously called "**shaikhs**", "**peers**", "**marabouts**" or "**murshids**"; their different orders and methods, "**tareeqahs**". Soofism has, at least since the fifth Muslim century, varied considerably in orthodoxy. It has therefore been viewed with some suspicion (but not final condemnation), by the "**ulama**" (scholars). Al Ghazzali's brilliant book, "**Mishkaat ul Anwaar**" (*Niche for Lights*), is a more mystical interpretation of Surah 24, verses 35 onwards, than that given by, say, Yusuf Ali. But his exposition owes its acceptability to its moderation. It is not TOO radical.

Yet a further and natural development of Sufism IS highly offensive to many of the guardians of orthodoxy. This is the very widespread phenomenon called "Folk Islam" or "Low Islam", with its seeking the intercession and healing powers of holy men, visits to their shrines, the use of charms and curses. This has of course no Qur'anic authority whatsoever. But both Folk Islam, and Soofism itself, are very persistent, and probably inevitable, results of the Qur'an's portrait of Al'lah. He is the unapproachable Sovereign who answers no questions from humans, beyond those He has already sent down in the Qur'an itself, or by Traditions.

As we shall see in greater detail later, Muhammad is the "**Seal of the prophets**" (33:40). That is, with him and the Book that came through him, God's message is complete. It may be argued that there is no logical reason why this should be so, since nearly fourteen hundred years have passed since then, and, as thoughtful Muslims complain, the Qur'an's teachings have been neglected by their own community, almost as much as earlier religious communities did with

their prophets and Books. The Traditions do however foretell a reformer in every century to restore Islam. Be that as it may, the Qur'an itself seems to be saying clearly that God's patience has run out, or at least that He sees no point in a new revelation from Heaven. Now the responsibility is firmly and finally on human shoulders.

The word "**la'alla**" with derivatives, is used about 120 times in the Qur'an. It could be translated "perhaps" or "it may be" or "in order that". It appears in references to Al'lah's "signs", both in Creation and the Book. And it implies these signs give to sincere, submissive people, enough knowledge of God and His will that they may act in accordance with it. Just two

examples:

**"By the Book that makes things clear - We have made it a Qur'an in Arabic, that ye may be able to understand (and learn wisdom)" (43:2-3). And in 30:46:**

**"Among His signs is this, that He sends the Winds as heralds of Good Tidings, giving you a taste of His (Grace and) Mercy - that the ships may sail (Majestically) by His Command and that ye may seek of His Bounty: in order that you may be grateful".**

Footnotes:

1. Wahhabees, the Muslim Puritans, are not prepared to admit even this degree of nearness. Another translation/commentary, by scholars of Medina University, Saudi Arabia, adds to the words, "**And We are nearer to him than his jugular vein**", the explanatory note, "(by Our Knowledge)".
2. As stated in the last chapter, I am basing such conclusions entirely on the teaching of the Qur'an itself. There is however a poorly attested Tradition, which makes Al'lah say, "I was a hidden treasure and I longed to be known. Then I created creatures in order to be known by them". But even this does not refer to love in its emotional sense.