

CHAPTER THREE

ISLAMIC CONCEPTS: CONSTANT AND VARIABLE

In every religion there are basic and fundamental principles that do not change from place to place, and are valid and applicable till the end of times. These include:

- 1- The basic principles of belief
- 2- Laws of morality and noble character
- 3- Being good to our parents
- 4- Helping the poor and needy and those who need our help

Belief in Allah (God) as our Creator, who provides for us and guides us, and whom we should worship and serve, and to whom we are accountable is a basic core belief. Such belief does not change whether we are Muslims living in America or in the Middle East. It does not change whether we are living in the 21st century or in the 14th century. Belief that Allah has sent prophets to deliver His message to their people, and that such prophets applied the message on themselves and serve as examples of righteous behavior and noble character, such belief also guides us in our lives, and does not change with time. Belief that we have to answer to our deeds and that nothing escapes God's knowledge and that his justice is perfect, is a core belief that does not change with time.

Being truthful and honest is a character and moral that applies to all times. In contrast, lying and cheating is to be avoided at all times. To be sincere and do our best at work is moral, whereas hypocrisy and laziness is immoral. To be trustworthy and fulfill our obligations

and keep our promises is moral, whereas dishonesty and treachery is immoral. These laws of morality are timeless and are applicable in all communities.

To be good to our parents and to take care of them when they get old and need our help is a must in all religions and all cultures and traditions. The Qur'an stresses our obligations towards our parents:

﴿ وَقَضَىٰ رَبُّكَ أَلَّا تَعْبُدُوا إِلَّا إِيَّاهُ وَبِالْوَالِدَيْنِ إِحْسِنًا ۖ إِنَّمَا يُبَلِّغُنَّ عِنْدَكَ الْكِبَرَ أَحَدُهُمَا أَوْ كِلَاهُمَا فَلَا تَقُلْ لَهُمَا أَفٍ وَلَا تَنْهَرَهُمَا وَقُلْ لَهُمَا قَوْلًا كَرِيمًا ۝٢٣﴾
[الإسراء: ٢٣]

"Thy Lord has decreed that ye worship none but Him, and that ye be kind to parents. Whether one or both of them attain old age in thy life, say not to them a word of contempt, nor repel them, but address them in terms of honor" (Al-Isra'a 17 : 23)

﴿ وَأَخْفِضْ لَهُمَا جَنَاحَ الذُّلِّ مِنَ الرَّحْمَةِ وَقُلْ رَبِّ ارْحَمْهُمَا كَمَا رَبَّيَانِي صَغِيرًا ۝٢٤﴾
[الإسراء: ٢٤]

"And, out of kindness, lower to them the wing of humility, and say: 'My Lord! bestow on them thy Mercy even as they cherished me in childhood'" (Al-Isra'a 17 : 24)

Helping the poor and needy, and supporting institutions that promote social justice is something that every human being should do, each in his own capacity. The Qur'an stresses that giving charity is obligatory:

﴿ أَوَلَمْ يَرَوْا أَنَّ اللَّهَ يَبْسُطُ الرِّزْقَ لِمَن يَشَاءُ وَيَقْدِرُ ۚ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِّقَوْمٍ يُؤْمِنُونَ ۝٣٧﴾ [الروم: ٣٧]

"See they not that Allah enlarges the provision and restricts it, to whomsoever He pleases? Verily in that are Signs for those who believe" (Ar-Rum 30 : 37)

﴿ فَآتِ ذَا الْقُرْبَىٰ حَقَّهُ وَالْمِسْكِينَ وَابْنَ السَّبِيلِ ذَٰلِكَ خَيْرٌ لِّلَّذِينَ يُرِيدُونَ وَجْهَ
 اللَّهِ وَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ ﴾ [الروم: ٣٨]

"So give what is due to kindred, the needy, and the wayfarer. That is best for those who seek the Countenance, of Allah, and it is they who will prosper" (Ar-Rum 30 : 38)

Giving charity is a cornerstone in Islam, but leaving part of our wealth to support charitable causes is not widely accepted in Muslim countries. In western countries many rich people leave most of their wealth to charity. To mention just few names: Bill Gates, Ford, Rockefeller , Getty etc.

Why do rich Muslims build mosques, but do not support institutions that promote social justice, and do not leave their money for charity. Perhaps the answer lies in wrong understanding of what is more important. Some Muslims build mosques because the Prophet (PBUH) said:

(Whoever builds a house for Allah, Allah will build a house for him in paradise).

Bokhari

But the need for schools, clinics, hospitals, factories and to provide opportunities for work is more urgent in Muslim countries than mosques. Mosques are plentiful, but the opportunity for honest work is scarce, since most people depend on jobs provided by the government and work in the private sector is not readily available. It makes more sense to create these jobs that allow people to earn a living and not remain dependent on the charity of others. This is more important and surely will be rewarded better by Allah.

The problem with many Muslims is that they stop at the literal words and not think beyond that to what is more important and more useful. The idea behind prayers is to understand our accountability to Allah and to be in touch with Him and to receive His guidance. Prayers are supposed to make us better human beings. But how can prayer help if the father cannot provide food or clothes for his family? Therefore building a factory that employs people and allows them to provide for their families

surely is more important and more realistic and brings us closer to Allah than building another mosque, since mosques are numerous! Surely Allah will build more palaces for those who help others regain their dignity and provide opportunities for honest work, than for a person who builds another mosque.

