

## The Qur'ān as Event and as Phenomenon

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Yedullah Kazmi

Islamic Research Institute  
International Islamic University  
Islamabad-Pakistan



بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ



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## Introduction

What is event and what is phenomenon? The common everyday understanding of event is that it is that happening that occurs once and only once, never to be repeated again. As a one time happening it is unique in its occurrence. More concretely, that which happens only once in history is event. Wars, like the first and the second world wars, are events. Although they are both called world wars yet each is unique and an unrepeatable event. Similarly, a particular playing of the game of say cricket or soccer is event. While phenomenon in its everydayness is understood as that unfolding in time of events that marks the unique event as being of a

particular type. Hence, while the First World War is event, war as such is phenomenon; a particular game of cricket is event while the game of cricket is phenomenon. It is the phenomenon of war that helps define the events of 1914 to 1918 in Europe as the First World War. Without the events there would be no phenomenon, and without the phenomenon we would fail to understand events of a particular type. To put it a little differently, phenomenon is the stretch of time within which events show up and are meaningful and their uniqueness is acknowledged and appreciated.

No matter what the duration of an event, be it in multiple of seconds, minutes or years, it has a definite beginning and an end; there is a definite closure to an event. Phenomenon, on the other hand, may have a definite beginning but never an end; it can have no closure. Event, located in time and although once contemporary, forever recedes, and hence, we have access to it only through memory either our own or of others, through documents or with the help of other traces that humans leave behind. Phenomenon is always contemporary and our experience of it, therefore, is not mediated but immediate.

From the everyday understanding a specific meaning of each term as it relates to the Qur'ān is



derived. By the Qur'ān as event is meant any single understanding of the Qur'ān which, because it is specific to a time and place, is unrepeatable and hence unique. The phrase, the Qur'ān as phenomenon, has its origin in the title of Malek Bennabi's book, *The Quranic Phenomenon*;<sup>1</sup> however the universe of meaning in each case is different. The Qur'ān as phenomenon refers to the Qur'ān's universal character. If the Qur'ān as event is specific to a time and place and hence unrepeatable and unique, the Qur'ān as phenomenon is analogous to a narrative unfolding in time in which each event of the Qur'ān is an episode.

The main thrust of the enterprise engaged in here is to try to understand what it means to say that the Qur'ān has universal applicability and relevance. For although it is part of every Muslim's belief that the significance of the Qur'ān is not restricted to any one time or place, yet what it means is not given much thought. It is to highlight the importance of reflecting on the universal nature of the Qur'ān that a sharp distinction between event and phenomenon is made. As such the terms 'event' and 'phenomenon' are employed heuristically to aid the exposition of

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by Abu Bilal Kirkari (Kuala Lumpur: Polygraphic Press, 1983).

the Qur'ān's universal nature. The Qur'ān's universal nature is explored and delineated with the help of concepts such as 'embodied thinking'<sup>2</sup> and 'the realm of truth'.<sup>3</sup>

### The Uniqueness of the Qur'ānic Claim on Us

The Qur'ān is no doubt unique because of who the author is and what this book is all about. By virtue of being divine, the Qur'ānic truths make a definite type of claim on the reader. And they make the claim not merely because they are certain, irrefutable, immutable and universal. For one could, for example, argue that  $2+2=4$  for most practical purposes is irrefutable and immutable and also

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<sup>2</sup> 'Embodied thinking' suggests a way of thinking that is very different from our everyday understanding of thinking. Embodied thinking invokes a way of thinking that is not purely mental or cerebral but rather a form of thinking in which all our faculties are involved. But above all it is an activity in which thinking and feeling are not separate and distinct but merged into one single activity. In embodied thinking we think what we feel and feel what we think.

<sup>3</sup> 'The realm of truth' is used to underscore that humans do not and cannot comprehend truth directly. It has to be located in some space with which humans are some what familiar. In other words, truth has to be anchored in the human world to be accessible to us, or else it will escape our best efforts to grasp it.

universally true, and hence makes the same claim on us as say *lā ilāha illā 'llāh* (There is no god but God). Or perhaps the difference is in the order of magnitude of the claim;  $2+2=4$  makes less of the claim on us than *lā ilāha illā 'llāh*, but basically the same nature of claim nevertheless. Following this logic, one could argue that as a truth rises in the level of certainty it comes closer to making the type of claim made on us by the Qur'ānic truth. In other words, the only difference between the scientific and the Qur'ānic truth is in the degree of certainty and not in the nature of claim made by each. For most Muslims, however, the difference between the two has been and is that while *lā ilāha illā 'llāh* is revealed truth,  $2+2=4$  is not. Now although this distinction is true yet it fails to capture the real nature of the Qur'ānic claim on us, because the understanding of the difference remains, in the minds of most Muslims, a variation on the theme of certainty and uncertainty.

The difference between the truth of  $2+2=4$  and that of *lā ilāha illā 'llāh* is not primarily in the order of magnitude of certainty, irrefutability or universality but rather the fact that each belongs to a very different order of being, and hence each makes a different type of claim on us. The Qur'ānic truth like *lā ilāha illā 'llāh* is determinant of my being it shapes

and gives content to my being. To understand what it means to say *lā ilāha illā 'llah* shapes and gives content to my being is to understand religion as a divine response to human being's anguished cry. Who am I? What am I? And how am I to live my life on earth? Islam is a specific response to these questions. And the Qur'ānic response is not answers to these questions but rather guidance to finding the answers. And the guidance is in the form of truths that if one lives by, help one in finding the answers to those questions. The Qur'ānic truths, in other words, are ethico-existential truths; while  $2+2=4$  is a true or false description of the world. With the help of ethico-existential truths I acquire a particular form of life, while true descriptions of the world help me to operate in and on the world. Without the former my life would have no ethical content; without the latter I would not be able to cure the sick, build roads, construct buildings, make computers or go to the moon. It is not to deny, however, that the two are related, but the task in hand is not to explore this relationship but just to recognize the difference between the two. Nor is it to deny that there are no descriptions of the world in the Qur'ān. The descriptions in the Qur'ān function not as descriptions of the world *per se*, but rather as part of

an ethical theme that is being developed with the help of such descriptions.

