

THE PRINCIPLES OF THE QUR'ĀN FOR ITS OWN UNDERSTANDING

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If a comprehensive manual of holistic health is somehow provided by the world's best masters of medicine to help them maintain wellness and avoid things that harm their health, then it could only be used by following the method given in the manual itself. Without accepting that method, the manual will be useless, even harmful. A number of essential premises on which the medical solutions are based in it have to be credulously adopted without questioning by the users to benefit from the remedies provided.

First of all, it has to be recognized that human health was possible. Second, that health was necessary for man's well-being, happiness and a profitable existence in this world. Third, that there were certain elements and attitudes that caused ailments of various kinds and these were inimical to health and happiness. Fourth, that the author(s) of the manual possessed the necessary knowledge and wisdom for maintaining the required health. Fifth, that the authors were neither any ghost, nor had they faked these solutions, but were real men who sincerely meant to help the users of the manual in preserving their health and guarding them against disease.

Further, the readers could be able to benefit from the manual so long as they trusted the authors and acknowledged their expertise in the field. They also have to admit their own compelling need to rely on the manual. Any doubt in the authoritative knowledge of the manual authors or the readers' reluctance to admit their own need to medical guidance would render the manual irrelevant to them.

Moreover, if any of the above premises are challenged, the manual would be of no avails to the challengers. Furthermore, tampering with its text or distorting its content might further alienate them from a healthy and peaceful life. It would then be quite logical to suggest to the challengers or skeptics to either live without health and accept disease as an unavoidable necessity or seek the means of their own preferred health from whatever other sources might be available to them. No arbitrary, non-professional interference or expostulation in the content of the manual could be tolerated anyway.

The status of the Qur'ān as The Final, Ultimate, Authentic and Exclusive Divine Source of human education and guidance is more or less similar to such a manual. The Qur'ān has been sent as the Perfect Manual of instructions and guidance necessary for human moral well-being and spiritual health. It has come down from the Creator of man, the Controller of the Cosmos and their Absolute Sustainer through the reliable celestial source, the Archangel Jibril and handed down to the posterity faithfully by the most trusted and the truthful human par excellence, the last Messenger of God, peace be upon him. In order to understand and apply its instructive guidance to human life, it is necessary to affirm certain axiomatic premises defined by the Qur'ān as a condition precedent for the purpose of enlightening oneself by its luminous guidance.

The Qur'ān mainly recognizes two levels of comprehending its message:

- 1) general, direct and easy level available to everyone who wishes to understand the definite answers to the most important problems of life provided by the Qur'ān. However, the Qur'ān reveals the truth to those who are prepared to listen earnestly to its life-yielding message without prejudice, preconception or superimposing their own arbitrary and ailing views or jaundiced vision on its text, meaning and message. A genuine reader should, therefore, be required to approach this Book without insisting on his own prior presumptions. These presumptions may include such commonplace notions as:
 - i. man's creation ex-nihilo by mere chance;
 - ii. man's being nothing distinct or different from the world
 - iii. of nature / matter and thus being without capacity to transcend his immediate surroundings;
 - iv. man having blindly evolved through a natural process purposelessly;
 - v. both man and his habitat were of necessity devoid of any definite teleological direction;
 - vi. their genesis as well as their eventual end were indefinite and open to speculation;

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- vii. on the basis of the above assumptions, man and animal species of all hues were essentially the same; hence the former need not worry about any moral criteria to evaluate his responses to his own self or others;
- viii. at best man had only a slight edge over the rest of species on account of his inherent clever selfishness whereby he could prevail over his native brethren, subdue them and subject them to perpetual exploitation and slavery;
- ix. however, according to some more discreet or cautious thinkers/observers of the panorama of life, there was no scientific explanation of God that could be serviceable in the supreme scientific court of appeal;
- x. since the existence of God itself had been a question sufficiently debated by the Europeans in the past only to be found that it was never tenable; therefore, it was quite justified to infer that this myth managed to occupy so much space in human discourse only under the intolerant and dogmatic clerical totalitarianism of yore;
- xi. since mankind has already “successfully” graduated into irreversibly progressive and necessary evolutionary stages of “renaissance”, “rationalism”, “humanism”, “empiricism” and “scientism”, there was no scope for “reverting” back to any discourse about God or recalling His transcendental sphere of absolute authority;
- xii. since such a “retrogressive” recourse shall incur the heavy cost of reversing the “forward” movement of history that brought in its wake human happiness and progress, therefore, such recourse could not be contemplated any more.

