

Authority: Divine or Qur'anic?

Any study of authority needs to consider the subject from a number of different perspectives, including an analysis of concepts and how they are formulated, as well as effects of these concepts at both the practical and the theoretical levels. This study does not claim to be the last word on the subject. Rather, its purpose is to open the door to further examination and inquiry, and to critically analyze the main concept and the network of concepts attached to and contingent upon it.

I shall not spend a great deal of time analyzing the lexical aspects of the concepts we are about to study, because terms and concepts are two different things. In a study of terminology, it might suffice to identify the lexical root and its particular meanings and then discuss the usages appropriate to a particular field, subject, or science. Thereafter, one might attempt to define the term in a way that gives a clear idea of its intended meaning. A concept, however, may be described as a term connected to a network of philosophical and cultural roots. Furthermore, regardless of the diversity of its roots, a concept will always correlate with the epistemological paradigm within which it functions. This assumption holds true in regard to Islamic concepts or those concepts that are key to understanding the Islamic order.

For example, an entire network of related concepts surround the Islamic concept of divine authority. Unless they are understood, both on their own and within the larger context of Islamic order itself, the concept of divine authority will remain unclear. This network includes the concepts of divinity, creation, worship, the world and the hereafter, the divine discourse, the lawful and the unlawful, the classification of texts as relative or unqualified or as general or specific, the religious laws of earlier communities, the unity

of religion, and many others. Regardless of the nature or importance of these ancillary concepts, one cannot fully understand a concept without understanding its related concepts.

People sometimes arrive at mistaken notions of concepts when they attempt to understand them according only to their lexical meanings or usages. Over the past few decades, the concept of divine authority has been misunderstood in this way by several schools of thought within contemporary Islamic reform movements. This study seeks to clarify this concept and to rid it of the ambiguities and confusions that have grown up around it. I shall begin by indicating briefly a few points that are essential to understanding the discussion that is to follow.

Let us consider God's call to the Patriarch Ibrāhīm (Abraham):

“Behold! I will make you a leader of people.” Ibrāhīm asked: “And my offspring as well (will You make them imams too)?” Allah replied: “My covenant does not extend to those who are unjust.” (2:124)

This is *imāmah*, a sort of leadership made possible by God: There is justice and injustice, as values that need to be acknowledged; there are those who are unjust (to themselves and to others) and those who are just; and those who outdo others in justice and good deeds. In this verse, leadership takes the form of a covenant between God and humanity – a covenant that may not be extended to those who are unjust or who draw close to injustice. The value of justice is highlighted here as the opposite of injustice, and is shown to be the second (after *tawhīd*) of the higher purposes behind the missions of the prophets and those reformers who would later assume their place.

A second point to remember is that the idea of divinely appointed leadership, which is inherent in the concept of *imāmah*, naturally leads to the concept of election (*iṣṭifā'*): “Allah chooses messengers from among the angels as well as from among men” (22:75). This concept, moreover, is connected by means of certain characteristics to the process of the divine election of peoples and nations: “Behold! Allah chose Adam, Nūḥ (Noah), the family of Ibrahim, and the family of ‘Imran over all of humanity” (3:33).

This divine election of individuals as prophets and messengers to peoples chosen to be the focus of their efforts, leadership, and guidance must be kept in mind throughout our discussion of divine authority.

Looking into the history of legal and political systems of ancient civilizations, we find that several of these were based on the idea of divine

sovereignty or rule. For example, the Sumerians, Akkadians, and Babylonians had such systems. Among the most important peoples mentioned in any discussion of divine authority are the ancient Jews, known later as the Children of Israel. In fact, the form of divine authority understood by them was fairly well defined: revealed scripture, tablets inscribed by God with commandments they were required to follow, and prophets and messengers charged with communicating God's will to the people.

Among the most important elements in the Jewish understanding of divine authority were the notions that they were God's "chosen people" and that God ruled over them directly, chose His messengers from among them, and ordered them to enforce His rule and carry His teachings to the people. Perhaps no less important was the understanding that, as a result, they were the closest of all people to God, and so were "God's people," and that their land was thus a "sacred" or "holy" land. This concept of divine authority left clear imprints on every aspect of the Jews' lives, including their worldview, character as a people, and concepts of law, worship, life, and the universe.

