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## THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

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### ABSTRACT

It is faith in this sense of a living assurance in the existence of God that lies at the helm of, presides over, and determines the modusoperandi of all the recognized sources of knowledge enunciated by the Qur'an, i.e., sense experience, reason, and revelation. It is not difficult to see how revelation derives its entire justification and authority from faith in God. Faith in God is not a 'subject-object relationship' in the ordinary sense of this phrase. It is appropriately faith-in-God. The equivalent Qur'anic word iman does have its verbal derivatives but all these ultimately behave like substantive nouns. Iman remains a matter of existential concern—an I-Thou, a person-to-person, experience, as said above, rather than a recognizable activity towards an objective something. Despite the express Qur'anic position spelled out here there has been a heated controversy among Muslim theologians regarding the relationship between faith and action. The one held that good actions are a part of faith whereas the other were of the opinion that faith has nothing to do with good actions. The Controversy was kept alive on extraneous grounds, that is, without the fullest realization of the inherent dynamics of faith. The dialecticians could not take account of these dynamics because of their preoccupation with purely rational methods. One has to rise above logicalities and to understand the Quranic theory of knowledge in order to grasp the true significance of spiritual and moral concepts of Islam.

The Qur'an appears, in principle, to be thoroughly against an attitude of irrationality. It does not recommend a blind conviction in any proposition whatsoever even if it be one of its own verses<sup>1</sup>. On the contrary, great importance is attached to, the acquisition of more and more definite knowledge of facts and values. Our Prophet (Peace be upon him) was himself a teacher to the entire humanity<sup>2</sup>. Story of the creation of Adam symbolically brings into clear focus the truth that man is superior to all creatures, specially to angels, and that this superiority lies in his capacity to formulate concepts and thereby to attain a possibility for immense advances in knowledge and research<sup>3</sup>. It is now our duty to continue realizing this possibility and so to justify our status as the best of creation to whom every thing in nature has been made to serve<sup>4</sup>. The Qur'an asks: Shall those who know and those who do not know be held equal<sup>5</sup>? The answer, as implied, is obviously 'No'. Similarly: 'Allah will exalt those, who believe among you and those who have knowledge, to high ranks<sup>6</sup>. And so on. In fact herein lies, according to Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the distinction between Christianity and Islam:

Christianity is essentially a mystery which veils the Divine from man. The beauty of Christianity lies in the acceptance of God as a mystery... In Islam, however, it is man who is veiled from God. The Divine Being is not veiled from us; we are veiled from Him and it is for us to try to rend this veil asunder, to try to know God... Islam is thus essentially a way of knowledge: it is a way of gnosis (*ma'rifah*). It is based on gnosis or direct knowledge that, however, cannot by any means be equated with rationalism which is only an indirect and secondary form of knowledge. Islam leads to that essential knowledge which integrates our being, which makes us know what we are and be what we know, or in other words, integrates knowledge and being in the ultimate unitive vision of reality.<sup>7</sup>

A lot of confusion has persisted in the Islamic literature due to an erratic interpretation of the term *iman b'al-ghaib* which is one of the central and most important concepts in the Qur'an. It has generally been rendered into English as 'faith in the unseen' or 'faith in the unknown', boiling down, in turn, to, what we may call, a blind and unreasoned conviction. What does *ghaib* or 'the unknown' really mean. Answer to this question in the present context requires the more basic understanding of the character of *iman* itself. Belief and faith which are inadvertently used as interchangeable and equally adequate translations of this word in fact refer to two quite different

states of affairs. Their mutual difference is worth understanding in some depth.

‘Believe’, in ordinary English language, behaves like the verb ‘know’ with at least two important differences. Firstly, ‘belief is always propositional in character: ‘belief that’ is more evidently so than ‘belief in’. ‘Belief in’ statements can also ultimately be reduced to ‘belief that’ statements where the object of this verb turns out to be a proposition rather than an object or a person. ‘I believe in angels’, for instance, means ‘I believe that angels exist’. Knowledge, on the other hand, can evidently be of both kinds and these kinds are mutually irreducible without doing violence to the character of language. There is knowledge by description as well as knowledge by acquaintance<sup>8</sup>. The former is propositional; the latter, non-propositional. Belief, unlike knowledge, is based on incomplete evidence. It has a lesser degree of truth/probability and so it changes or can even be replaced when richer evidence and a greater light of knowledge is available. Knowledge too of course can be so improved but this is possible only with the advancement of knowledge itself.