In short, if one were to suppose that he could assign a coherent meaning to the text of the Qur’ān while refusing to shed his intellectual inhibitions of the last four-five centuries, then this stance will be full of fallacies and paradoxes. How could one in his right state of mind assert that he was capable of meaningfully understanding and interpreting the Qur’ān without departing an inch from his past prejudices such as atheism, Darwinian creed, unilinear Euro-centric view of history, Newtonian mechanics, Spinoza’s Pantheism, Nietze’s views pronouncing God’s final exit from this world, Hobbes’s notion of original anarchy or Sartre’s existentialism and all the “pres” and “posts” of modernity, structuralism, “constructions”, “reconstructions” and “deconstructions” of all colours and complexions, where will such a pretender stand in the scales of sanity?

2) The second level of comprehending the Qur’ān is the specialist’s level. This is to be attained by those who achieve and maintain a high level of spiritual development, moral compatibility and emotional frequency with its Author. Through a constant and intense reflection on the Divine Attributes and their all-round reflection on the reality within and the reality without, such gifted men are granted heights of understanding enabling them to perceive the pleasure and displeasure of God, their Lord, by continuously conforming to His ways. Once they made the single God, their focus of obedience and their locus of love and reverence, this became their highest priority in life. By freeing their mind and heart from lowly desires, they could easily dedicate all their resources and faculties to understand and adopt the message of God revealed in the Qur’ān. These enlightened minds were generously rewarded by the Supreme Divine Teacher with profound knowledge revealed in the Qur’ān. These men, the renowned scholars of tafsir shared their insightful understanding of the Qur’ān with posterity. Their contributions to the learning of the Qur’ān continued throughout the last 1447 years ever since the first five verses of chapter 96 were revealed to Prophet Muhammad, son of Abdullah, (pbuh), in 610 of the common era on Mount Hira in Makkah. Human undertaking to learn, study, recite, memorize, internalize, read and reflect on the Qur’ān started with these early moments of the Revelation. The first three recipients of this Divine Revealed knowledge from the Prophet (pbuh) were three earliest and the closest companions of the last Messenger. They were:

- (i) his wife Khadija,
- (ii) his friend Abu Bakr and
- (iii) his cousin Ali, the great genius of Islam.

As the membership of the believers’ community expanded, the number of these early scholars of the Qur’ān increased. This process of learning the Qur’ān became the most sublime mission of the

Muslim scholars eversince. It has continued without a moments' interruption throughout the history of Islam and attracted the best Muslim minds of all times. The mission continues to this moment and will go on until the Last Hour. The erudite masters of tafsir carried forward their mission to pass on the fruits of this fertile, well-protected ever-growing garden of knowledge to succeeding generations of Muslims.

Between the above two levels of understanding the Qur'ān, there are countless ways to comprehend the same Divine Message and apply its cannons to specific situations of life. These ways could be as numerous as the number of indulgent and interested readers of the Qur'ān. Nevertheless, any individual attempt to comprehend the message of this Divine Book has to proceed within the framework of meaning and the cosmic vision clearly defined by the Qur'ān.

However, any effort or attempt to distort the message intended by God in the Qur'ān or to restrict its meaning to any specific situation could not be valid because this could be done only by disregarding its given universal framework of meaning and definite principles of interpretation. Thus one comes across a unique trait of this Book. It has been a scripture fully guarded in both text and meaning. While its words have been immune from any alteration, its meaning has also been fully protected under Special Divine Care (15:9). Therefore, any ill-conceived or insincere move to undermine this Divine Text and its authentic Message or disorient it from its own fundamental postulates and given semantical framework is bound to fail in delivering a clear and coherent meaning from the Qur'ān. In fact, history bears ample evidence to establish the failure and futility of any such attempt whenever it was made.