The very first lines that were revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him) asked him not just to read or read only the name of Allah, but to read in the name of Allah. To read *in the name of Allah* is no epistemological directive about method, but an ethical injunction regarding the shape and content of being of one to whom what is revealed will be comprehensible. The focus, in other words, is not exclusively on the text but also on the one who is to read the text. And as such it is about a particular type of comprehension, one that ensues not merely in understanding the Qur'ān but the comprehension that is possible only if and when the Qur'ān is allowed to make ethical or ethico-existential demands on the reader. In other words, in order to understand and follow the dictates of the Qur'ān one has to be a particular type of person, a person who is open and responsive to ethico-existential demands of the Qur'ān. As such the Qur'ān solicits a particular response from the reader. And the proper response to the Qur'ān cannot be purely and exclusively cognitive and cerebral.

The Qur'ān does not compel us through the force of irrefutable logic or on the basis of procedural rationality *a la* Descartes, but by the argument the

structure of which goes something like this: be righteous and act righteously and you will realize a particular form of life that will prove to be profoundly satisfying and richly rewarding. The form of life held out to be emulated is illustrated and concretized with the help of stories of prophets the the final seal on which is put by the life of Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him). This is the structure of a book of guidance and not of a book on some theoretical issue. Nevertheless, an essential aspect of the form of life that one is to emulate is a particular way of thinking; a mode of thinking that is neither narrowly cognitive nor purely cerebral, called here embodied thinking, of which again the prophets are the best examples. Embodied thinking is needed in order to relate to the Qur'ān in a manner that allows the reader to understand the ethico-existential demands the Qur'ān makes.

### Embodied Thinking

It is for the sake of understanding the nature of the claim the Qur'ān makes on us and what our proper response to it should be that the purely cognitive and cerebral description of human intellectual activity is rejected. The tendency to equate human intellectual activity with the mental is at the bottom an attempt to locate that activity somewhere in the human

body, which once successfully lodged in human cortex, gave rise to, among other dichotomies, the mind/body dualism.

The mind/body dualism does not exist in the Qur'ān. Neither is the mind ever mentioned as a separate and superior entity to the body, nor is human body denigrated as the site of sin. In a way, the distinction is undermined from the start in the person of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him) who was neither an ascetic recluse nor an intellectual tower, as the term is applied today to one who spends years in an institution training his/her intellect; but though unlettered he was nevertheless given to reflection; he was a thinker. But although a prophet has to be a thinker he is never the type of cerebral cogitator as our present day intellectuals are. Prophets were fully embodied thinkers, which means that their activity and experience of thinking can be classified neither as purely mental nor purely physical; it was an activity in which their whole being participated.

Embodied thinking was a necessary preparation for the eventual reception of divine inspiration. Divine inspiration addresses the being of the prophet, albeit in the interiority of his being but nevertheless as an embodied person and not just a disembodied intellect. A prophet is addressed by

Allah, the creator and the sustainer of the universes, and not by some bureaucrat, political leader or army general. He is not called upon by Allah to perform a particular act in a specific domain, but to bear witness with his total being to the truth of the fundamental and irrevocable singularity of one and only one Supreme Being, in respect to whom there is no before or after. For a prophet, to be a witness is not a determinate single act, but a constant state of his existence. He could no more step out of that state than he could out of his skin. His existence is witness to the fact of the existence of Allah. And since prophethood usually comes after a long period of deep embodied reflection, a prophet is ever an embodied thinker. Furthermore, had prophets not been embodied thinkers, they would not have succeeded in relating to ordinary human beings and their everyday experiences, whose lives and experiences they were entrusted to shape and change in fundamental ways. Those of us who submit themselves to the alleged rigorous training of institutions of higher learning to gain the dubious honour of becoming intellectuals, do so at the cost of being alienated both from ordinary people and ordinary experience. For although intellectuals may know this theory or that and can by and large communicate with others with similar training, yet



they find it very difficult to talk to ordinary people, and worst of all, get easily tripped by ordinary experiences.

In this regard, it is useful to remember that the form of ritual worship in Islam is not silent meditation or contemplation, but embodied human act of facing Allah. One has to make oneself physically, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually ready to bring oneself to face Allah. Although one is always in Allah's gaze but for a minimum of five times a day, we on our own, take time off from whatever we are doing and abandon ourselves physically, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually to Allah as an embodied person. For that is how He has made us. Although a creature of flesh and blood and endowed with heart, mind and soul, yet every human being is fused together by Allah into one being. Thus, when a Muslim prays he/she prays not with his/her body and soul and heart and mind, but as an embodied person, surrendering in the single act of prostration his/her whole being to Allah. The encounter between Allah and human being is an encounter between Being and being.

To sum up, it has been argued that the Qur'ān, by virtue of being divine, makes an especial kind of demand on us, a demand which no other text makes or can make. That demand can only be

acknowledged and met by engaging in a particular type of reflective activity called embodied thinking. Embodied thinking is understood as opposite of cognitive activity or disembodied intellectual activity. The prophetic thinking is presented as the highest and the purest form of embodied thinking. The embodied reflection made the prophets both the suitable receptacle to receive the divine inspiration and the proper agent to discharge the prophetic duties.