In America Muslims passed through a phase of building mosques, till now there is a mosque in every city, town or village. But how many Muslim schools are there for Muslim children to learn their Islam and to apply it in their Daily lives? Or how many schools are there that teach Arabic, the language of the Qur'an and Sunnah, the two main sources of knowledge in Islam? How many schools that integrate Islamic principles in their curriculum and teach the children about Muslim history, culture and identity? Is not building and supporting these schools important to the future of Islam in America! Our children are the future, and if we do not take the time and effort to raise them well, they will lose their Muslim identity and forget their heritage. Therefore, Muslim schools at this time are more important to Muslims in America than mosques. But few people understand this, and few people care about supporting Muslim schools if they do not have children that attend these schools.

BASIC PRINCIPLES DO NOT CHANGE

God stated that He has completed His religion and chose Islam as the religion that Humanity must live by:

﴿ الْيَوْمَ أَكْمَلْتُ لَكُمْ دِينَكُمْ وَأَتِمَمْتُ عَلَيْكُمْ نِعْمَتِي وَرَضِيتُ لَكُمُ الْإِسْلَامَ دِينًا ﴾

[المائدة: ٣]

"This day have I perfected your religion for you, completed my favor upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion"

(Al-Maeda 5: 3)

This means that the basic concepts and cornerstone of faith and morality are well established and explained. It does not mean that we close our minds or not think and consider how to apply the rulings in our lives. Ijtihad or critical thinking to answer questions and come up with answers

to our current problems never stop. We need our intellect to be able to understand and realize our responsibility and accountability to God.

This critical thinking and coming up with answers that suit the problems and issues of our time is necessary in our interaction with others or what is called in Islam Fiqh. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said:

(God sends for this nation every one hundred years someone who renews its religion)

Abou Dawood

Renewing the religion in this Hadeeth does not mean inventing a new Islam, rather it means renewing our understanding of Islam in the light of changes that occur with time, and the new problems and issues that we face. Such problems and issues that were not present before.

We come up with answers based on the central basic concepts of Islam and the spirit of morality and faith that does not change. We base our new rulings on what will accomplish benefit for mankind keeping in mind our relationship with God and our accountability to Him. In other words, the new rulings or understanding or applications occur within the framework of Islam and its spirit.

IJTIHAD

This Ijtihad is necessary if Islam is to be applicable and suitable for all times, and that is the meaning and objective of the Qur'anic verse that God has chosen Islam as the religion for mankind. Unless our understanding and application is relevant and makes sense, then Islam becomes irrelevant and of historical interest only.

Omar Bin Al-Khattab, the second Caliph did his duty of critical thinking or Ijtihad to show that our understanding of Islam cannot be rigid, rather it considers the problems that we face and the different circumstances that we encounter. When there was famine he froze the Qur'anic injunction of cutting the hand of the thief, because he was forced to steal to feed his family. He changed the ruling of the Prophet in punishing those who drink, and those who divorce their wives, and in

demanding from merchants to set fair prices for their merchandize, because he saw a need for such a change. He did not hesitate to seek consultation, despite a clear text in the Qur'an or in the Sunnah, regarding the land that was opened in Iraq and Syria. The Qur'an and Sunnah stated that it should be divided among the fighters, but Omar argued against that and sought to make it an asset for all Muslims, and not merely for those who fought.

The Prophet (PBUH) explained that he as a human being can make a mistake in his ruling, because he is subject to what he hears. Some people are more eloquent in presenting their argument than others:

(You come to me to judge between you, but I am only human. If I had no divine revelation and I judge between you according to my opinion. Since some of you may be more eloquent than others in presenting his case, and I may be convinced by him, if I judge in his favor and my judgment is wrong, he should not take it, for he only takes a piece of Hell Fire)

Bokhari, Muslim, Abou Dawood, Nesa'ee & Termedhi.

In this saying, the Prophet (PBUH) explains that as human beings we make mistakes, because our judgment is fallible, and we do not always have access to the truth. He also stressed that he judges according to the best evidence presented after critical thinking and deliberation.

No one can, therefore, limit Muslims to his own opinion, or the opinion of scholars that lived in a different time and place. And no one should close the door of Ijtihad or critical thinking. If we do not use our minds and consider all the options and opinions then our Islam becomes rigid and not suitable for our times or for future generations.

Our ability to think and reason is the best gift that God gave mankind. The Qur'an extols us to think, consider, contemplate and reason in many of its verses. We cannot understand our Islam or its principles without using our minds.

There are, however, certain limits to our intellect. We are incapable of understanding the nature of God. We can consider His attributes and His ability and Knowledge. We do not know the how of His knowledge or

the How of his decree. We do not know the unseen or what will happen in the future. We are limited by time and space, but God is not limited. We have a free will, and we have the freedom of choice. But this freedom is not absolute, it is subject to God's will. We have control over earth and its resources, but such control, again, is not absolute.

We should use our intellect in understanding God's will and orders, realizing our human limitations. Knowledge gained through divine revelation is understood and complemented by human intellect. What is revealed to us through divine revelation does not contradict our intellect, because both are truthful, and both came from the same source, God who created us and cares for us.