In short, any sort of finite human mode of interpretation originating from the narrow prism of empiricism or from the spectacles of any linguistic theories accumulating in history could not be relied upon to make sense of the infinite, transcendental, meta-historical and absolute Divine Writ represented by the Qur'ān. The latter is the un-created and eternal Divine Speech, the manifest expression of which had been revealed in historical time in the seventh century of the Common Era to the last Prophet (pbuh). According to the express statement of the Qur'ān, the Book had been eternally existing in the preserved tablet (85:21-22):

'This is but a glorious Qur'ān preserved in the time-less tablet'

بَلْ هُوَ قُرْآنٌ مَجِيدٌ ﴿٢١﴾ فِي لَوْحٍ مَحْفُوظٍ ﴿٢٢﴾

Therefore, all theories provided by human empirical enquiries, experiences in linguistics or literary studies that have evolved in the course of history to make sense of any kind of finite, relative and transitional products of human language are simply inadequate – if not unfit – to aid anyone in properly comprehending the All-Pervasive Absolute Divine Writ revealed in the Qur'ān. Any mode of deriving meaning that tries to construct a connotation of the Qur'ānic text by divorcing it from its Divine Author's intent and from the logically resultant contours of its message is but futile. The Qur'ān transcends the finitudes of space and time. It has to bypass all temporal frontiers to proclaim such universal truths as are essential for defining human *raison d'être* in terms of transparent normative values that are needed to streamline the conduct of human life in a meaningful direction.¹

However, a question which may arise in the modern mind is: whether a non-believer could really comprehend the Qur'ān given the above criteria? The answer supplied by the Qur'ān in numerous statements is in the affirmative. The Qur'ān clearly declares that it was the final Divine Message addressed to all mankind. (14:52)

هَذَا بَلَاغٌ لِلنَّاسِ وَلِيُنذِرُوا بِهِ وَيَلْعَلُوا أَنَّمَا هُوَ إِلَهٌ وَاحِدٌ وَلِيَذَّكَّرَ أُولُو الْأَلْبَابِ

If this is the case, then this Book should lend itself to human comprehension even prior to belief and open affirmation. This access of the human mind to the Qur'ānic message of universal validity,

¹ For the purpose of guiding human conduct and taming of a universal human character on the basis permanent moral values valid for all times, the Qur'ān has introduced a number of key terms. For example, the terms: *Khayr* (good) *sharr* (evil), *birr* (virtue) *ithm* (vice), *falāh* (felicity), *salāh* (rectitude), *nāsīh* (one who wishes well for others and maintains an altruistic attitude) *sidq* (speaking truth according to one's conviction and best of knowledge) *kidhb* (stating or implying something against one's own conviction and knowledge) *najāt* (moral uprightness which bring security), *halāk* (moral disaster). These are just a few examples that illustrate the universal idiom of the Qur'ān.

however, could only be achieved by accepting – at least as a hypothesis – certain necessary premises. The mind seeking such initial comprehension should be free from any preconceived notions, dogmatic prejudices or mental inhibitions. All available resources and active human faculties should be concentrated to listen to this Divine call to man’s salvation and solace. This sincerity of purpose should further be accompanied by a genuine search for the truth or act least by granting a tentative possibility of the truth revealed in the Qur’ān. For he who is genuinely in search of truth should be expected to pursue all possible avenues until he reaches the Truth whatever be its source.

This attitude is the minimum requirement for a non-believer to make sense of the essential message communicated by the Qur’ān.

Significantly, the word *Huda* used in the beginning of the second chapter

ذٰلِكَ الْكِتٰبُ لَا رَيْبَ فِيْهِ هُدًى لِّلْمُتَّقِيْنَ
الَّذِيْنَ يُؤْمِنُوْنَ بِالْغَيْبِ وَيُقِيمُوْنَ الصَّلٰوةَ وَمِمَّا رَزَقْنٰهُمْ يُنْفِقُوْنَ

(2:3) has been interpreted by the scholars of the Qur’ān as having two shades of meaning:

- i. showing the way to one’s destination;
- ii. conducting the seeker of the path along the way to the clearly defined destination.