### Embodied Thinking as *Sunnah*

But while embodied reflection is constitutive of a prophet, it is not of ordinary human beings. For every Muslim the prophetic *Sunnah* is the paradigm for the proper Islamic conduct. What is not, however, generally acknowledged is that a particular mode of thought, namely embodied reflection, is also part of the *Sunnah*. Where we readily accept to emulate the Prophet Muḥammad's (peace be on him) actions we hardly ever pay heed to his mode of thought. This is, to a great extent, because his mode of thought has largely gone unthought or underproblematized. This is forcefully and dramatically highlighted by al-Ghazālī's turn to Sufism to resolve his intellectual crisis, rather than to the example of the Prophet (peace be on him). For

after all al-Ghazālī's crisis was brought on by his training in philosophy, against which he later no doubt unleashed his trenchant criticism. His general problematic — to look for certainty of truth in philosophical thought — was doomed to failure from the start. It was based on unduly privileging reason which, though capable of much, yet not so without direction and guidance.

In contrast, it is both revealing and enlightening that the contemporaries of the Prophet (peace be on him), who spent years reflecting on just one *sūrah* of the Qur'ān, never suffered from al-Ghazālī's type of crisis. Obviously, it could not be because they had difficulty understanding the language of the Qur'ān that they spent years reflecting on just one *sūrah*. Their problematic was very different from that of thinkers like al-Ghazālī. Also, it was not the certainty of truth they were looking for — of that they were very sure — but for something more personal. They desired the immediacy of the Qur'ānic truth for it to become palpably real and true for them. They did not wish to understand the Qur'ānic truth by capturing it in some conceptual net devised by human thought, but to experience the truth so that they could live their daily life by its light. For them, in short, it was not an intellectual/philosophical issue but an existential one. And in this

they were one of the elect who, with the help of the Prophet (peace be on him), had learnt embodied thinking. For them to think was to think only the way the Prophet (peace be on him) did. And to think like him was only possible if one lived like him, hence the significance of the *Sunnah*. What saved them was perhaps their lack of training in philosophy and their commitment to making sense of what they had experienced through the agency of the Prophet (peace be on him) by remaining true to that experience by emulating the life of one who made it all possible.

For al-Ghazālī, on the other hand, because of his training the possibility of experiencing the immediacy of the Qur'ānic truth was not that readily available. Between him and the immediate experience stood conceptual thought ruled by reason. However much he tried to escape philosophy, in the end he did not quite succeed, for after all he returned to philosophy if only to write a philosophical critique of philosophy. And when he finally did abandon philosophical thought, he found refuge in Sufism, totally bypassing the prophetic embodied thinking. Ibn Taymiyyah's (d. 728/1328) criticism of al-Ghazālī for giving priority to the Sufi way over the way of the Prophet (peace be on him) is thus most telling in this regard.

As pointed out earlier, the best example we have of embodied thinking is the prophetic thinking. How does the Prophet (peace be on him) exemplify embodied thinking? The shortest and the simplest possible answer to this question would be through his relationship to the truth. What is his relationship to the truth? He did not arrive at the truth as a result of long intellectual labour nor did he accidentally bump into it, so to speak. The existential questions, to which Islam is a specific response, were experienced as anguish and not as clearly formulated questions. But then it happened: Allah spoke to him, and in one fell swoop he was engulfed by the truth, it rolled over him like a huge tidal wave, knocking him off his feet, carrying his old self and the world away and reconstituting him and his world differently. The Prophet (peace be on him) in that instant and for as long as he lived, felt and thought the truth as a unitary experience of being situated in the truth. No part of him was left out; he was made whole by and in the truth. He did not arrive at the truth; he got situated in the truth. He felt the truth, he thought the truth in short, he lived it. And whenever he was prompted deviated he was pulled back to the truth. The situatedness in truth is not the result of the movement of thought but of being, and once situated the movement of thought and being become one.

And since the Prophet (peace be on him) is situated in the truth his relation to the Qur'ān could not be but organic and internal. Once situated in the truth his mission was to invite and help others to get situated similarly.

### The Realm of Truth

Through the Prophet (peace be on him) Allah opened up the realm of truth. The realm of truth is that space in which every act, every thought resonates with truth. To open up this space the Qur'ān in and by itself would not have been sufficient. The happening of disclosure of the realm of truth needed an embodied person capable of embodied thinking. For the space so disclosed was not a discursive space but one defined by the relation between Allah as such and His servant, *'abd*, as such. The Prophet Muḥammad's (peace be on him) being was transformed by the primary and initial revelation. The power of revelation transformed him from an ordinary human being to Allah's servant. To be the servant of Allah is to surrender your total being to Him. And it was in and through his surrender that the Prophet's (peace be on him) embodiedness reached its fullness. But for the recognition of and submission to this primordial relation, the truth *lā ilāha illā 'llāh* would have no

resonance in the being of the person uttering it nor would the truth have an anchor in any space. An *'abd's* submission to Allah is not an intellectual exercise undertaken to solve some intellectual problem, but rather through total submission to Allah to give specific moral and spiritual content to his/her life; in short, to be a particular type of person. Thus it was the Prophet Muḥammad's submission to Allah that opened the space of truth or better, was instrumental in the happening of disclosure of the realm of truth, in which the truth of the Qur'ān was to be anchored. Outside the realm of truth, the Qur'ānic truth had no or very little resonance for those listening if any; and this in any case could easily be countered and avoided.

The relation of the truth to the realm of truth needs further elaboration. One way to make clear this relation is with the help of an analogy. The relationship between the truth and the realm of truth is, in one sense, analogous to the relationship that exists between the pieces or items of furniture and the space within which they happen to be located. The same sofa set or a dining set will show up or look one way in, say the warehouse, and very different inside the shop or a house. The physical space and the way the pieces are located within it, alter the way they appear and show up. The same

pieces of furniture look very different in different houses because of the difference in space. In other words, the judgment regarding the visual potential of items of furniture — do they look pleasing to the eye — can be made only in the context of enclosed space of a particular house the buyer has in mind.

