

Contemporary Islamic Thought: Repairing Broken Links in the Chain

THE FAILURE of so many Islamic reform movements points to the existence of deep-seated defects that need to be identified and corrected on a broad scale. In addition to promoting innovative, reformist interpretations and correcting the concepts that underlie these defects, there is a need to examine three major links in the chain that makes up contemporary Islamic thought. These three links are: a creedal framework for thought and action; moderation; and realistic applications.

[THEME I]

Constructing a Creedal Framework for Thought and Action

The triliteral root ^ʿ-q-d from which we derive the Arabic word for creed (^ʿ*aqīdah*) bears the sense of tying or knotting. “I knotted the rope” (^ʿ*aqadtū al-ḥabl*), one might say. The marriage bond can be referred to as ^ʿ*uqdat al-nikāḥ*, and the word ‘contract’ is translated into Arabic as ^ʿ*aqd*, plural ^ʿ*uqūd*. When we ‘tie’ or ‘bind’ our hearts or intentions to a particular truth or ideal, this truth or ideal becomes the source of authority that guides us and the motive force behind what we do or say to the point where we would even be willing to fight in its defense if necessary.

In keeping with the images of binding and loosing, tying and untying, when faith in Islamic creeds (*al-ʿaqāʾid al-islāmiyyah*) weakened and became tinged with impurities, these creeds began to lose their

ability to bind the Muslim community together just as a rope can no longer hold a sail in place if its knots unravel. To make matters worse, knowledge and learning were being undermined by disagreements and fruitless wrangling.

By defining the nature of existence, human beings, and the cosmos, Islamic doctrine or creed served as the idea that created Islamic civilization. However, the civilizational function this creed performs depends on the way Muslims understand and interpret it. If the Muslim community's understanding of its doctrine is distorted, disjointed, or incomplete, this fact is bound to be reflected in the state of their civilization. At the present time, weaknesses in the Muslim community can be said to have arisen out of two principle factors. One of these is the age of decadence during which Islamic thought stagnated and was divorced from daily life. And the second is the intellectual and moral challenge that faces the Muslim community due to its encounters with Western culture and civilization over the last two centuries.

In addition to the failure to provide the Muslim community with the needed doctrinal framework for thought and action, we also have another bane to contend with, one that manifests itself in the method by which the Muslim community draws on its authoritative sources. The texts of the Qur'an and the Prophetic Sunnah differ in terms of both definitiveness and attestation. So, for example, whereas all Qur'anic verses have definitive attestation, some of them convey definitive meanings, while others do not; as for texts from the Sunnah, some of them are definitive in terms of both their meaning and their attestation, while others are merely speculative on the level of meaning, attestation, or both. Consequently, Muslims have arrived at differing understandings of what such texts mean. Moreover, as time passed and Muslim thinkers began to rely on the views of their predecessors rather than engaging creatively with Islamic texts and the situations to which they apply, Islamic thought stagnated. The positions of earlier thinkers went unchallenged and unanalyzed, without regard for the factors and circumstances to which these positions had been a response.

People's response to Islamic doctrine takes places at different levels. One of these is understanding; another is belief in its truth; still another

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is the decision to treat it as an authoritative source of guidance for thought and action, including one's research and the conclusions to which it leads. As we have noted, the failure to employ Islamic doctrine as a means of providing a framework for both thought and action had led to the emergence of numerous deviations from a correct understanding of Islamic teachings, which in turn has prevented Muslims from taking the required initiatives based on their faith. Many Muslims have fallen prey to the belief that Islamic faith is limited to mental or verbal assent to Islamic creeds rather than extending to action on the basis of these creeds. This, along with laziness and dependency, disregard for the laws of cause and effect, and fatalistic thinking, has had a stultifying effect on the Muslim community's enthusiasm and effectiveness and resulted in an insipid, superficial piety.

When political thought was disconnected from an Islamic doctrinal framework with respect to the values of social justice and human rights, many Muslims began thinking in ways that legitimized tyranny. This was followed by the appearance of phrases such as, "the just tyrant," and, "better a brute tyrant than endless chaos." Al-Najjar has suggested two interrelated steps that can be taken by modern Muslim thinkers toward strengthening the connection between Islamic doctrine and law. The first is to devote a doctrinal study to each central issue relating to Islamic law, and the second is to ensure that every legal ruling issued has a firm doctrinal basis, that is, that it is consistent with both the specific requirements of Islamic law, and the overall principles by which these requirements are shaped.

Hasan al-Turabi is of the view that apart from limited attempts at renewal that took place in the seventh century CE, innovative textual interpretation ceased with the deaths of the founders of the principle schools of Islamic jurisprudence and their leading students.