These dual aspects of guidance (هدى) also indicate the possibility of the Qur’ān being comprehensible to the non-believers. Otherwise, this Book could not have been a guiding message for all humanity. The Qur’ān frequently reminds its readers that it was meant as message of guidance for all mankind individually and collectively until the end of time; therefore, it must remain comprehensible to people / individuals of every generation beyond all barriers of time and space or any variables of culture or episteme. Further, the language of the Qur’ān has maintained the unique characteristic of being immune from such historical compulsions, geographic factors, capricious social conditions, cultural constructions or any sort of subjective constrictions typified by human products of language or specimens of literature. In chapter (53) revealed in the Makkan phase of the Prophet’s mission (from 610 CA to 622 CA) which is named: The Moon, a verse has been repeated four times as a refrain. The verse is as follows:

‘And indeed we have made the Qur’ān easy to understand and internalize; then is there any who will remember?’

وَلَقَدْ يَسَّرْنَا الْقُرْآنَ لِلذِّكْرِ فَهَلْ مِنْ مُدَكِّرٍ

(54:17,22,32,40)

Scores of other verses are found to the same effect in a number of other chapters of the Qur’ān revealed during both the Makkan and Madinan phases of the Noble Messenger’s mission. A diligent reader should, in the above refrains as well as in nearly every other chapter of the Qur’ān, could not miss the clear or implied stress on remembrance. This remembrance is an allusion to the ingrained readiness present in pre-mordial human nature to recognize its Lord, the Creator, the Sustainer and the Supreme Guide and Protector of every individual member of the human family.

The above cited refrains in the chapter, ‘The Moon’ (No.54) seem to suggest, among other things, an implicit reference to the event of the prenatal human acknowledgement of the Supreme Divine Authority of God and His Absolute status as the Ultimate Teacher and Guide of mankind. This acknowledgement, according to the Qur’ān, was testified by each individual member of the human family even prior to their collective appearance on the stage of history. This statement has been made explicitly in the following verse of chapter seven, verse No.172. The verse reads:

‘And remember? when your Lord brought forth from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their seeds, who were all Adam’s and Eve’s offspring and made them testify as to themselves (saying); “Am I

not your Lord?” They said: “Yes! Indeed we do hereby testify,” lest you should say on the fateful Day of Resurrection: “verily we have been unmindful of this acknowledgement” ’ (7:172)

وَإِذْ أَخَذَ رَبُّكَ مِنْ بَنِي آدَمَ مِنْ ظُهُورِهِمْ ذُرِّيَّتَهُمْ وَأَشْهَدَهُمْ عَلَىٰ أَنفُسِهِمْ أَلَسْتُ بِرَبِّكُمْ قَالُوا بَلَىٰ ۗ شَهِدْنَا ۗ أَنْ تَقُولُوا يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ إِنَّا كُنَّا عَنْ هَذَا غَافِلِينَ

The Qur’ān – the last Divine Communication of the final, indispensable and all embracing message for human felicity and salvation – is, of necessity, premised on certain definite postulates; these are: *tawhid*, *risālah*, *ākhirah* and *khilāfah*. Further, the above four cardinal doctrines rest on an unqualified acceptance of Prophet’s status as primary recipient and communicator of the Revelation. This acceptance affirms the cardinal fact that the revealed words employed in the Qur’ān with their singularly coherent composition have been primarily received and understood, immediately announced, clearly explained and practically applied in history by the Prophet (pbuh). Subsequently or simultaneously, the teachings of the Qur’ān were wholeheartedly espoused and adopted in the lives of believing men and women.

At the same time, one should bear in mind while going through the Qur’ān either as a neutral observer or as a believer, that it claims for itself an all-embracing status encompassing the essence of all previously revealed scriptures (5:48). According to the Qur’ān, this Book is the final recapitulation of all the books of Divine Guidance revealed from the same Divine source to the Divine Messengers and Prophets in the past from Adam (pbuh) to Jesus Christ (pbuh) (4:163). This is why it is an essential component of the believer’s creed to affirm the truth of all the past Prophets (4:136). In the same way, all the past Prophets (pbuh), predicted the coming of the last Prophet (pbuh) at the conclusion of human cultural career in history (3:81).

Without endorsing the above premises as postulates – or at least – as possible hypotheses-this message cannot play its educative role, nor could it perform its corrective function in man’s life. Unless these premises are affirmed, any reading of it, accompanied by a refusal to heed its clarion call or an attempt to impose an arbitrary interpretation on it, will surely lead to results contrary to its intended aims.