More importantly, however, the relation between the truth and the realm of truth is basically one of mediation between the divine and the human world. Given the qualitative difference between the divine and the human world, the stark, naked unmediated encounter between the human being and the divine truth will either be devastating for human psyche or totally meaningless. Without the realm of truth the divine truth will neither have human resonance nor existential dimension. Hence the cardinal importance of the Prophet (peace be on him) is that he humanizes the divine truth by anchoring it in a space that human beings can relate to and situate themselves in. By living the divine truth he lends human face to what would otherwise be totally alien to human experience.

### Historical Nature of the Realm of Truth

Since it was through the agency of the Prophet (peace be on him) that the realm of truth was opened, the opening introduces an historical element



to the landscape of truth. Although the mission of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him) was unique yet it was not an unprecedented event. He was last in the series of prophets who had opened the realms of truth before him. The Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him) was therefore fulfilling an historical role of a prophet. More significantly, though, a radical historical element is introduced by the nature of the activity that opens up the realm of truth.

The Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him), like all previous prophets, was able to open the realm of truth through the act of submitting himself to Allah as an embodied being. No other submission but the embodied submission would count as a true submission and open up the realm of truth.

An embodied being is a creature of flesh and blood; one who thinks and feels in a certain way because he/she is of flesh and blood; one who because he/she is of flesh and blood lives in anticipation of death, in the shadow of death. It is the knowledge and the anticipation of death that introduces into human life future as possibilities and negation of those possibilities in death. It is only as further future possibilities that the Day of Judgment makes sense. The passage of time marked by concatenation of days does not quite impress upon

the human mind the temporality of human life, as the inevitability of death in the future. And because such a being is marked by death he/she is historical; and because he/she is acutely aware of living under the shadow of death, aware of his/her finitude. All creatures live under the shadow of death but only human being is marked by it, i.e., aware of it. It is the awareness of death as negation of future possibilities that makes history an existential fact. Hence, only human beings are truly historical creatures.

Since the realm of truth is opened up by an embodied act of an embodied person, we can say that the opening of the realm of truth is an historical act that makes an historical event, namely the coming forth of divine truth to abide in the realm of truth possible. For the realm of truth is that which brings forth the divine truth into the human world through the agency of the Prophet (peace be on him). The interlocking of the two is the original experience that allows the divine truth to be experienced or rather makes it experiential.

The divine truth has always existed and will always exist; it is ahistorical and hence eternal. The realm of truth, however, that humanizes and lends

human existential dimension to it is historical.<sup>4</sup> It is, therefore, in the nature of the realms of truth to open and then close. Each opening and closing of the realm of truth describes an event and creates the Qur'ān as event. The coming of a succession of prophets makes perfect sense if we see each prophet engaged in opening a realm of truth for the same divine truth to be articulated through it, but only a little differently. Thus, we can read the Qur'ān as a record of events of the Qur'ān that each prophet helped to create.

Once the realm of truth is closed the divine truth stands isolated from and unanchored in human life. Neither does human life resonate with the divine truth nor does the divine truth speak to human beings; the interlocking of the two that was the original experience comes unfastened. The divine truth then stands amidst human world like the half forgotten remains of some old civilization that people no longer understand what it was all about, yet may view it with awe and even pride as a symbol of their forgotten glorious past. It becomes the stuff of which memories are made of, and not that which

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<sup>4</sup> This way of thinking is implicit in the distinction between *Fiqh* and *Shari'ah*. *Fiqh* is an attempt to understand the true and eternal path, *Shari'ah*. Hence, while *Fiqh* is historical, *Shari'ah* as such is not.

is articulated in actions of everyday life. It harkens to a past but does not beckon to a future or shape the present. Easily circumvented, people negotiate around it as they go about their daily life. It no longer represents a place of abode but a site that people may visit as tourists. When this happens, meaning of the Qur'ān comes to us as if from afar, from a distant realm of truth of which and in which it was an event. Its meaning becomes part of a moment in and of history accessible only through memory, no longer possible for immediate experience. The Qur'ān becomes a book that no longer requires or demands reflection on its utterances but only preservation in memory of a particular meaning as *the meaning*, a moment of history frozen in time for all eternity. In short, the Qur'ān becomes an event.

The Qur'ān as a divine book is simultaneously transcendental and historical. Of which the Qur'ān speaks is universal, the manner in which it speaks, however, has to be historical. Allah did not fashion the Qur'ān for His own edification but as guidance for all humanity. And He designed human being as historical creature. Our historicity is not an accident of nature or a fabrication of the human mind, but of the Hand that shaped the awesome symmetry of our mind, body and soul also cast us in

an historical mould. The Qur'ān is the Speech of Allah addressed to human beings in all their embodied historicity. As stated earlier, Islam is a specific response to human being's anguished cry: Who am I? What am I? And how am I to live my life on earth? It is basically a cry to help create meaning in a seemingly meaningless world. Through the Qur'ān Allah tells us that He has not abandoned us to meaninglessness of life. Hence the Qur'ān is an expression of Allah's love for human being. Yet the Qur'ān is not a blueprint of pre-fabricated universal meanings that remain mind-numbingly the same through time and space. "The meaning", as Charles Taylor puts it, "is one which admits of more than one expression, and in this sense a distinction must be possible between meaning and expression".<sup>5</sup> All expressions of meaning that can legitimately be called Islamic have indeed to conform to the Qur'ān but that does not mean they have to be identical. Although all the buildings designed by architects obey the same laws of nature, yet they are not all alike in shape and structure. Variability of design and structure of buildings is an expression of human

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<sup>5</sup> "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man" in Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan, eds., *Interpretive Social Sciences* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 34.

freedom and hence of human initiative within the limits imposed upon the human mind by the laws of nature.