[THEME 2]

The Centrist Trend

The Arabic root *w-s-t* is associated with the center of something, that

which comes in the middle, or between two extremes. As such, it is associated with fairness and justice. God has described the Muslim community as a “...community of the middle way...” (*Sūrah al-Baqarah*, 2:143). The Quraysh tribe used to be described as “the most central of the Arabs with respect to lineage” (*awsaṭ al-ʿarabi nasaban*), meaning that they were of the best lineage. Another, related, usage of this root is found in *Sūrah al-Baqarah*, 2:238, where believers are urged to commit themselves to “guard strictly your (habit of) prayers, specially the Middle Prayer (*al-ṣalāh al-wustā*); and stand before God in a devout (frame of mind)”. The same sense of the word is reflected in the hadith according to which “the best of all things are the center-most” (*khayr al-umūri awsaṭuhā*), and in *Sūrah al-Qalam*, 68:28, where the phrase *awsaṭuhum* is rendered in English as “...the most right-minded among them...”

Centrism, or moderation, is a distinguishing feature of comprehensive Islam, and a universal guiding principle that informs all Islamic legal rulings. The concept of centrism governs both thought and behavior, conceptualization and action. It is this feature of Islam that enabled it to serve as the foundation for such a great civilization before being undermined by distortions that, in essence, were due to a departure from the Qur’anic “middle way” in the direction of either excess or neglect. The principle of moderation means that Muslims are taught to live in such a way that spirit and body are in harmony, and there is no conflict or contradiction between religious values and the demands of social, economic and political life. Moderation constitutes the ideational and methodological foundation for all Islamic concepts. It is the axis on which the general Islamic system turns. Yet despite this fact, only rarely has reformist thought succeeded in bringing the Muslim community back to this foundational principle.

Shaykh al-Qaradawi has defined moderation as an approach that steers clear of extremes in any direction. In his book, *Al-Thaqāfah al-ʿArabiyyah al-Islāmiyyah bayn al-Aṣālah wa all-Muʿāṣarah* (Arab Culture Between Tradition and Modernity), al-Qaradawi sets out to establish a middle position between overemphasis on either the traditional or the modern. He advocates taking from both tradition and modernity without abandoning either. If we intend to adhere to the

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approach followed by the earliest Muslim scholars, this means striving for interpretations appropriate to our own day and age just as they did for theirs. It requires us to use our reason just as they did, and when we issue legal rulings, engage in research, and relate to ourselves and others, to demonstrate awareness of the environment in which we live and the conditions that surround us. Similarly, we should adopt from others whatever ideas, knowledge or practices will be of benefit to us just as they did, and be inventive in our day-to-day affairs just as they were.

What would a return to the approach adhered to by the earliest Muslims look like? It would involve a re-embrace of their understanding of Islamic doctrine in its simplicity, clarity and purity; of worship as a spiritual, heartfelt practice; of ethics as a powerful, integrated network of values; of Islamic Law as a flexible entity with broad horizons; of life as governed by consistent, universal laws; and of human beings as noble, morally accountable stewards of God endowed with reason. In Qaradawi's view, the 'first Islam' was marked by purity and simplicity in its doctrine, ease and sincerity in its worship, purity and integrity in its morals; creative, innovative interpretation; fruitful action; and balance between a concern for this world and a concern for the after-life, between reason and emotion.

Al-Qaradawi stresses the need to be familiar with all aspects of life in the present age. To be genuinely modern is to exist consciously side by side with the living, not with the dead, and to deal with reality as it is now, not as it was in the distant past. The only way we can come to know reality is to become familiar with the geographical, historical, social, economic, political, intellectual, and spiritual elements that shape it and determine its direction.

Al-Qaradawi notes that Western culture is so closely associated with modernity that some people mistakenly equate modernity with Westernization. At the same time, al-Qaradawi affirms the need to benefit from everything that is wholesome and good and to invest it not only in the intellectual and theoretical sphere, but in the practical, material sphere as well. As long as something is beneficial, it makes no difference what 'container' it comes in; his only requirement is that we relate to the world around us in a discerning manner that serves the

aims and goals of the Muslim community and violates none of its foundational principles or legal rulings.

In his discussion of tradition and modernity, al-Qaradawi cautions against both a mindless fixation on the past, and an excessive fascination with the future. By contrast, he notes, Islam takes a midway position that falls prey to neither of these extremes. Islam combines stability with flexibility in its teachings and its rulings; it maintains a stable commitment to ends, and flexibility in relation to means; stability in relation to universals, and flexibility in relation to particulars; stability in relation to spiritual and religious matters, and flexibility in relation to material, earthly matters. What endangers Islamic society is for Muslims to attempt to freeze what should be allowed to change and evolve, and to change what should remain as it is. According to Qaradawi, the moderation or centrism that is the hallmark of Islam manifests itself most clearly in the areas of belief and conceptualization, in personal piety and worship, in ethics and rules of etiquette, in legislation and order; in permission and prohibition; in individuality vs. communality.