The Qur’ān has the following to say about various kinds of perverted approaches to the Book of Allah:

‘By it He misleads many and many He guides thereby; and He misleads only those who are the rebellious, the perverts.’
(2:26)

... يُضِلُّ بِهِ كَثِيرًا وَيَهْدِي بِهِ كَثِيرًا وَمَا يُضِلُّ بِهِ إِلَّا الْفَاسِقِينَ

The aim of revealing the Qur’ān essentially consists in defining the vocation of man enabling him to fulfill the terms of his purposeful vocation and thereby ennobling his status in this temporary world and in his permanent abode. Acknowledging God as alpha and omega, as the prime and absolute source of all knowledge, power and the whole cosmic reality, conforming to the moral scheme of life elaborated by Him in His Last Book of Guidance and submitting to His will by voluntary choice constitutes the *raison d’être* of man.²

At the same time, despite marshalling compelling evidence that establishes its proven Divine Status, the Qur’ān affords man the freedom of accepting or rejecting its message in toto. It declares openly:

‘He who wants to live by it should live by clear evidence and he who desires perdition should do so by conviction.’ (8:42)

إِذْ أَنْتُمْ بِالْعُدْوَةِ الدُّنْيَا وَهُمْ بِالْعُدْوَةِ الْقُصْوَى وَالرَّكْبُ أَسْفَلَ مِنْكُمْ وَلَوْ تَوَاعَدْتُمْ لَاخْتَلَقْتُمْ فِي الْمِيعَادِ وَلَكِنْ لِيَقْضِيَ اللَّهُ أَمْرًا كَانَ مَفْعُولًا لِيَهْلِكَ مَنْ هَلَكَ عَن بَيِّنَةٍ وَيَحْيَىٰ مَنْ حَيَّ عَن بَيِّنَةٍ وَإِنَّ اللَّهَ لَسَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٌ

However, this acceptance or rejection could not be partial. It has to be whole and holistic. Because accepting it in part or rejecting it in part is tantamount to rejecting it in toto. This has been made clear in the following verse of the Qur’ān:

² See for example: 95:1-8; 3:189-198

‘Then do you believe in a part of the Scripture and reject the rest? Then what is the recompense of those who do so among you, except disgrace in the life of this world, and on the day of resurrection, they shall be consigned to the most grievous torment. And Allah is not unaware of what you do’ (2:85)

ثُمَّ أَنْتُمْ هَؤُلَاءِ تَقْتُلُونَ أَنْفُسَكُمْ وَتُحْرَجُونَ فَرِيقًا مِنْكُمْ مِنْ دِيَارِهِمْ تَطَاهَرُونَ عَلَيْهِمْ بِالْإِيمَانِ وَالْعُدْوَانِ وَإِنْ يَأْتِوكُمْ أُسَارَى تَفَادُوهُمْ وَهُوَ مُحَرَّمٌ عَلَيْكُمْ إِخْرَاجَهُمْ أَفَلَا تُؤْمِنُونَ بِبَعْضِ الْكِتَابِ وَتَكْفُرُونَ بِبَعْضٍ فَمَا جَزَاءُ مَنْ يَفْعَلْ ذَلِكَ مِنْكُمْ إِلَّا جُزَاءُ فِي الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا وَيَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ يُرَدُّونَ إِلَى أشدِّ الْعَذَابِ وَمَا اللَّهُ بِخَافِلٍ عَمَّا تَعْمَلُونَ

The degree of initial access to the message is attainable to everyone who fulfills the above criteria. However, as explained above, there always remains a higher level of understanding the Qur’ān which is accessible exclusively to the extraordinarily gifted group of scholars. These are the ones who have devoted themselves to gain a profound understanding in the field of religious scholarship:

...‘so that they may gain profound understanding in the Religion...’ (9:122)

... فَلَوْلَا نَفَرَ مِنْ كُلِّ فِرْقَةٍ مِنْهُمْ طَائِفَةٌ لِيَتَفَقَّهُوا فِي الدِّينِ ...

