

Chapter Ten

Human interpretation of Divine text

We will discuss the following concepts:

- 1- God sent Divine texts and sent messengers to explain to Mankind their duty and obligation in serving God, and to illustrate how they should live their lives and achieve their goals
- 2- It is the duty of Mankind to struggle and try to understand Divine message and how it can be applied depending on their circumstances and their society
- 3- It is expected that we are going to make mistakes, for we are human and are fallible. What is important is to learn and correct these mistakes
- 4- There are limits to our ability as human beings in understanding certain concepts such as the nature of God or the how of His powers and will

God's Divine message

Divine message comes in two forms:

- 1- A Divine Book like the Torah, the Gospel and the Qur'an
- 2- A human messenger who explains God's divine message and shows how it can be applied in our life: like Prophet Moses, Jesus and Muhammad (PBUH).

We as human beings need both forms of Divine instructions. We cannot understand or apply God's teachings unless there is a human messenger who exemplifies this message in his character and behavior, and who is surrounded by close companions or disciples that relate to us his teachings and God's instructions. The Qur'an alludes to these two sources of Divine guidance:

﴿وَكَيْفَ تَكْفُرُونَ وَأَنْتُمْ تُتْلَىٰ عَلَيْكُمْ آيَاتُ اللَّهِ وَفِيكُمْ رَسُولُهُ ۚ وَمَنْ يَعْتَصِم بِاللَّهِ

فَقَدْ هَدَىٰ إِلَىٰ صِرَاطٍ مُسْتَقِيمٍ ﴿١٠١﴾﴾

And how would ye deny Faith while unto you are rehearsed the Signs of Allah, and among you lives the Messenger? Whoever holds firmly to Allah will be shown a Way that is straight.

Al-Imran 3 : 101

We cannot overemphasize the importance of God's prophets in explaining and living God's message and in teaching the message and imparting it to future generations. A divine book, regardless of how great it is or how excellent are its teachings will not be effective unless it is accepted and put to good use. It is God's prophets and their committed followers who show us how we can live our lives as God has commanded us to do.

With time both God's Divine text and the human beings that explained this message and served as examples for us take certain form and the religious practice that follows is the tradition and culture associated with that particular religion. Scholars in different times and places struggle to explain and amplify God's message and the religious tradition that has developed. Therefore, religion becomes an evolving concept that is firmly rooted in the Divine text and early prophetic instructions, but further developed through the clarification and thinking of several successive generations of scholars.

What is the role of religious scholars? Is it limited to explanation of what the old scholars have said, or does it involve new ideas that address the problems and issues of their time from their own prospective as long as they are faithful to the basic principles and teachings of that religion and its tradition?

Human interpretation of the Divine text

As explained before, it is human beings who must understand the Divine message and how it applies to their lives. They are guided by basic principles of morality and basic guidelines and doctrine in their religious tradition. But they should be free to form their own opinions and develop solutions to problems and issues that affect their lives. Such problems did not exist before, and were not addressed by the old classic scholars. This ability to criticize and examine religious tradition is healthy and should be encouraged. Divine message is sacred, but the writings and opinions of old scholars are not sacred and can be and should be subject to debate and discussion. They lived in a different time and they gave opinions based on their own experience and their society. Their conclusions are helpful in explaining the methodology of thinking and how to reach the truth, but their ideas are to be analyzed and examined. What is good and applicable to our time should be accepted, but what is out of touch with our time should be put aside and new answers sought.

Some Muslims, on the other hand, hold the view that the opinions of the old established scholars of Islam are almost sacred and cannot be changed. In their view they based their conclusions on the opinion of the Prophet's companions. These lived with Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), heard from him, asked him questions, and witnessed the revelation of the Qur'an, and knew the Arabic language better than we do. They had a keen knowledge of the Qur'an and Sunnah, therefore, their opinions and their conclusions are better than our opinions. Therefore, we should be followers, and not innovators in religious matters. They also view the Qur'anic verse:

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

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

In their view completing or perfecting the religion means that nothing was left out. Therefore, it is not right to devise new concepts or establish new guidelines in Islam.

The way of thinking of those who want to just follow classic interpretation and refuse to debate or listen to new ideas or different points of view is that of those who are afraid of making a mistake in something sacred. They do not allow themselves the freedom to reason, think or consider. They feel more secure and content to follow old established doctrines. When asked whether those revered scholars are human beings that are fallible, they hesitate in answering. When asked if these venerable scholars came and lived in our times, would they change their views because now they are facing new challenges and a different society, their answers are ambiguous. When told that a scholar like Imam Shafei' changed his views when he moved to Egypt and such new views are referred to in books of Fiqh (Jurisprudence) as new views, compared to old views he held in Iraq, they do not understand the implication. They fail to see what this great scholar saw: that a learned person must change his conclusion if confronted with different circumstances. The ruling is only valid regarding the problem and circumstances that surround it. If the situation and the circumstances change, then the old ruling is no longer applicable and a new ruling is called for. It then follows, that if we as Muslims live in a society with different needs and face issues that earlier Muslims did not face, then our answers must reflect the different environment that we live in.