### History and Human Freedom

Wherein we differ from angels is precisely in our being-in-time. For whereas the angels are stationary monuments to total devotion to Allah we, on the other hand, as creatures of time, are future oriented, and future is the realm of possibilities for action and hence of freedom. And weren't the angels asked by Allah to bow to Adam made of clay, the stuff of history? Our temporality, therefore, is not a sign of a fallen creature but instead of uniqueness, for aren't we the ones that are made from the best of mould? Hence, it is part of our bounded freedom to walk this earth through history under the shadow of eternal damnation or salvation: "And We showed him the two highways", says the Qur'ān (90: 11). And our uniqueness lies in our ability to be other than what we have been in the past, within the bounds ordained by Allah. For what would accountability on the Day of Judgment mean, what sense words like damnation and salvation have if not predicated on human ability to be creative? And the act of creation is always future oriented. In other words, our being historical is a necessary condition

for our being creative. If passive conformity to Allah's will is all what is required of human beings, then compared to angels our structure suffers from a major fault. Unlike the angels, we are not built for passive immobility. Our structure is historical; we are beings who are in constant process of becoming, and becoming requires difference. We do not become if we remain the same. Furthermore, what role if any would knowledge play in the life of a Muslim then, for knowledge is manifestly an act of creation, of going beyond what has already been accomplished, said, and written? For did not Allah teach us the use of the pen? ("He Who taught the use of the pen". 96: 4).<sup>\*</sup> Was it just for the purpose of copying what has already been written, or to write something new, that we were taught the use of the pen?

The structure, the content and the language, indeed the entire universe of the Qur'ān is designed not to elicit blind compliance from human beings but rather to provoke us to act, to elicit a response from us. No autocrat has ever felt the need to use poetic language and powerful imagery to demand unreflective compliance to his/her will. The language

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<sup>\*</sup> To be accurate, the translation of the relevant verse and the one that follows should read as the following: "He who taught man with the pen; taught man what he knew not" (96: 4-5). Ed.

demanding compliance is direct and to the point. The metaphoric language is provocative; it provokes us to think, to reflect. The language of the Qur'ān is at places direct but also quite often metaphoric and poetic. And metaphors need to be interpreted to be understood. Interpretation of metaphor is an unending process for no one interpretation can ever exhaust its full meaning, i.e., the process is historical. In our desire to understand the words of Allah by interpreting them we are truly responding to His words. Reading without understanding is a mechanical gesture hence a non-response. The music, the cadence of the Qur'ānic language compels, propels and provokes the listeners; that is why the unbelievers in the time of the Prophet (peace be on him) avoided listening to the Qur'ān being recited for fear it will cast a spell on them.

The proper response to the Qur'ān is the response of an embodied thinker and, an embodied thinker is of necessity grounded in time and place. The required response, in other words, should be historical. A historical response is of a reader who is situated in history and constituted by history. Such a reader bears the marks of history in his/her being. He/she responds in and through history. Situatedness in history, in other words, becomes the



necessary condition for his/her response to the Qur'ān.

### **Situatedness in History**

In as much as the Prophet (peace be on him) was human, his life and his utterances were situated in history. To deny him the situatedness in history is to deny him his humanity and invest him with divinity and hence commit the Christian fallacy. And if by the life he lived by virtue of being human, he could make the life of others resonate with the divine truth, it must be because at one level he shared a common historical world with them. Had not that been the case, there would be no communication between him and the other human beings. If he succeeded in some measure in changing how people acted, thought, and what they wished, desired or accepted and rejected, it was because he could relate to their world. And he could relate to their world because he was situated in their world. While the fact of his situatedness in history, allowed the Prophet (peace be on him) to relate to others similarly situated, it also imposed limitations on his abilities. Situatedness in history is after all, an aspect of human finitude. Finitude in human terms means to be in time and history, and thus be bounded and limited by time and history. Which also means that, at any

given moment of time there are limits to the extent the world can be changed by human beings.

History is not all that malleable to human touch; it resists, prevents and derails human projects. It is highly improbable that Allah, through the agency of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him) and the prophets before him, wished to make history become totally transparent to human thought or offer no resistance to human action. What is more probable is that Allah wished to initiate change in the course of human history by spiritualizing it. Had the purpose of religion been to make history become transparent to human thought and wholly malleable to human action, Islam would have marked the end of history. The end of history means making the present absolute and negate the future absolutely. In simple terms, it would mean bringing to a grinding halt the hustle and bustle of life, as we know it, and freezing life into a tableau till eternity. A tableau does not allow for action. Where be the test and where the accountability then? If Allah had so desired, He would have, in one fell swoop, converted everyone to Islam and made this world a perfect world. But then would there be any need to remind us that our life here is to be full of trails and tribulations? Allah created history the instant He exiled Adam from

heaven to teach us how to spiritualize history and not to bring history to an apocalyptic end.

Although on one hand the Qur'ān does not outright ban the institution of slavery, yet on the other, the Qur'ān insists that human beings establish social justice on earth. Is there a contradiction here? Yes, but only if we disregard the human situatedness. The way to resolve the contradiction is to adopt the view that the Qur'ān, recognizing that the institution of slavery is deeply entrenched in the society of the day, sought to mitigate the worst dehumanizing aspects of slavery, yet nevertheless, initiated a historical project of social justice for the future generations of human beings to struggle to realize, to complete. In this, and in several other similar instances, the Qur'ān is hinting and pointing to the human situatedness in history. Prophets, like any other human beings, are made to operate within the limits of historical necessity. By working within the limits of historical necessity they acquire human guise and thus become fitting examples for us.