...‘so ask of those who know the Scripture (e.g. learned men of Torah and Injil) if you know not’ (16:43)³

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ قَبْلِكَ إِلَّا رَجَالًا نُوحِيَ إِلَيْهِمْ فَاسْأَلُوا أَهْلَ الذِّكْرِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ

These are the scholars who pursue a vigorous scholarly effort to acquire a thorough understanding of the profundities and subtleties of the Qur’ānic language and its unique style to their utmost capacity. They take full cognizance of the oral explications and practical applications of Qur’ān provided in the Prophet’s sunnah. At the secondary level of this challenging academic pursuit, the scholars of the Qur’ān take due notice of the subsequent contributions made by the celebrated scholars in the field of tafsir. These contributions started with the very first generation of the Prophet’s own direct pupils namely, his companions. The companions’ record of highly original insights in the field of tafsir is only next to the Prophet’s sunnah in importance. This importance has been accorded to the companions’ understanding by the consensus of the Muslim scholars throughout history simply because these men and women directly witnessed the events of the Revelation that continued for around twenty three years (610-632 C.A.).⁴

The primary source of understanding the Qur’ān is the Qur’ān itself. Its peculiar language, style, composition, coherence and symmetrical order is unique and matchless. These features of the Qur’ān have been presented by its Divine Author as a continuous challenge to all mankind to produce a similar specimen comparable to any single chapter of this singular Book. It is a challenge expressly pronounced in the Qur’ān, repeated and reiterated by it in various chapters. At the level of common understanding also, this singular quality of the Divine Book is often felt by every reader, reciter and listener to the Qur’ān who has a genuine thirst for the authentic Divine Truth. Though it is an intense feeling, yet it may not be easy for the nonspecialists to express and argue for it for want of the required linguistic competence. At the advanced level, however, this appreciation rests on a clear evidence of Qur’ān’s inimitability. This evidence of the miraculous status of the Qur’ān has been meticulously examined and elaborated by the scholars of *Balagha*.⁵

The precedents and parallel statements of the Qur’ān, repeated in different contexts, together provide the thematic scheme and theoretical framework in which the consistent meaning of the Book is supplied as a whole. Taking notice of all these statements together is necessary to determine its holistic

³ This implicit reference to the scholars of the earlier scriptures, further re-enforces the syncretic perspective of the Qur’ān and its contention that it was a culmination of the historical process of Revealed Guidance. Further, on many occasions, the Qur’ān acknowledges the virtuous qualities displayed by the ‘people of the Book’, a generic term of the Qur’ān for all those who uphold the supreme status of Divine Revelation. See for instance: (3:113-115).

⁴ See for a detailed study of the development of tafsir as a distinct discipline: Muhammad Husayn al-Dhahabi, al-Tafir wal-Mufasssirin, Cairo, 1961, 1st edition, (two volumes).

⁵ See for details, Salāh al-Khālidi, al-Bayān fī I’jāz al-Qur’ān, Amman, 1991, pp.29-60.

denotations. This comprehensive view is necessary at both levels, primary as well as advanced. Thus the Qur'ān should be approached as an integrated, coherent and organized discourse.⁶ It says:

'This is a Book, the verses whereof are perfected and then explained in detail from One who is All-Wise, Well-Acquainted' (11:1)

الرَّ كِتَابٌ أُحْكِمَتْ آيَاتُهُ ثُمَّ فُصِّلَتْ مِنْ لَدُنْ حَكِيمٍ خَبِيرٍ

Significantly, the Qur'ān directs its readers to seek refuge of God against satanic influences before reading it. This direction underlines the need for seeking an inner purity before one could intend to be guided by the Qur'ān. This direction also indicates that the Divine discourse addresses man at both intellectual and spiritual levels at the same time. Therefore, both these human cognitive realms need cleansing from all kinds of satanic influences before a nexus could be achieved with the Qur'ān and its Author. As a musician touches the inner chords and creates a deeper impact, a poet goes even deeper in creating an impact on one's mind and heart, emotions and sentiments. This impact by far exceeds the effects of purely rational expressions of the reality. The Qur'ān transcends all such limits of human influence. It addresses the entire being of man far beyond the intellectual frontiers of the mind and emotional limits of the heart. Its impact reaches the deepest recesses of an attentive human self and a retentive soul. This penetration of the Divine Voice in the interiors of a receptive and reflecting reciter's self is immediately synchronized with an inner echo already present in the depths of human soul. It is then registered in the conscious as well as the sub-conscious spheres of human individual's cognitive apparatus. This total response of the believers to the Divine call is reflected, inter-alia, in their zeal to memorize the whole Book. Millions of believers recite the Book of God to this day from memory in exactly the same way as the Prophet (pbuh) recited its 114 chapters to his companions. This number of expert Qur'ān reciters had started from the time of its revelation. It has always been on the increase in all parts of the world. These fortunate ones include hundreds of thousands of blind men and women also.