We cannot ask a scholar who has lived all his life in Egypt, for example, to give us an answer to problems that we as American Muslims face here in America. He does not know our circumstances, nor does he understand the history or dynamics of a Western society or its values. He cannot give us definitive answers of how to interact or live with non-Muslims in America because his background and experience does not give him the necessary insight into our society with its diversity and dynamics.

To think and reflect on Qur'anic verses and what it means and how we can interpret its message and extract lessons that guide us in our life is encouraged by the Qur'an itself. The Qur'an is asking us as human beings to think and reflect, and not close our minds:

﴿ كِتَابٌ أَنْزَلْنَاهُ إِلَيْكَ مُبَارَكٌ لِيَدَّبَّرُوا آيَاتِهِ وَلِيَتَذَكَّرَ أُولُوا الْأَلْبَابِ ﴾

(Here is) a Book which We have sent down unto thee, full of blessings, that they may meditate on its Signs, and that men of understanding may receive admonition.

Sa D 38 : 29

Prophet Muhammad explained some verses of the Qur'an. The Qur'an explains itself and its verses complete and complement each other. But ultimately it is up to us as human beings to extract its lessons and guidance using the Qur'an, the prophet's sayings, early commentary and our human intellect and apply all this information to the society that we live in and come up with answers that help us in our life and define our goals.

Ijtihad or critical thinking and coming up with solutions to current problems will continue to be a source of knowledge and an asset to Islamic thinking and culture. Those who want to close this research afraid of new ideas do not understand the nature or purpose of religion. Religion is meant to make us better human beings and to improve our character and behavior. This cannot be done without understanding and reflection. We are liable to make mistakes, but this is human and nothing to be ashamed of. What is important is to learn from our mistakes and not repeat them.

Mankind is fallible and likely to make mistakes and errors in judgment

No one is perfect and infallible except Allah, glory be to Him. As human beings we make errors in judgment and we commit many mistakes. This is to be expected. God understands our shortcomings and human limitations and forgives our mistakes. The solution is to realize our mistake, turn to God seeking His forgiveness and to make a pledge not to repeat that mistake. This system of repentance and trying to do good and improve turns our mistakes into learning opportunities and our failures into success. The Qur'an states:

﴿ وَإِنِّي لَغَفَّارٌ لِّمَن تَابَ وَءَامَنَ وَعَمِلَ صَالِحًا ثُمَّ اهْتَدَى ﴾

"But, without doubt, I am (also) He that forgives again and again, to those who repent, believe, and do right, who, in fine, are ready to receive true guidance."

Ta Ha 20 : 82

﴿ إِلَّا مَنْ تَابَ وَءَامَرَ وَعَمِلَ عَمَلًا صَالِحًا فَأُولَٰئِكَ يُبَدِّلُ اللَّهُ سَيِّئَاتِهِمْ حَسَنَاتٍ ۖ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ غَفُورًا رَحِيمًا ﴾

Unless he repents, believes and works righteous deeds, for Allah will change the evil of such persons into good, and Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful,

Al-Furqan 25 : 70

God accepts our repentance as long as we are sincere and we work to correct our wrong-doing. On the other hand, if our goal is to corrupt Divine texts and to twist its meaning to suit our purpose, then such an effort is wrong and our plan will fail sooner or later. Falsehood may fool some people for a while, but its nature will become apparent with time. What is important is to contrast falsehood to the truth, then the difference becomes obvious to anyone who is willing to see the truth and does not allow his desires to blind his vision. The Qur'an states:

﴿ بَلْ نَقْذِفُ بِالْحَقِّ عَلَى الْبَاطِلِ فَيَدْمَغُهُ فَإِذَا هُوَ زَاهِقٌ وَلَكُمُ الْوَيْلُ مِمَّا تَصِفُونَ ﴾

Nay, We hurl the Truth against falsehood, and it knocks out its brain, and behold, falsehood doth perish! Ah! woe be to you for the (false) things ye ascribe (to Us).

Al-Anbia'a 21 : 18

﴿ كَذَٰلِكَ يَضْرِبُ اللَّهُ الْحَقَّ وَالْبَاطِلَ ۚ فَأَمَّا الزَّبَدُ فَيَذْهَبُ جُفَاءً ۖ وَأَمَّا مَا يَنْفَعُ النَّاسَ فَيَمْكُثُ فِي الْأَرْضِ ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ يَضْرِبُ اللَّهُ الْأَمْثَالَ ﴾

Thus doth Allah (by parables) show forth Truth and Vanity. For the scum disappears like froth cast out; while that which is for the good of mankind remains on the earth. Thus doth Allah set forth parables.