The divine truth becomes the truth by which we wish to live, only when we grasp it through meaning or else the truth remains always at a distance from us, alien to us. In other words, unless we try to *understand* the truth we remain alienated from it. It follows, then, that if we accept it but do not

understand it, we are still alienated from it. For then our acceptance, born of cultural habit, is passive and mechanical. It is this habit of mind that makes the Qur'ān into event. When we reject the truth, our rejection of the truth is a reflection of our desire not to understand it. For, if we truly understood the truth, we would not escape being overwhelmed by it.

Yet, the divine truth can never ever be captured in its totality by any one meaning or interpretation. The truth will forever and always escape the net of meaning we cast to capture it, however comprehensive in its scope it may be. For the truth is divine, and its meanings, no doubt designed with the help of the divine truth, are nevertheless linguistic constructs of historically situated finite human beings. The singular function of the Prophet (peace be on him) is to help us understand the divine truth by teaching us to construct meanings *appropriate* to the divine truth. And *appropriateness* of meaning to the divine truth is shaped by historical conditions. This is what is meant by the claim that the Prophet (peace be on him) humanized the truth by making it meaningful to and for us without however reducing it to the human level. If, however, someone were to claim that the utterances of the Prophet (peace be on him) capture the truth *in its entirety*, then such a claim would reduce the divine truth to the human

level. For it would situate the Prophet (peace be on him) not in history but beyond it and, rob him of his humanity, and cast a mantle of divinity upon him.

Hence, every attempt at grasping the truth is but an interpretation and every interpretation is always and forever partial. In as much as we are bound and limited by history we cannot overcome the partial nature of our interpretation of the truth. As human beings, we can no more transcend history than step out of our skins and still continue to be human. To correct the partial nature of one interpretation we replace it by another interpretation, and the limitation of that by yet another interpretation, *ad infinitum*. The only option open to us, therefore, is always and forever 'to be engaged in the act of interpretation. As human beings we are doomed to go on interpreting.

Thus, the realm of truth is a contingent historical space that structures human experiences so that they resonate with the divine truth. The structuring of human experiences to resonate with the divine truth is likely and possible only by acknowledging and affirming the historical nature of human being. And hence it follows that change in the human situation requires change in the realm of truth, for human experiences to continue to resonate with the divine truth. For human experience to

resonate with the divine truth, the divine truth has to be understood. We understand the divine truth, if we understand it at all, only from where we are in history and not by stepping out of history, as if that were a possibility open to human beings. It is for this very reason that historical experience has to be continuously brought in line with the divine truth.

In spite of the claims made for history, it should nevertheless be remembered that although we are historical, our historical experience is not to be shaped entirely by whatever history brings forth. For although we understand from where we are in history, yet history is not our only guide; for although our human experience is essentially historical, yet we are not bound and tied and delivered to history to be at the mercy of historical contingencies. What liberates us from the tyranny of historical contingencies and flow of fortuitous events is the transcendental point of reference, from which and of which the Qur'ān speaks. Hence, although the contents of our experiences are historical yet their form has always to be extra-historical. For that to be possible, however, the divine truth has to unfold in time, which through all the historical articulation of its meaning remains essentially the same through time. It is the historical articulation of meaning that makes the Qur'ān into phenomenon, which through

its several interpretations remains, in essence, the same. This point can be best illustrated with the help of Gadamer's discussion of the historical nature of festival.

As a festival it is not an identity, in the manner of an historical event.... From the start it belonged to it that it should be regularly celebrated. Thus it is its own original essence always to be something different (even when celebrated in exactly the same way). An entity that exists only by always being something different is temporal in a more radical sense than everything that belongs to history. It has its being only in becoming and in return.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, that which happens only once is event, and that which repeats its self, i.e., unfolds in time is phenomenon. We remember an event, but participate in the phenomenon of festival, which constantly renews itself through the celebration of each event of festival. This is easily grasped if we once accept that difference and continuity are not exclusive of one another, but rather characteristics of all things that are historical in nature, i.e., festivals and narratives. Hence, a meaning can remain the

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<sup>6</sup> *Truth and Method*, translated and edited by Garret Barden and John Cumming (New York: Crossroad, 1975), 110.

same through its various expressions. That is how the statement that the Qur'ān as phenomenon is a narrative of which a particular interpretation of the Qur'ān is an event is to be understood.

What makes the historical articulation of the meaning of the Qur'ān possible is the realm of truth. The realm of truth as an historical event, however, opens and closes. When the realm is closed our access road to the Qur'ān is closed off, and our historical experiences no longer resonate with the divine truth. The words of the Qur'ān are then like sawdust in our mouths without the power to heal or console, to guide or direct; our fancies no longer then cling or revolve around the Qur'ānic images. The written words of the Qur'ān then get lost forever amidst a million other words that we encounter daily. There is nothing to redeem them from the inky oblivion.

The prophets exemplify and embody the truth and express it through their style of life and strategy for living. This is what was earlier called embodied thinking. Hence, it is not so much *what* but *how* they said or did that is significant. It is not to say that what they said or did is not important, but if the focus is on strategy for living and style of life, as it should be, then *how* of an act should have priority over *what* of the act. Furthermore, the meaning of what is said or done is always context specific, while



how something is said or done is considerably freer from historical specificity and can be carried over from situation to situation.

### The Prophetic Teaching

The opening of the realm of truth is thus the necessary *a priori* condition for the relaying of the divine word to the mundane world. The divine truth requires certain conditions for it to congeal and take shape and prevail in the mundane world. The fact that so many prophets were sent with basically the same divine truth shows that the message never did quite succeed in sticking to the mundane world in spite of repeated exposure to it. Hence the coming of each prophet can be understood as constituting the necessary *a priori* condition that opened a realm of truth that soon however closed like a book on a book mark, requiring the coming of the next prophet. The rehearsing of the act of opening of the realm of truth through the sending of prophets, however, came to an end with the advent of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him). Human beings have been furnished with sufficient examples and given enough demonstrations to open the realm of truth if they so desire, on their own. The closing of the realm of truth is not a failure of the divine truth to congeal and reside permanently in the

mundane world. To reveal the divine truth is a divine act, but to make the divine truth abide in this world is human responsibility. We are responsible for our destiny not Allah. The truth cannot be forced down the throats of unwilling and recalcitrant population "there is no compulsion in religion". Only the leavened bread rises. And part of the divine truth contains the recipe for leavening the human bread. When we hear and not listen to the divine truth we also do not get that recipe down right.