The mission of Prophet Jesus may be seen as an attempt to correct many of the concepts that had influenced the Jews in their dealings or relationship with God, the universe, its prophets, and with itself and its neighbors:

And I have come to confirm the truth of whatever there still remains of the Torah,¹ and to make lawful unto you some of the things that [afore-time] were forbidden to you. (3:50)

Jesus, the son of Mary, said: "O Children of Israel! Behold, I am an apostle of God unto you, [sent] to confirm the truth of whatever there still remains of the Torah, and to give [you] the glad tiding of an apostle who shall come after me, whose name shall be Ahmad." (61:6)

Think not that I have come to destroy the law or the prophets. I have not come to destroy, but to fulfill. For verily I say unto you: Until heaven and Earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, until all is fulfilled. (Matthew 5:17)

And it is easier for Heaven and Earth to pass, than [for] one tittle of the law to fail. (Luke 16:17)

All of these verses clearly indicate that Jesus was sent to support the Torah, call people to its teachings, and, perhaps most importantly, explain to them how to implement those teachings in daily life. But Christian thought differed from Jewish thought on many matters, even if both tradi-

tions derived their concepts from the same source, perhaps due to Jesus's emphasis on reform in general, particularly on the rabbis' undue attention to the letter – rather than the spirit – of the scriptures. This was why he so often used parables in his attempt to help his people understand the Torah, which engaged both the hearts and minds of the believers.

In regard to divine sovereignty, however, the Christian understanding was based on the teachings of the Torah and the law derived therefrom. This is reflected in Jesus' reply to Pilate, when Pilate asked him:

“Are you speaking to me? Do you not know that I have the power to either crucify or release you?” Jesus answered: “You have no power at all over me, except what has been given to you from above.” (John 19:10-11)

The concept was further emphasized in Paul's letter to the Romans:

For there is no power but that of God. The powers that be are ordained of God. (Romans 13:1)

In regard to the Qur'anic concept of divine authority, let us begin by considering the relevant verses:

Not in my power is that which you so hastily demand. Rule rests with none but Allah. (6:57)

For those who do not rule by what Allah has revealed, it is they who are truly iniquitous. (5:47)

And on whatever you may differ, the ruling thereon rests with Allah. (42:10)

But no, by your Lord, they are not truly believers unless they make you [O Prophet] a judge of all on that which they disagree and then find in their hearts no bar to accepting your decision and give themselves up to it in utter self-surrender. (4:65)

At the heart of Muhammad's mission was what Abraham specified in his prayer to God:

O Lord! Raise up from the midst of our offspring a prophet from among themselves, who will convey to them Your messages, impart to them revelation and practical wisdom, and purify them. (2:129)

And then Allah answered:

Allah bestowed a favor upon the believers when He raised up in their midst a prophet from among themselves to convey His messages to them, purify them, and impart to them the Book and practical wisdom – whereas before they were clearly lost in error. (3:164)

Prophet Muhammad was commanded to summarize his mission in the following terms:

[Say, O Muhammad:] I have been commanded to worship the Lord of this city, He who has made it sacred, and unto whom all things belong. And I have been commanded to be of those who commit themselves to Him, and to recite the Qur'an to the world. (27:91)

When we consider the Prophet's life, we find that he acted as a leader, judge, ruler, advisor, and teacher. All of these roles were taken on as a part of his prophethood, rather than as the result of his having attained power. Given that his prophethood was instructional, nurturing, and purifying, he was not sent with the sword of domination or command.

At this point, we might do well to ponder how the Prophet ordered, on the night before he liberated Makkah, that bonfires be lit on all of the surrounding hills as a show of strength designed to quell any thoughts of resistance among the Makkans. On that night, Abū Sufyān, his long-time opponent, sought him out in the company of his uncle (ʿAbbās) in order to announce his conversion and seek some gesture of honor. When Abū Sufyān saw the bonfires and realized how many followers the Prophet had, he said to ʿAbbās: “Well, your nephew's kingdom has certainly grown vast!” ʿAbbās replied: “This is prophethood, O Abū Sufyān, not kingship.”