‘Faith’ is opposed to ‘belief and very much akin to ‘knowledge. However, it is almost invariably non-propositional in character. It would not be good English to say ‘I have faith that...’, etc. We always have faith ‘in’ some person or ‘in’ some object which is, rightly or wrongly, assigned personal characteristics. Further, faith is not an unreasoned conviction, as a layman would have it: it is rather a piece of knowledge, a cognition, an awareness. It is in fact knowledge in the fullest sense of this term and signifies the highest stage of religious awareness. Everyday knowledge is of two kinds—the one based on sense-experience and the other on reason—each having its distinct nature. Faith, paradoxically enough, combines in itself the qualities of both. Like experiential knowledge it is subjective, direct and immediate: like reason and logic it is unfalsifiable, inviolable and certain. It is a matter of personal commitment to the one in whom it is reposed. Being thus an enterprise of the whole man it cannot be repudiated or replaced unless the man concerned goes through an entire metamorphosis of his personality and becomes a new man altogether.

In view of the above distinctions, it can justifiably be reaffirmed that the word *iman* as used in the Qur’an must be translated as ‘faith’ rather than ‘belief’. The latter is better understood as *i’tiqad* commonly used in Urdu and is nearer the Qur’anic word *ẓann*.

The fact of English grammar that faith is a noun and that there is no derivative of this word which stands for the act of having faith is very significant in this regard. It implies that faith is essentially and entirely a formation of mind, a psychical equipment of the man of faith and does not, for that matter, envisage an operation on any external object or proposition or reality. Faith in God, for example, is not a ‘subject-object relationship’ in the ordinary sense of this phrase. It is appropriately faith-in-God. The equivalent Qur’anic word *iman* does have its verbal derivatives but all these ultimately behave like substantive nouns. *Iman* remains a matter of existential concern—an I-Thou, a person-to-person, experience, as said above, rather than a recognizable activity towards an objective something. The Qur’an almost invariably uses the preposition ب after different derivatives of the word *iman* (thus meaning ‘faith in’) rather than اِنَّ or اِنَّكَ (which would amount to saying ‘faith that.’)

Now what is *iman b’al-ghaib* or ‘faith in the unseen’. To me it is the adoption of an idealistic point of view which of course is relevant to, and firmly grounded in, the most eloquent facts of experience. Our everyday experience discloses at least three levels of natural existence—levels of matter, life and consciousness including self-consciousness. The nature of causation that works at any of these levels is unique in itself. At the level of matter, there is, perhaps, pure determinism. But as we move on to living organisms, there too operate the laws of determinism but these are subordinated to an element of spontaneity. At the level of conscious beings there are purposes and plans which in very significant ways control, direct, and interfere with, the laws of mechanical causation as well as with the purely spontaneous impulses. Thus material causation undergoes a modification when life acts on matter and vital causation changes when mind acts on life. *Iman b’al-ghaib*, in the context of theism, implies a conviction that beyond the whole of nature there exists a supernatural level also with a causation peculiar to it. This causation, being superior most, is capable of changing all kinds of lower causalities. Incidentally, this is what miracles do. Thus miracles have no mysteriousness about them. They are a commonplace notion. Just as life is miraculous from the point of view of matter, and consciousness is miraculous for matter and life, so workings of the supernatural realm are miraculous from the point of view of nature itself which is normally the only point of view available to human beings. All this is not to be taken as sheer metaphysics erected with

the help of an exercise in reasoning. It is rather a piece of psychology. We have to live this metaphysics rather than simply calculate it. In general, this is the difference between Western metaphysics and Eastern, specially Islamic, metaphysics. The former is a matter of ideation and imaginative speculation, pure and simple, and so gradually loses relevance to the natural, experiential sciences. The latter, in general, has been a matter of organic assimilation and existential participation and so deeply relevant to all human activities including his sciential enterprise.

‘To live the metaphysics of the Qur’an’ suggests to my mind the concept of *shahadah*, the testimony, the ‘bearing of witness to’. The man of faith in Islam proclaims at the pitch of his voice on the occasion of every call to prayer five times a day—and proclaims it twice every time—that “I bear witness to the fact that there is no god but Allah” and that “I bear witness to the fact that Mohammad is the apostle of Allah”. One of the most essential requirements of bearing witness to a state of affairs is that the person bearing that witness must have had a direct experience of that state of affairs in the first instance. There is a popular saying of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) according to which the hands, the feet etc, with the help of which a person performs sinful deeds in this world, will become his enemies on the Day of Judgment and will give evidence against him. Now limbs of the body are totally involved in the performance of evil actions and are the very participators in what the person does. So must be the man of faith. He should have an existential awareness and a living assurance of the existence of God and the entire scheme of things that is Divine: only then he can justifiably say: “I bear witness to the fact that there is no god but Allah...” Just as in this world it becomes our moral and legal obligation to testify what we have observed whenever an occasion to testify arises, so in the religious sphere also we must offer *shahadah* even if we have to go through the most excruciating pains for that or even face death. That is why a person who dies fighting in the way of God is known as *shahid*.