The method that al-Qaradawi adheres to in issuing legal rulings, writing and teaching is based on the following principles: (1) lenience in relation to peripheral matters and strictness in relation to fundamentals; (2) limiting duties and prohibitions to the minimum; (3) making generous allowance for dispensations (*rukhas*), that is, exceptions to Islamic duties such as being allowed to break one's fast in Ramadan if one is sick or traveling, or to shorten one's obligatory prayers when traveling; (4) avoiding sectarian fanaticism and bigotry; (5) lenience in relation to things that are so widespread that they are virtually impossible to avoid (such as, for example, pictures of scantily clad women in advertisements); (6) addressing people in contemporary language; (7) toeing a middle course that avoids both licentiousness and excessive austerity; and (8) providing sufficient clarification and explanation of one's legal rulings.

As for al-Qaradawi's preferred hermeneutical method, it involves the following steps: (1) interpreting the Qur'an in light of both the Qur'an itself and the Prophetic hadiths; (2) gleaning guidance from the interpretations of the Prophet's Companions and their Successors;

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(3) interpreting each text within its cultural and linguistic context; (4) exhibiting awareness of the grammatical rules of the Arabic language, common usage, rhetorical styles and devices, and the like; and (5) avoiding the use of weak and forged hadiths, Jewish folklore, and groundless opinions as a basis for one's interpretations of Qur'anic or hadith texts. Lastly, al-Qaradawi warns against three particular pitfalls: the distortion of texts due to extremist thinking, forgeries falsely attributed to authoritative figures, and incorrect interpretations of the ignorant.

[THEME 3]

Realism and the Jurisprudence of Sound Application

It is not enough simply to understand what a text means. One must also see how to apply the text properly to real-life situations in different times, places and circumstances. The need to interpret religious texts with a view to their real-life applications has led to the development of a variety of hermeneutical tools, including, for example, juristic preference (*istiḥsān*), which involves giving human interests (*maṣāliḥ mursalah*) and the overall aims of Islamic Law priority over the results of *qiyās*, or analogical reasoning, and reasoning based on unrestricted interests (*istiṣlāḥ*), which entails addressing particular human needs by issuing a legal ruling on a case which is not mentioned explicitly in any authoritative Islamic legal text and on which there is no consensus. Unfortunately, however, these very tools have been the subject of disputes among Muslim jurists, and those jurists who approve of them have not developed them into a systematic applied hermeneutic. Instead, they have simply been appended to the four recognized sources of Islamic legal evidence (the Qur'an, the Sunnah, consensus and analogical reasoning), yet without being given the attention they deserve.

The human condition is not necessarily better now than it once was in all areas, including the interpretations that seek to identify the all-encompassing aims and intents of divine revelation. Those who engage in such interpretations may resort to the use of methods that they see as

being ‘justified by reality’ but which, in fact, may not be permitted by the text. Divine revelation did come to achieve specific purposes. However, some of the texts that show us how to achieve these purposes are definitive, and others speculative. And just as the revelation obliges us to achieve these purposes, it also obliges us to employ the means set forth in the texts before us. The rulings that can be influenced by current circumstances are those that are based on speculative texts. As for those that are based on definitive texts, changing circumstances have no effect on them. In this connection, it bears noting that despite its reliance on stable Islamic principles, and despite its having identified criteria and conditions that are intended to prevent it from falling into the traps of neglect on one hand, and excess on the other, Islamic thought has yet to develop and crystallize ways of understanding and relating to changing circumstances in a dynamic, inclusive manner.

We now turn to the suggestions that have been offered by contemporary Muslim thinkers concerning what we might term a methodology of application, and problems relating thereto. In his book *Fiqh al-Tadayyun* (The Jurisprudence of Piety), al-Najjar presents what we might term a ‘jurisprudence of reality’ as an important element of the ‘jurisprudence of piety’ and the ‘jurisprudence of application’ of the rulings it yields. When speaking of ‘reality’ here, al-Najjar is referring to all aspects of human life with all of their complex interrelationships, causes and effects. The best way to understand reality is to be involved in it by living side by side with people and getting to know their problems. And when seeking to analyze such problems, we can draw on the findings of the various sciences, from psychology, sociology and economics, to physics, chemistry, astronomy, and the like.