Clearly, ʿAbbās understood the difference. To those around him, the Prophet emphasized repeatedly that he was not a potentate or a sultan. Once, for example, when a man began shaking with apprehension before him, he said: “Take it easy! I'm not a king, I'm only the son of a Qurayshi woman who used to eat dried meat [*qadīd*] (like you do).” In the same vein, the Prophet's prayer is well known: “O Allah! Let me live as a poor man and let me die as a poor man.”

Thus, Muhammad's prophethood was predicated upon instruction, edification, recitation of the Qur'an and its teachings, and amelioration of the human condition. Under such circumstances, if he engaged in what seemed to be political matters, he did so out of instructional considerations. This is the difference between prophetic rule and all other forms of rule. Moreover, this was carried out after his death by his political successors, each of whom

understood his fundamental role to include reciting the Qur'anic verses to the people, teaching them the meaning of its verses, instructing them how to apply the Qur'anic teachings (wisdom) in their daily life, and helping them to purify themselves. None of these aspects is related to the sort of authority derived solely from power.

In view of the foregoing, it is extremely difficult to propose that authority in Islam is a matter of power vested directly in God or wielded in His name, or in the name of the Shari'ah, by the Prophet or his political successors. Rather, authority in Islam is bound irrevocably to education, edification, recitation, and purification; these, in turn, influence its exercise. It is interesting to consider the Prophet's words when he looked ahead to the Ummah's future: "*Khilāfah* will reign for 30 years. Thereafter, there will follow a period of gnashing monarchy." In other words, he differentiated between *khilāfah*, which followed the way of prophethood, and authority based on power and exercised under a certain name, slogan, or ideology.

In the Islamic understanding, then, there is prophethood and *khilāfah*, which follows in the way of prophethood. However, authority resides in the Qur'an, which is characterized by attributes not found in any of the earlier scriptures. For example, God guaranteed that its text will remain intact throughout history. In addition, it confirms all earlier scriptures and came as a guidance for all of humanity, its Shari'ah is merciful and accommodating, and so much more. However, the important thing is that the Qur'an is to be understood and interpreted through a human reading, for its discourse is directed toward human beings. From this point, the entire matter of reading and interpretation comes into the picture, along with the idea of the "two readings" (reading of the texts in conjunction with a reading of the real-existential).²

Thus, whereas the concept of divine authority was understood by the earlier monotheistic traditions to involve God directly in human affairs, the Islamic understanding is that divine authority resides in His eternal message, the Qur'an, which is the Word of God:

And upon you have We bestowed this reminder, so that you might make clear unto humanity all that has been revealed to them, so that they might take thought. (16:44)

A Book We have revealed to you in order that you might bring forth all of humanity, by the permission of their Lord, out of the depths of darkness into the light, and onto the way that leads to the Almighty, the One to whom all praise is due. (14:1)

We have revealed to you this Book to make everything clear, and to provide guidance, mercy, and glad tidings for all those who have committed themselves to Allah. (16:89)

Authority in Islam is the authority of the Qur'an; it is to be understood, and interpreted and then applied with wisdom by those who have committed themselves to it and to purifying themselves by means of it, each in accordance with their own cultural, geographical, economic, social, and historical circumstances.