Ar-Ra'd 13 : 17

Thus extremists who want others to listen only to their ideas and regard it as sacred, are demanding complete obedience and they refuse to allow others what God wants them to do, which is to think, reflect and understand and develop conviction based on evidence and logic.

Hard line Muslims also refuse to listen to opposing points of view. Their behavior is anti-Islamic, since they deny others the right to think for themselves and make mistakes, then correct these mistakes. They do not give them credit for being able to reason and understand opposing points of view.

It is not easy to listen to a view point that is contrary to our way of thinking. But that is exactly what we need to do, because it allows for discussion and reflection. Only through this process of study, reflection and analysis can false ideas be identified and rejected, and true concepts emerge and prove their validity.

Therefore, as Muslims, we should not be afraid of new ideas or innovation. We should not be afraid, either, of committing mistakes, even in religious doctrine, because it is expected of us as human beings. What is also expected is that we listen to and accept the truth when we see it and are confronted with it:

﴿وَجَاهِدُوا فِي اللَّهِ حَقَّ جِهَادِهِ ۚ هُوَ اجْتَبَاكُمْ وَمَا جَعَلَ عَلَيْكُمْ فِي الدِّينِ مِنْ حَرَجٍ﴾

And strive in His cause as ye ought to strive, (with sincerity and under discipline). He has chosen you, and has imposed no difficulties on you in religion

Al-Hajj 22 : 78

There are limits to our abilities as human beings and certain concepts are difficult to understand particularly the nature of God and the how of His power

What is God made of? Who created God? How does He know what will happen in the future? How does He know everything that we do, even our

inner secrets? Is there paradise and Hell? Why cant we see the Angels? What is the purpose of our existence?

These questions and many more have perplexed human beings throughout the ages. They struggled to come up with answers and argued about metaphysical aspects and areas that are unknown to us as human beings. Some were of the opinion that there is nothing that man's intellect cannot comprehend. Others realized that as human beings we are limited in our abilities, and that certain concepts are difficult to understand.

Regarding the nature of God, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) told us not to think of the innate nature of God, but rather to think of His creation and how He described Himself. When we think about the order and the complexity and magnificence of the creation of the earth and the galaxies we begin to understand something about God the Creator and His abilities. The Qur'an explains:

﴿لَخَلْقُ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ أَكْبَرُ مِنْ خَلْقِ النَّاسِ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ النَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ﴾

Assuredly the creation of the heavens and the earth is a greater (matter) than the creation of men: yet most men understand not.

GHafir 40 : 57

God's words are too numerous to count or write:

﴿وَلَوْ أَنَّ مَا فِي الْأَرْضِ مِنْ شَجَرَةٍ أَقْلَمٌ وَالْبَحْرُ يَمُدُّهُ مِنْ بَعْدِهِ سَبْعَةُ أَنْهَارٍ مَا نَفَذْتُ

كَلِمَتُ اللَّهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ﴾

And if all the trees on earth were pens and the Ocean (were ink), with seven Oceans behind it to add to its (supply), yet would not the Words of Allah be exhausted (in the writing): for Allah is Exalted in power, full of Wisdom.

Luqman 31 : 27

God's words here does not refer only to the Qur'an and how each time we read it we find new meanings and guidance. It also refers to His will and His blessings. It refers to His knowledge and how everything runs according to a Divine plan. Then we begin to understand and marvel at God's wisdom and intricate design.

When we look at ourselves and how we were created and the potential of human beings we begin to understand God's creativity and how much we owe Him:

﴿ سَنُرِيهِمْ ءَايَاتِنَا فِي الْآفَاقِ وَفِي أَنْفُسِهِمْ حَتَّىٰ يَتَبَيَّنَ لَهُمْ أَنَّهُ الْحَقُّ ۗ أَوَلَمْ يَكْفِ بِرَبِّكَ أَنَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ شَهِيدٌ ۚ ﴾

Soon will We show them Our Signs in the (furthest) regions (of the earth), and in their own souls, until it becomes manifest to them that this is the Truth. Is it not enough that thy Lord doth witness all things?

Fusselat 41 : 53

There is a reason and a plan for our creation and there is a time when accountability becomes a reality:

﴿ أَوَلَمْ يَتَفَكَّرُوا فِي أَنْفُسِهِمْ ۗ مَا خَلَقَ اللَّهُ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا إِلَّا بِالْحَقِّ وَأَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى ۗ وَإِنَّ كَثِيرًا مِّنَ النَّاسِ بِلِقَآئِ رَبِّهِمْ لَكَفُرُونَ ۚ ﴾

Do they not reflect in their own minds? Not but for just ends and for a term appointed, did Allah create the heavens and the earth, and all between them: yet are there truly many among men who deny their meeting with their Lord (at the Resurrection)!