The signs of Allah have always already been here but we lacked the capacity to listen and make our lives resonate to it in response. We lacked the ability to read and understand them. The prophets teach us how to listen to and understand the signs of Allah. And their teaching takes the form not of discursive activity but of living a particular form of life; in short, they teach through style of life and strategy for living. It is through the style of life and strategy for living that they open up the realm of truth. The styles of life and strategies for living, however, are not ahistorical structures that can be used as cookie cutters or print blocks and transported across time to make all moments (conform to them). This would undermine the very historical nature of human existence and of human understanding. No two prophets embody identical styles of life, yet they do

not necessarily contradict each other. Each prophet's life represents a specific moment in time and a particular opening of the realm of truth unique to that moment. Thus, if we were to view the lives of all the prophets as part of a narrative, we will find each prophet's life to represent a variation on a single theme. It is the theme that is significant. The theme represents their relationship to the divine, the holy and the truth. In short, the theme is their relationship to *lā ilāha illā 'llāh*. For *lā ilāha illā 'llāh* represents the core of the Qur'ān.

### The Nature of Divine Guidance after the Advent of Last Prophet

The divinely inspired variation on the theme came to an end with the last prophet from there on the working out of the variations is to be a purely human enterprise, divinely guided but not divinely inspired. The prophetic tradition ends with the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him). It is not to assume that Allah has abandoned us, but to recognize that we have reached a level of maturity that allows us to build on what He has given us, to meet the constantly changing situations with which history challenges us. Nor is it to say that we no longer need His guidance but to suggest that the nature of guidance has changed.

The difference in the nature of guidance could be likened to the difference between undergraduate and post-graduate guidance. At the post-graduate level a student works on his/her own project, albeit under the supervision and guidance of an academic mentor who guides the student by showing him/her the consequences of following a certain line of thought in light of recognized exemplars of excellence, without however damping or curbing the student's creativity. At the under-graduate level a student is still learning to think and write and cannot follow through to the end of an argument and understand the consequence of a particular line of thought. The supervision hence is much closer and consists a great deal of on-hand training and teaching. At the postgraduate level the emphasis is on being original and creative, while at the under-graduate level, the emphasis is on learning the basic skills that allow one to be creative. The coming of Islam may be usefully understood as the movement of human beings from the under-graduate to the post-graduate level. Islam is more demanding because it provides more room for creativity to its followers. When Allah breathed His spirit into Adam, He gave Adam the gift of life and life is restless and creative. What is divine and also that which separates us from all other beings in the universe is our ability to be creative. The scope to be

creative is Islam's openness to history that does not permit Islam to be captured in its totality by any one moment of time; it is universal because it is historical.

Originality and creativity require personal commitment not merely to finding the truth but to extending and reformulating it, to understanding and experiencing the truth in new ways. It is, however, not possible for the human mind to be creative and original in any field of human endeavour, in a space or an area that has no limits. The experience of limitlessness only causes anxiety and results in paralysis of will that undermines action. To be creative, the human mind has to recognize limits and work within them. Every field in which human being is creative sets its own limits. And Islam is no exception. The limits in Islam, within which human creativity has to be practiced, are the truths that the Qur'ān has categorically set down of which *lā ilāha illā 'llāh* is the prime example. The truths cannot be transgressed, but what the truths mean is formulated again and again. Truths are not historical but their meaning is. The Qur'ānic truths are not, as stated earlier, of a  $2+2=4$  variety, but rather of the type by which one could live. In order to take hold of me the truths have to be meaningful to me or else they will become as impersonal as  $2+2=4$  and fail to make

demand on me. Another way of putting it is that Qur'ānic truths are not theoretical and impersonal like scientific truths but existential. Since I am historical, the meaning of the truth has to be continuously interpreted to create the resonance between the truth and me. It is precisely because the Qur'ānic truth is existential that the creation of the realm of truth is necessary.

### Conclusion: The Relationship to the Truth

One significant point that the Qur'ān tries to underscore, in and through the telling and retelling of the stories of the prophets, is the relationship that each prophet had to the Qur'ān. The key to the opening of the realm of truth is the way each prophet encountered the Word of Allah. No doubt, the Qur'ān is a text that has to be read like any other text. Yet it is a text with a difference. The difference consists in the Qur'ān holding truths of the kind by which one can live. And since it is a book by which one can live, the encounter has to be personal, intensely personal or else the Qur'ānic truths would not have the existential bite for the truth to matter.

Hence, the Qur'ān is to be read not because understanding its text will enable him/her to do well in some exam or be recognized and acclaimed for his/her knowledge of the Qur'ān. None of these

could have been an issue for the prophets. What must have been an issue is that understanding the Qur'ān mattered to his existence as a human being. Hence, his existence would be an issue. And when existence is an issue it is not reducible to a matter of life or death but rather deals with something more fundamental and primary. The issue is not, in other words, do I live or die but *how* do I live and die. Life and death are the givens of human life; it is the meaning of life that is not given and so is the meaning of death. In short, the issue is the meaning and the content of life. But where would the meanings come from; they are not created *ex nihilo*? The Qur'ān is both the guide and source of meanings, and hence understanding the Qur'ān has to be part of the existential project. And the existential project is an attempt to find the answers to such questions as: Who am I? And how I am to live my life on this earth? In other words, it is an enterprise that one undertakes to give ethical and existential content to one's life. And since it is my own existence that is at stake, the understanding of the Qur'ān has to be the result of intense personal encounter with the Qur'ān.