As divine authority is vested in the Qur'an, Muslims are responsible for providing all of the guarantees demanded by the values shared by humanity in general, such as justice, truth, guardianship, and guidance. Moreover, this sort of authority is enhanced by many different dimensions, including the Shari'ah's universal and comprehensive nature and its basis in the texts of the Qur'an, which are open to all. Thus, the Qur'an may never become the exclusive domain of one group in the name of divine authority, owing solely to such people claiming to be the only ones capable of accessing and understanding it. Similarly, its authority is a liberating concept that empowers successive generations of Muslims to constantly renew their understanding of God's will for them and to order their affairs in a tractable manner:

My mercy overspreads everything, and so I shall confer it on those who are conscious of Me and spend in charity, and who believe in Our messages – those who follow the Prophet, the unlettered one whom they find described in their Torah, and in the Injil; who will enjoin them to do what is right and forbid them to do what is wrong, and make lawful to them the good things in life and forbid them the bad things, and lift from them the burdens and the shackles that were upon them. (7:156-57)

In this Ummah, the one God intended to be the “middlemost” and whose message is intended to be the final message to humanity, the Qur'an is the final authority. Let me quote here from al-Shāfi'ī:

Thus, the Shari'ah [by which he means the Qur'an] is the absolute authority, over all, and over the Prophet, upon him be peace, and over all the believers. So the Book is the guide, and Revelation (*waḥy*) instructs in and clarifies that guidance, while all [members] of creation are the ones for whom that guidance is intended. So when the Prophet's heart and limbs, or his inner and outer being, were illuminated by the light of the Truth, he became the Ummah's first and greatest guide, for Allah singled him out,

to the exception of all others, to receive that clear light, having chosen him from among all of His creation. So Allah chose him, first of all, to receive the Revelation that lit up his inner and outer being, so that his character became, as it were, the Qur'an. This came about because the Prophet, upon him be peace, gave revelation authority over himself until his character was brought into accord with that revelation, into accord with the Qur'an. Thus, revelation was the authority and the standing speaker, while the Prophet, upon him be peace, submitted to that, answering its call, and standing by its authority. Then, if the matter was so, if the Shari'ah was the authority over the Prophet, upon him be peace, or if the Qur'an was the authority, then all of humanity deserves to be subjects to the authority of the Qur'an.³

But, one may ask, how did so many contemporary Islamic movements acquire such mistaken understandings of divine authority? Why did they attempt, in its name, to vault into positions of political power and insist that Islam is based on this notion?

To begin with, the majority of these movements represent extensions of independence movements that began as attempted jihads against foreign colonialist powers. At the time, they brought everything under their power, including the entire intellectual and cultural heritage of the Ummah, to bear against the enemy by calling Muslims to the glory of the past. Even though very few of those movements actually accomplished what they set out to do, the colonialists left, new faces appeared, and national governments were established. At the time of their formation, however, the influence of western concepts was overwhelming, including ideas regarding nationalism, national governments, and the exercise of power. As a result, the new governments often bore little resemblance to the models of the Muslim past.

In such an atmosphere, Islamic movements began their internal struggles with the goal of achieving that for which so many of their predecessors in Algeria, Egypt, India, Iraq, and many other Islamic lands had given their lives. Moreover, the feeling among most participants was that the Ummah had fallen victim once again, but this time to its own people! Confronted with a state of dependency in economics, politics, thought, institutions, and even culture, the leaders of the Islamic movements turned again to the heritage of Islam in order to find the right sort of religious ideas and slogans with which to fire the masses' imaginations and oppose the ideologies and practices of their new rulers who, despite their Islamic names and the nominal Islamic trappings of their governments, differed little from their colonialist predecessors. Thus, the Islamists branded their opponents *jāhili*, a des-

ignation for pre-Islamic pagans, and charged them with usurping the reins of power on the grounds that authority and sovereignty belonged only to God.

This is approximately what happened in Pakistan, where the Islamist leadership, especially Abū al-‘Alā al-Mawdūdī, was quite vocal in its espousal of the dualist *jāhili* versus divine authority equation. As a state formed in the name of Islam, and as a homeland for India’s Muslim minority, the popular vision of Pakistan was that it would be an Islamic state. Therefore, it was only natural that when the debate over the form and legitimacy of its government began, the heavily loaded terms of *jāhili* and *God’s sovereignty* quickly gained wide circulation.