Ar-Rum 30 : 8

﴿ أَفَحَسِبْتُمْ أَنَّمَا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ عَبَثًا وَأَنَّكُمْ إِلَيْنَا لَا تُرْجَعُونَ ۚ ﴾

"Did ye then think that We had created you in jest, and that ye would not be brought back to Us (for account)?"

Al-Mumenoun 23 : 115

God described Himself in the Qur'an in certain attributes. When we consider God as Forgiving and merciful, we begin to understand His nature. He created us and He knows our human weakness and tendency to make mistakes and to sin. Therefore, He forgives us again and again, as long as we are willing to learn, turn to Him and seek Forgiveness. He bestows His mercy on human beings in numerous ways.

﴿ قُلْ يَبْعَادَى الَّذِينَ اسْتَرْفُوا عَلَى أَنْفُسِهِمْ لَا تَقْنَطُوا مِنْ رَحْمَةِ اللَّهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَغْفِرُ
الذُّنُوبَ جَمِيعًا إِنَّهُ هُوَ الْغَفُورُ الرَّحِيمُ ﴾

Say: "O my Servants who have transgressed against their souls! despair not of the Mercy of Allah: for Allah forgives all sins: for He is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.

Az-Zumar 39 : 53

﴿ قُلْ لِمَنْ مَا فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ قُلْ لِلَّهِ كُتِبَ عَلَى نَفْسِهِ الرَّحْمَةُ ﴾

Say: "To whom belongeth all that is in the heavens and on earth?" Say: "To Allah. He hath inscribed for Himself (the rule of) Mercy Al-An'am 6 : 12

When we think of God as the One who provides for every living creature, small or big, we understand His nature:

﴿ وَكَأَيِّنْ مِنْ دَابَّةٍ لَا تَحْمِلُ رِزْقَهَا اللَّهُ يَرْزُقُهَا وَإِيَّاكُمْ وَهُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْعَلِيمُ ﴾

How many are the creatures that carry not their own sustenance? It is Allah Who feeds (both) them and you, for He hears and knows (all things).

Al-Ankabut 29 : 60

The Qur'an asks Muslims and others to call on Allah (God) by His names, as He described Himself in beautiful names or attributes of perfection:

﴿ وَلِلَّهِ الْأَسْمَاءُ الْحُسْنَىٰ فَادْعُوهُ بِهَا وَذَرُوا الَّذِينَ يُلْحِدُونَ فِي أَسْمَائِهِ سَيُجْزَوْنَ مَا

كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ ﴾

The most beautiful names belong to Allah: so call on Him by them; but shun such men as use profanity in His names: for what they do, they will soon be requited.

Al-Araf 7 : 180

The Qur'an explains also our human limitations, and that our knowledge is quite limited: This implies that we may not be able to comprehend certain ideas or concepts like the innate nature of God or the nature of the soul:

﴿ ذَٰلِكُمُ اللَّهُ رَبُّكُمْ لَا إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ خَلَقَ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ فَاعْبُدُوهُ ۚ وَهُوَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ وَكِيلٌ ﴿٦٠﴾ ﴾

That is Allah, your Lord! There is no god but He, the Creator of all things; then worship ye Him; and He hath power to dispose of all affairs.

Al-An'am 6 : 102

﴿ لَا تُدْرِكُهُ الْبَصَرُ وَهُوَ يُدْرِكُ الْبَصَرَ ۖ وَهُوَ اللَّطِيفُ الْخَبِيرُ ﴿١٠٣﴾ ﴾

No vision can grasp Him. But His grasp is over all vision: He is above all comprehension, yet is acquainted with all things.

Al-An'am 6 : 103

﴿ وَتَسْأَلُونَكَ عَنِ الرُّوحِ ۖ قُلِ الرُّوحُ مِنْ أَمْرِ رَبِّي وَمَا أُوتِيتُمْ مِنَ الْعِلْمِ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا ﴿١٧٥﴾ ﴾

They ask thee concerning the Spirit (of inspiration). Say: "The Spirit (cometh) by command of my Lord: of knowledge it is only a little that is communicated to you, (O men!)"

Al-Isra'a 17 : 85

This debate about God and His attributes has generated a lot of discussion and animosity between two groups of Muslims: A group that stated that we cannot as human beings understand some of God's attributes or comprehend the know how of His power. The second group wanted to explore God's attributes and His power. In the process some Muslim scholars negated some of God's attributes in order to make God perfect and infallible.

What we learn from these debates and from the Qur'an is that God is One and that He knows what we do, and that we are accountable to Him. How He knows or what God is made of are questions for philosophers, but our belief that we are accountable for our actions is what guides our behavior.

* * *