It is faith in this sense of a living assurance in the existence of God that lies at the helm of, presides over, and determines the *modus operandi* of all the recognized sources of knowledge enunciated by the Qur’an, i.e., sense experience, reason, and revelation. It is not difficult to see how revelation derives its entire justification and authority from faith in God. So I need not discuss this source of knowledge in any detail. I shall presently confine myself to sense

experience and reason only which, to all appearance, have simply a naturalistic character, but in fact it is not so. All these avenues of knowledge together comprise the Qur'anic epistemology. Incidentally, it is the awareness of this mutual relationship between faith and ordinary knowledge that ensures what has been known as Islamization of sciences. It also ensures unity of all knowledge. Different sciences get hold of small bits of the universe and study them in isolation. In this way contradictions between the findings of various sciences are bound to appear. Faith in one God, the creator and sustainer of the universe, provides us a total point of view. It is from this total, comprehensive point of view that we realize the significance of the Qur'anic verse:

And if it (i.e. the Qur'an) were from any other than Allah, they would have found in it many a discrepancy.<sup>9</sup>

What is Islamization? In general, it implies the acceptance as well as implementation of the Islamic world-view in supersession of all other points of view about the universe. There has been one section of orthodox *ulama* who, in this connection, simply refuse to recognize any other form of truth than the one contained in the Qur'an.<sup>10</sup> They consider it an innovation and a heresy to pursue the natural sciences. In fact what new information, they think, can these sciences give us in view of the fact that, everything green or dry is contained in the Qur'an? Devotees of naturalism, on the other hand, claim that Islamization is a thoroughly fake concept. Knowledge is just the awareness of an objective state of affairs, the awareness of objects as they really are. To Islamize would be to look at facts with a prejudicial frame of reference. Knowledge, according to them, is secular by temperament and so should never be tagged with religious faith. In between the positions of religious recessionism and scientific naturalism are the religious modernists who permit the acquisition of all knowledge but, against the perspective of Islamic resurgence presently taking place in most of the Muslim countries, they try, somehow or other, to Islamize this knowledge. For instance, it has sometimes been observed that if from a particular text-book etc., or from the syllabi and courses of reading in a subject all atheistic views or views that may possibly lead to atheism are just excluded that book or that subject will stand Islamized. Similarly, if a book by some non-Muslim author is simply replaced by the one written by a person who is a Muslim by profession, it is believed with a complacent satisfaction that the operation of Islamization has been completed. Still a more sophisticated and apparently acceptable way

has been that for every theory or point of view arrived at by the Western sciences we search out, or give fresh interpretation to, a corresponding verse from the Holy Qur'an and thus try to establish that our Qur'an has to say the same thing on the subject. This attitude is, in turn, grounded in an innocent formula so vehemently propounded by Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan that Qur'an is the word of God and nature is the work of God<sup>11</sup> and that the truthfulness of God demands that there should be no disharmony between the two. All these viewpoints are either flimsy and childish and have only a propagandist significance or they only show a defeatist mentality. Knowledge as such is never morally bad nor is it ever un-Islamic. How can it be sinful, for instance, simply to know that such and such a person does not believe in the existence of God or that such and such a philosophy is atheistic or materialistic. Knowledge, absolutely speaking, is a virtue because it clearly tells us what is what. It is only the nature of the use to which it is put or the broader axiological framework against which it is acquired that ultimately makes it desirable or undesirable. As to the harmony between the word of God and the work of God, it is, broadly speaking, an irrefutable principle but two things must be carefully noted. Firstly, Qur'an is not a book of science. Its statements do not relate to purely objective phenomena like those of physical sciences. They are not factual but rather existential truths having an appeal primarily to the core of the being of man, his desires and aspirations and the ultimate problems of his destiny. Secondly, Qur'an being the verbal revelation from God, the Infinite, is eternal, absolute and final whereas the findings of sciences are always tentative, hypothetical and strictly subject to improvement. It is because of these categorial and essential differences that the respective truth-values of the word of God and the work of God are mutually incomparable.