Looking at Egypt, we note that while its experience differed significantly from Pakistan’s, there are many similarities between the two. For example, in both instances the Islamists were among the first to organize the populace against the colonialists. In Egypt, the Islamists played major roles in the ‘Urabī Pasha uprising, in the revolution of 1919, and in every resistance movement thereafter, including the attempt to rid the Suez Canal of its 70,000 British “protectors” and liberate Palestine. With all of these in mind, the Islamists fully expected their countrymen to recognize their rights and acknowledge their long and arduous struggle. So when the army officers moved to abolish the monarchy, it was the Islamists who undertook to quell the populace. At that time, it was well known that without the support and assistance of the Islamists (the Muslim Brotherhood), the revolution would never have succeeded. Even so, within a few short months the revolutionaries denounced their Islamist associates and broke their agreements with them. Yet in order to appease the masses and appeal to their Islamic loyalties, the revolutionaries were careful to pay lip service to Islam. However, they acted quickly to neutralize their former allies’ influence by subjecting them to the worst sort of persecution.

From their prison cells, their places of secure detention, and their places of exile, the Islamists retaliated in the only way they knew: turning to Islam’s cultural and intellectual heritage and pointing out to the masses how their new leadership had not only betrayed the Islamists, but also Islam itself and the Muslim masses. This message was conveyed in the studies and writings of several of the movement’s most prominent thinkers, among them ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘Awdah, who wrote on legal and political systems, and Sayyid Quṭb, who used the emotive term *jāhili* to refer to the revolutionary leadership. In addition, he cited Qur’anic verses

that branded those who do not rule by the Shari‘ah (as the ordered expression of Divine revelation) as unbelievers.⁴

In fact, Sayyid Quṭb dealt at length with the terms *jāhiliyyah* (pre-Islamic paganism) and *ḥākimiyyah* (authority). In his later works, his discussions of authority took on added importance due to his opinion that the people and parties that had come into power after independence throughout the Muslim world had wrongly assumed for themselves the right of authority that belonged to God alone. In Quṭb’s opinion, no person had the right to claim legitimacy for his/her rule unless that rule was based on God’s authority.⁵ But he did not elaborate on the details of how a government based on God’s authority would actually function, probably because his purpose was merely to bring it to the Ummah’s attention and demonstrate that its rulers had failed to achieve their proclaimed post-independence goals.

Quṭb developed the concept of authority to a level of high sophistication. According to him, the creedal phrase “There is no god but God” included the meanings that God is the sole authority and that all power belongs to Him alone.⁶ However, he did not differentiate between the meaning of Allah’s authority as it pertained to the political sphere, for example, or to the sphere of the natural universe or to the legal sphere. Thus, both Quṭb and al-Mawdūdī attempted to show divine and human authority as being in opposition to each other. Just as al-Mawdūdī negated any role for either individuals or groups in the matter of authority, other than “hearing and obeying,” Quṭb did the same for the reason that God is the sole authority.

Owing to the influence of these two thinkers and activists, the concept of divine authority came to be understood in Islamist circles in almost the same way it had been understood in the days of Moses: God would establish a state of His own, with His own laws and procedures that, having originated with the divine, are sacred and inseparable from belief and the details of the articles of faith. In such a system, there is no difference between what belongs to this world and to the Hereafter, and nothing to separate what is “civil” from what is “religious” or otherwise. This popular perception persisted, despite the attempts of others to explain, within the same general framework, the role of people involved in understanding and interpreting existing realities through *ijtihad*. In addition, many commentators and other people attempted to deal with such concepts as the state, government, and legitimacy by reading the Qur’an and the hadiths and studying history, and then transposing these contemporary meanings onto the texts of the Qur’an and Sunnah. As a result of such activity, they

so distorted these concepts that a great deal of analysis and reconstruction will be required before any clear understanding can be achieved.

In order to clarify the concept of divine authority, it is necessary to consider a few fundamental matters. From their beginnings, the message and the discourse of Islam were universal: “We have not sent you [O Muhammad] otherwise than to humanity at large, to be a herald of good tidings and a warner” (34:28).