To get the personal encounter with the Qur'ān off the ground, one has to feel the need, the necessity and the urgency to ask the type of questions that

have been characterized as defining the existential project. What justification do we have to make this claim? To answer this question we have to go back to the tradition of the prophets and get our cue from them.

Almost every prophet spent some time wondering and wandering in a state of agitated restlessness before his encounter with the divine. They took time off from their everyday activity and withdrew to a place of seclusion, or else withdrew from social life to ponder and reflect. What did they reflect on, why did the need to isolate themselves, what was the urgency? The need, the urgency and the isolation were because they were reflecting on something that mattered to them most. Not the profit and loss of business, nor the gain or loss of power or social status but the one thing that mattered most to them i.e. existence, the *what for* and *why for* of existence. Their agitation had to reach a fever pitch, and their total existence focused like a laser beam on one spot before the epiphany of personal encounters with the divine, and then the release and total surrender to Allah. The electrifying immediacy of the encounter with the divine opened up the realm of truth, within which from there on, their existence had its anchor.



Although the same generic questions disturbed each prophet, yet in each case the context in which the questions acquired existential bite was historically unique. The prophets were not carbon copies of each other nor did they live in identical times.

The age of the prophets are long past, but we are fortunate to have the Qur'ān. And the Qur'ān, among other things, is the Book in which — pressed between its pages and suffused through all its words — is the distilled, pure and concentrated essence of all the prophetic encounters with the divine, for all the humanity to partake of till the end of time. We do not have to climb a mountaintop or be a recluse in a cave to open up a realm of truth, now that we have the Qur'ān, of which the wholesomeness and essential purity has been preserved over time. But the thing that remains crucially important for us, as it was for the prophets, is the existential project. Unless we experience the need, the necessity and urgency of the existential questions, the issue of personal encounter with the Qur'ān would not arise. In an important sense though, to be a Muslim is to feel the need and the urgency to enter into a personal encounter with the Qur'ān. Or how else would it guide us? From afar like a bureaucratic manual of impersonal rules!

To learn from a book we have to approach it with a question or set of questions. The questions do not have to be clearly formulated, but have to be in some form in our mind before we start to read the book or else what we read would not register. The questions others have asked would not do; each reader has to get the book to respond to his/her questions for a personal encounter to take place. Similarly, each Muslim has to ask his/her questions for personal encounter with the Qur'ān to take place.

Personal encounter is looking for and finding a personal entry or doorway to the Qur'ān. This, however, is not easily achieved. It is not so much the matter of reading the Qur'ān with the right intension or the correct attitude, but rather of making the connection between you and the Qur'ān, not with the whole of the Qur'ān but any one single aspect of the Qur'ān that your thoughts, experiences and feelings most resonate with. It is very much like looking for that elusive end in a ball of wool that once you have found and pull unravels the whole ball of wool. Just as you have to turn the ball of wool many times between your fingers to locate the end, you have to read the Qur'ān several times to find that doorway. The search for the personal entry is a very solitary enterprise. Others can advise, guide

and boost your flagging spirits but no one can find the doorway for you. Nor can you abandon the search; so much is riding on you finding it. And when you have found the personal doorway to the Qur'ān, although in many respects it would be similar to those found by others, it nevertheless is uniquely yours. The doorway would have your inimitable life-imprint on it. It would carry the mark of where and how you are situated in history just as much as your existence will forever be stamped by it.

We, as finite beings, understand — if we understand at all — always from a perspective. The ability to understand unencumbered by a perspective is the privilege only of Allah. The personal entry point is nothing but a historical perspective on the Qur'ān. You become the agent of history in understanding the Qur'ān from a perspective, and a servant of Allah in understanding history from the Qur'ānic perspective. This is what intensely personal encounter with the Qur'ān means. The personal encounter not only, however, furnishes one with a perspective on the Qur'ān but it also creates the realm of truth in its wake. The realm of truth functions as a steadily enlarging resonance chamber in which your experiences are slowly moulded to resonate with the Qur'ān. Until finally, everything you have read, seen, heard and thought and

everything you read, see, hear and think or will ever read, see and think, resonates with *lā ilāha illā 'llāh*. (What else would the Qur'ānic injunction: "Read in the name of Allah", \* mean). This is the ultimate form of what was earlier referred to as embodied thinking. It is not what we commonly call thinking. The term thinking generally refers to cognitive activity in which a specific faculty of human mind is used. Hence thinking is opposed to feeling, since feeling exercises a different faculty from thinking. Embodied thinking, therefore, is not thinking in the narrow sense of cognitive activity, but rather refers to reflection as a mode of being in which human faculties do not function separately but in unison, in harmony with each other. The harmony that makes embodied thinking possible is achieved when *lā ilāha illā 'llāh* becomes the internal organizing principle of your being. For then you realize that *lā ilāha illā 'llāh* is not a concept you can understand intellectually or a principle you can grasp with your mind, but is in fact the rhythm with which the entire universe resonates. And as a dancer responds to the music by dancing to its rhythm, an *'abd* responds to the rhythm of *lā ilāha illā 'llāh* by forever affirming Allah through tirelessly engaging in creating new

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\* Qur'ān 96: 1.

meanings. For affirmation of Allah has to be constant and continuous. From here on, every step towards the creation of meaning will always be a first step because the next step will always begin with *lā*, which will deconstruct the previous meaning. And this is a constant and continuous historical task by which the Qur'ān as phenomenon is created and maintained.







## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yedullah Kazmi is Associate Professor in the Department of Education, International Islamic University, Malaysia. He has a Ph. D. from the University of Illinois, USA in Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education. He has contributed research papers to several learned journals of international repute.