I am firmly of the opinion that for purposes of Islamization it is sufficient as well as necessary that a person who is acquiring knowledge or one who is disseminating it should begin with a strong commitment to the values for which Islam stands. Talking in personalistic language, he should have faith in God in the sense of a living assurance of His being. When such an assurance is available one may entertain any idea or doctrine or point of view. Just as light dispels darkness and the colours of objects which could not be distinguished earlier become clearly perceivable, so faith which too is a light from God makes its incumbent adequately capable of seeing everything in the true perspective. There remains absolutely no

possibility of his being duped by any un-Islamic view that he may happen to encounter. The Holy Prophet (PBUH) is reported to have said “اتقوا فراسة المؤمن فإنه ينظر بنور الله” (beware of the wisdom of the man of faith because he sees with the light of God). However, there are degrees of this light as it is never fully available to the finitude of man. Even the Holy Prophet (Pbuh) is reported to have said: “رب ارنى حقائق الاشياء” (O God, show me things as they really are).

The world of sense experience is an authentic world, according to the Qur’an. It is a reality to be seriously reckoned with. Man has been asked to observe and speculate over the signs of God spread out in the entire material world. For instance,

In the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of night and day; and the ships that run in the sea with that which profits man; and the water that Allah sends down from the sky, then gives life therewith to the earth after its death and spreads in it all (kinds of) animals; and the changing of the winds and the clouds made subservient between heaven and earth, there are surely signs for a people who understand<sup>12</sup>.

The Qur’an also advises its readers to contemplate the events of human history, which can be characterized as the temporal embodiments of eternal principles: Does it not manifest to them how many of the generations, in whose dwellings they go about, We destroyed before them? Surely there are signs in this for men of understanding<sup>13</sup>. Stories of the rise and fall of nations, of the way the Divine law of requital operated in the past, analogically prescribes for us the course of action that we ourselves ought to follow. So history is useful because we can learn a lesson from it. Besides, a delineation of Divine behaviour in actual, spatio-temporal human situations makes it easier for us to recognize the personal character of God Who answers our prayers and comes to our help when we are in trouble. The third sphere of natural knowledge emphasized by the Qur’an is the human ego itself which also furnishes pointers to the being as well as character of Divine existence. Man has been created after the image of God. He is the bearer of His attributes which together serve as the supreme ideals of moral and spiritual excellence for him. It is thus the responsibility of man to recognize the essential nature of his self and then strive to realize it. Those who do not do so, those who permit their essential I-ness, the appreciative self, to be buried under the dust of disregard and obliviousness, they are the ones who never succeed<sup>14</sup>. There is a very pithy *sufi* maxim which



says: “من عرف نفسه فقد عرف ربه” (whoever recognizes his own self in fact recognizes his God). Naturalistic observation and thinking, whatever its kind, has a sacredness about it. It is not simply recommended but is also a religious duty which has to be carried out and for which man will be answerable to God on the Day of Judgement. It is worth noticing in this regard that word آيات (sing: آية) meaning ‘signs’ has been used for the verses contained in the Book of God as well as for various phenomena of nature. “Nature’s laws are God’s thoughts thinking themselves in orbits and tides. As there are signs of God’s power and wisdom and beauty in all men... The verses of God’s revelation are inscribed in the letters of light in the minds and hearts of those who reflect rightly on nature within and nature without”<sup>15</sup>. The Qur’an says:

Surely the hearing and the sight and the heart, of all of these it will he asked.<sup>16</sup>

And whoever is blind in this (world) he will be blind in the Hereafter<sup>17</sup>. (The denizens of hell) will say: Had we but listened or pondered, we should not have been among the inmates of the burning fire<sup>18</sup>.

They (the inmates of hell) have hearts wherewith they understand not, and they have eyes wherewith they see not, and they have ears wherewith they hear not. They are as cattle; nay, they are more astray. These are the heedless ones<sup>19</sup>.

Surely the vilest of beasts in Allah’s sight are the deaf, the dumb, who understand not<sup>20</sup>.

And so on.

Such a persistent emphasis on sense experience and its rational manipulation led to the rapid development of natural sciences among the earliest Muslims. Birth of Islam, Iqbal rightly observes, is the birth of inductive intellect in man<sup>21</sup>. This was because of the fact already emphasized above that various phenomena of the universe display pointers to the existence of God, the Ultimate Reality. After all, sciences too aim at the discovery of the most fundamental truths regarding the subject-matters of their study. Thus, essentially, although with the qualifications laid down above, there ought to be no disharmony between the efforts of a devotee of natural sciences and a religious seeker of God as actually no water-tight differentiation between the natural and the supernatural is allowed by the Qur’an. “Nature is to the Divine Self, to quote Iqbal once again, “as character is to the human self... in our observation of nature we are virtually seeking a kind of intimacy with the Absolute Ego”<sup>22</sup>.