The message’s attribute of universality means that it can appeal to everyone, whether Asians, Africans, Europeans, or Americans; answer their needs throughout history; and guide them to success in this world and the Hereafter. Even though Muslims may find themselves in a most difficult position, they should never attempt to transform Islam or its concepts into weapons or a means of overthrowing, because Islam, as the religion of God, is meant for humanity at large.

Furthermore, even though the Qur’an may have been revealed in Arabic, its meanings are universal and comprehensive. The Qur’an’s relationship to the circumstances in which it was revealed, moreover, is of the nature of the relationship between the absolute and the relative, or of the unlimited to the limited. Finally, while its verses are limited, in a lexical sense, their meanings are unlimited and discernible through an understanding of its structural integrity and unique intellectual methodology.

As we move from these theological truths, insofar as they may be described as objective scientific postulates in support of Islam’s eternal and universal message, we notice that several of its special characteristics are so self-evident that we never paid much attention to their methodological consequences. Among these are the concepts of prophethood’s finality (*khatam al-nubūwah*), the principles of legal facilitation and mercy, and the Qur’an’s absolute authority regardless of time or place.

Thus, while the Qur’anic discourse begins by addressing the simplest family unit: “We said: ‘O Adam. Inhabit, you and your wife, the garden of Paradise’” (2:35), then the extended family: “and warn your closest kinfolk” (26:214), then address the tribe: “O Children of Israel. Remember those blessings of Mine with which I favored you” (2:40) and “... verily it [the Qur’an] shall be a reminder to you and to your tribe” (43:44), and then an entity larger than just a single tribe: “... in order that you may warn the mother of all cities and those living around it” (42:7).

Thereafter, the discourse progresses to include those beyond the family and the tribe: “He has sent unto the unlettered people an apostle from among themselves” (62:2), in which the meaning of “unlettered people” is

all those who had never received a revelation before. Consider what al-Shāfi'ī wrote in his *Risālah*: “He sent him (i.e., Allah sent the Prophet) at a time when people were divided into two categories.”

One of these groups was the People of the Book, who had altered its laws, rejected belief in God, engaged in lying, and mixed falsehood with the truth that God had revealed to them. After that, Allah mentioned to His Prophet some of their unbelief, saying:

“And indeed there are some among them who distort the scriptures with their tongues, so as to make you think that [what they say] is from the scriptures, when it is not from the scriptures; and who say: ‘This is from Allah,’ when it is not from Allah. Thus do they speak falsehoods about Allah, even when they know [otherwise].” (3:78)

Woe unto those who write down with their own hands, [something they claim to be] divine scripture, and then say: “This is from Allah,” in order to acquire a trifling gain thereby. Woe, then, unto them for what their hands have written, and woe unto them for all that they may have gained. (2:79)

And the Jews say: “Ezra is Allah’s son,” while the Christians say: “The Christ is Allah’s son.” Such are the sayings that they utter with their mouths, following in spirit [those] assertions made in earlier times by people who denied the truth. (They deserve the imprecation) May Allah destroy them! How perverted are their minds. They have taken their rabbis and their monks – as well as the Christ, son of Mary – for their lords beside Allah. (9:30-31)

Are you not aware of those who, having been granted their share of the divine scriptures, believe now in baseless mysteries and in the powers of evil, and maintain that those who deny the truth are more surely guided than those who believe? It is they whom Allah has rejected, and he whom Allah rejects shall find none to succor him. (4:51-52)

The other category was the group that rejected belief in Allah and created that which Allah did not allow. With their own hands, they raised stones and wood and images that pleased them, gave them names that they made up themselves, proclaimed them to be deities, and then worshipped them. When they found something that was more pleasing to them as an object of worship, they discarded what they had been worshipping, raised up the new objects of worship with their own hands, and began worshipping them! Those were the Arabs! A group of non-Arabs followed the same path, worshipping whatever they found pleasing, be it a whale, an

animal, a star, fire, or whatever. God related to Muhammad one of the answers given by those who did not worship Him: “Behold, we found our forefathers agreed on what to believe – and, verily, it is in their footsteps that we find our guidance” (43:22). And He quoted them: “[And they say to each other:] Never abandon your deities, neither Wadd nor Suwā’, nor Yaghūth, Ya‘ūq, or Nasr” (71:23).⁷