The process of relating to a text consists of the effort one expends thinking about the text on one hand, and about concrete circumstances on the other. One’s understanding of the text and how it relates to the circumstances at hand will then yield a particular application.

1. *Basics of the method of understanding*

Al-Najjar’s ‘method of understanding’ consists of three elements: (1) exploration, (2) abstraction, and (3) integration. The process of understanding texts as envisioned by al-Najjar involves understanding

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Islamic legal rulings in an integrated manner, that is, in light of one another. For example, later rulings are to be understood in light of earlier ones, rulings that abrogate earlier rulings are to be understood in light of the rulings they have abrogated; and rulings that are unrestricted in nature are to be understood in light of those that are restricted.

Al-Najjar identifies the following foundations for understanding a text: (1) linguistic, (2) intentional (that is, relating to the aims the text is intended to fulfill), (3) complementary (having to do with how the text complements, or is complemented by, other texts), and (4) rational.

Regarding the rational aspect of understanding a text, al-Najjar notes that the way one approaches a Qur'anic text with a definitive meaning will differ from the way one approaches a text with a speculative meaning. Similarly, the way one approaches a text from the Sunnah will differ from the way one approaches a text from the Qur'an. The text from the Sunnah (the hadith) must be investigated to see whether its attestation is definitive or speculative; once this has been determined, one investigates to see whether its meaning is definitive or speculative.

If the text is speculative in meaning, one's interpretation must meet certain conditions in order to be trustworthy and valid. These conditions include, for example, that: (1) the interpretation must rest on clear evidence; (2) the interpretation must be consistent with the constraints of the language in terms of grammar, syntax, linguistic context, and the like; and (3) the interpretation must not conflict with a definitive text or recognized legal principle. Furthermore, al-Najjar distinguishes between two types of 'rational knowledge'. One of these types is marked by complete, or nearly complete, certainty, while the other is marked by uncertainty. When engaging in the interpretation of Islamic texts, the scholar should depend only on the former type of knowledge. In light of this former type of knowledge, then, the interpreter will be aided in specifying the meaning of the text, and inferring the aim that the text was intended to fulfill. For the entire Islamic religion is based on the higher aims that lend order to all of its duties and directives. These aims, moreover, reflect human interests and needs which, when properly fulfilled, enable people to achieve happiness and well-being.

2. Basics of the method of application

Al-Najjar notes that applying legal rulings in such a way that the aims for which they were intended are fulfilled requires adherence to an appropriate methodology. The most important principle underlying such a methodology, in his view, is what he terms specification or individualization. Reality is made up of myriad sets of circumstances, cases and events that affect both individuals and communities, and which arise in a variety of contexts both geographical and temporal. Consequently, the application of a given ruling in exactly the same way to every situation without taking such individual differences into account could lead to hardship and, rather than fulfilling the aim for which was intended, might actually do the opposite. The second principle to which al-Najjar makes reference is referred to as *tahqīq al-manāt*, that is, the act of determining the situations to which a given ruling applies. And the third principle is referred to as *tahqīq al-ma'āl*, which is the act of determining, as precisely as possible, what the probable outcomes/consequences of applying a given ruling will be.

Basics of the Method of Application		
Individualization	Determining the situations to which the ruling applies (<i>tahqīq al-manāt</i>)	Predicting probable outcomes (<i>tahqīq al-ma'āl</i>)

Lastly, it should be pointed out that secularists tend to portray the application of Islamic rulings as being restricted to the realm of law. Furthermore, they portray their legal application as being restricted to the Qur'anically prescribed penalties for specific crimes, as though Islam consisted in nothing but cutting off thieves' hands and flogging adulterers, slanderers and drunkards.

Islam is, in essence, a peaceable creed that enjoins sincere worship, a stringent moral code, good works, and heartfelt labor to prosper the Earth and bring compassion and mercy to humankind. It is a call to virtue and goodness, and to the communal practice of urging one

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another to live lives of truth and forbearance and to engage in struggle in the way of God. For this reason, the moderate, centrist current of Islamic thought calls for the application of Islam in its entirety, not simply the application of certain narrow aspects of its teaching as many people imagine. Furthermore, as al-Qaradawi has pointed out, Islamic law cannot be properly applied unless the people applying it believe in its sacredness and carry it out with a spirit of reverence.

Hence, the proper approach to applying Islamic legal rulings to real-life situations calls for realism, moderation, and a sound creedal framework for thought and action. These elements are all vital, as no one of them alone can ensure proper application of the rulings of Islamic law. Once they are all present, however, and working in tandem, we will have rejoined the links of the chain that makes up contemporary Islamic thought.