Western sciences unduly emphasized this cleavage in order to create a separate empire for themselves rejecting everything that did not conform to their principles of inductive generalization as illusory and superstitious or, as they would derisively put it, religious and metaphysical. Thus was initiated a cold war between philosophy and sciences, on the one hand, and religion, on the other. The war has ever continued to persist in one form or the other. However, all this is absolutely alien to the comprehensive, organismic and total point of view about existence which the Qur'an very forcefully enunciates.

If there is no alienation between the natural and the supernatural then how does a traffic from nature to God actually take place? How do nature and God become relevant to each other? I have already said that faith in God, according to the Qur'anic scheme of things, must preside over all forms of ordinary knowledge. Thus nature is relevant to the existence of God but still it cannot be equal to Him nor can it furnish a sufficient proof for His existence. This proof is provided only by faith in Him that gradually becomes self-conscious during a dispassionate study of the universe.

Qur'anic epistemology has a moral dimension also. Faith in God, I have already explained, determines the character as well as direction of the different ordinarily recognized modes of knowledge. I must say now that it also determines the kind of actions that the man of faith ought to perform. If a person has faith, in the sense explained above, in the existence of God with all His beautiful names, the celebrated ideals of human excellence, only morally excellent actions can issue forth from him. It impinges upon the whole of his personality in all its aspects, the cognitive, the affective as well as the conative. It would be total lack of self-awareness or sheer simulation and hypocrisy for an immoral man or even for one who does not have a temperamental likeness for virtuous actions to claim that he has faith in God. The oft-quoted verse from Ghalib

جانتا ہوں ثواب طاعت و زہد  
پر طبیعت ادھر نہیں آتی

(I know that obedience and piety are prized activities but I don't feel inclined towards them)

would be a self-contradiction in terms if the word 'know' used here is accepted as the kind of assurance that faith is. When Socrates had identified knowledge with virtue, he meant by 'knowledge' nothing

less than 'faith' itself. The Qur'an, it is significant to point out, almost invariably mentions the performance of good actions alongwith the acquisition of faith by man in such verses as:

“ان الذين آمنوا و عملوا الصلحت” , “يا ايها الذين آمنوا و عملوا الصلحت”

The relationship between faith and actions from the Islamic viewpoint is so indissoluble and firm that, if a man of faith falls into evil ways and commits major sins, he is not forgiven unless he solemnly repents and almost makes a renewal of his faith. Conversely, if he performs 'morally' excellent actions in the usual sense of the term but has no faith in God, his actions are unacceptable from the Divine point of view.

Despite the express Qur'anic position spelled out here there has been a heated controversy between the kharijites and the murji'ites among Muslim theologians regarding the relationship between faith and action. The former held that good actions are a part of faith whereas the latter were of the opinion that faith has nothing to do with good actions. The Controversy was kept alive on extraneous grounds, that is, without the fullest realization of the inherent dynamics of faith. The dialecticians could not take account of these dynamics because of their preoccupation with purely rational methods. One has to rise above logicalities and live religiously in order to grasp the true significance of all spiritual and moral concepts.

## NOTES AND REFERENCE

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- <sup>1</sup> Qur'an. 25:73
  - <sup>2</sup> Ibid., 2:129 etc.
  - <sup>3</sup> Specially refer to the verse 2:31
  - <sup>4</sup> Qur'an 25:65 etc.
  - <sup>5</sup> Qur'an 39:6
  - <sup>6</sup> Ibid, 5:11
  - <sup>7</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr: *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, pp. 21-22
  - <sup>8</sup> Refer for this distinction to Bertrand Russell: *Problems of Philosophy*, Chapter V.
  - <sup>9</sup> Qur'an 4:82
  - <sup>10</sup> Ibid, 6:59
  - <sup>11</sup> See Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan: *Maqalat-e Sir Sayyid* (edited by Mohammad Ismail Panipati) Vol.3, pp. 16 ff
  - <sup>12</sup> Qur'an 2:164
  - <sup>13</sup> Ibid, 20:128
  - <sup>14</sup> Ibid, 91:10

- <sup>15</sup> Edward F. Barrett (ed.), University of Notre Dame Natural Law Institute Proceedings: article on ‘Natural Law in the Muslim Tradition’ by Khalifa Abdul Hakim, pp.35-36
- <sup>16</sup> Qur’an 17:36
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid, 17:72
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid, 67:10
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid, 7: 179
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid, 8:22
- <sup>21</sup> Allama Muhammad Iqbal: *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 120
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid, pp. 65-67