The Prophet did not die until he extended the divine discourse beyond the family, the tribe, and the nation to encompass humanity and until the following verses were revealed:

He sent His Prophet with guidance and the religion of truth, with the goal that He may cause it to prevail over all [false] religion. (9:33; 61:9)

He sent His Prophet with guidance and the religion of truth, with the goal that He make it to prevail over every [false] religion. None can bear witness [to the truth] as Allah does. (48:28)

Thus, in a historical sense, the divine discourse was revealed gradually and within differing legislative circumstances, each of which had its own particular features. Likewise, each prophet faced his own special circumstances. This is why God gave each one of them a different legal system and way of life. As the Qur’an states: “Unto every one have We appointed from you a law and a way of life” (5:48).

This verse alerts us to the importance of comparing religious legal systems to our own, as these pertain to the differing circumstances of those who believe. Finally, when we come to the Qur’an and its universal message, we discover that its legal system is one of facilitation and mercy for humanity, one designed to bring all people together within the framework of shared values and concepts.

Those who follow the Messenger, the unlettered Prophet whom they find described in their Torah, and in the Injil; the Prophet who will enjoin on them to do what is right and forbid them to do what is wrong, and make lawful for them the good things of life and forbid them the bad things, and lift from them the burdens and the shackles that were upon them. Those, then, who believe in Him, honor Him, assist Him, and follow the light bestowed through him – it is they that shall attain success. (7:157)

Therefore, it is very important that those of us within Islamic circles realize that we are face to face with a divine discourse that has progressed

in stages until, at last, it is now directed toward humanity at large. Accordingly, it is no longer possible to understand the concept of divine authority as it was understood in previous religious traditions. The popular understanding of this concept by Muslims today has been colored by attempts to counter western concepts of authority, government, and legitimacy by taking Qur'anic concepts out of context and ignoring the Qur'an's structural integrity, universality, and the true significance of prophethood's finality.

Thus, in the concept of Qur'anic authority we may discern the responsibility of individuals to read and understand and then to interpret and apply. As for divine authority, however, the individual is no more than a recipient whose only responsibility is to adhere to whatever he/she has been given. The Qur'an's authority is like human authority in the sense that it functions through a human reading of the Qur'an and a subsequent human application of its teachings, regardless of the cultural, intellectual, or other circumstances forming the context of that reading and application.

If contemporary Islamic thought is able to correct its own mistakes, then, God willing, it will not remain dormant or be destined to revolve endlessly within the confines of its own history, unable to solve its own problems. Many of those problems are related to concepts of legislation, the meanings of power and society, the relationship of the revealed texts to changing social and historical circumstances, and to concepts of deference to traditional authority (*taqlid*), renewal, and reform. If Muslims become serious about their responsibility to deal with these issues in the name of God, Who created and taught humanity by means of the pen that which it did not know, they will begin to contribute to the building of a new and better world, and thereby bring about the objectives of the truth for all of creation.

NOTES

1. See Muhammad Asad's explanation of the phrase *li mā bayna yadayhi* at note 3 in Qur'an 3:3. Muhammad Asad. *The Message of the Qur'an* (Gibraltar: Dār al-Andalus, 1984), 65-66.
2. See the author's "The Islamization of Knowledge: Yesterday and Today," *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 12, vol. 1 (spring 1995): 81-104.
3. Abū Ishāq al-Shāṭibī, *Kitāb al-I'tiṣām*, 2:328.
4. See Qur'an 5:47.

5. See, in particular, Sayyid Qutb's *Ma'ālim fī al-Ṭarīq* and his *Muqawwimāt al-Mujtama' al-Islāmī*.
6. By doing so, the further implication is that those who fail to give God His due in this matter are guilty of a form of *shirk*, which is clearly disbelief – and the worst sort of disbelief at that.
7. Imām al-Shāfi'ī, *Al-Risālah* (Cairo: Ḥalabī, 1940), 8.