Therefore, mere intellectual skills or linguistic resources are by no means sufficient to acquire the benefits of Qur'ānic guidance. The involvement of the sensory apparatus, intellectual tools of cognition and linguistic skills remain primary instruments for the study of the Qur'ān like any other human literary masterpiece. But in the former's case, a sincere and serious involvement of the reader's mind and heart (قلب سليم) is necessary to achieve the purposes for which the Divine Book has been revealed. This is simply because the Qur'ān is not merely concerned with passing on objective information, rational facts or intellectual knowledge. It has been revealed to transform individual, metamorphose society and change the course of history to a positive direction. All this is not possible by mere objective knowledge or sheer deductive or inductive rationality. Also, according to Qur'ānic epistemology, any discovery devoid of action is a useless pursuit and does not even qualify to be acknowledged as knowledge proper. 'Such carriers of religious knowledge without any desire for its practical application in life have been likened by the Qur'ān to an ass carrying loads of books.' (62:5)⁷

مَثَلُ الَّذِينَ حُمِلُوا التَّوْرَةَ ثُمَّ لَمْ يَحْمِلُوهَا كَمَثَلِ الْحِمَارِ يَحْمِلُ أَسْفَارًا بِئْسَ مَثَلُ الْقَوْمِ الَّذِينَ كَذَّبُوا بِآيَاتِ اللَّهِ وَاللَّهُ لَا يَهْدِي الْقَوْمَ الظَّالِمِينَ

Every field of knowledge or discipline defines its status and delineates the frontiers that determine certain rules to guide the learners. The Qur'ān also clearly identifies its own status at the outset. Also, it lays down clear rules for seeking those benefits that it promises to deliver. The foremost of these rules is to acquire knowledge with an earnest and sincere resolve to live in conformity with the acquired knowledge. As to committed nonbelievers, the minimum level of qualifying for reading this noble Book

⁶ See for further details about the thematic coherence in the Qur'ān: Amin Ahsan Islāhī, *Tadabbur-i-Qur'ān*, (Urdu), Lahore, 1998.

⁷ In this verse, the carriers of knowledge who have been condemned due to lack of concern for acting upon their knowledge, are some Jewish scholars of Torah. This fact again shows due acknowledgement of Torah as a valid source of the historical process of Divine Revelation at the end of which the Qur'ān places itself.

is: ‘to consider the possibility of its truthfulness and the validity of its postulated premises: monotheism, prophethood, hereafter and human vicegerency.’⁸

To capture the barest minimum sense of the Qur’ānic message, therefore, it is necessary to accept the underlying world-view of the Qur’ān at least as a working hypothesis. Otherwise, it would be sheer futility to labour with the Divine Revelation. If the purpose of human cognitive undertaking is to explain and understand reality, then the reality of the Qur’ān could only be discovered by following the method defined in the Qur’ān itself. Obviously, one cannot understand Bhagwat Gita by applying the methodology of *Hadith*, nor could one appreciate the laws of Manu Shastra through implementing the principles of *usūl al-Fiqh*. In short, the scholars of Islam have identified five basic guidelines to understand the Qur’ān:

1. acknowledging the Attributes of the Speaker/Author of the Revelation;
2. knowing the objectives of the Revelation;
3. recognizing the perfectness and comprehensiveness of the Revelation;
4. knowing the co-textual and contextual coherence in its discourses and narratives;
5. Knowing distinctive features of Arabic language, its extraordinary fertile semantics, rich linguistic resources, its unique composition and style and its wonderful patterns of communication. These features have been unparalleled in the cultural and literary history of mankind. For investing Arabic language with all these singular qualities, it seems that this unique lexicon was created, nursed, fostered and nurtured under special Divine care. Eventually it was chosen by Divine Providence to serve as the matchless living vehicle for the communication of the Final Eternal and Abiding Divine Message:

‘We have made it A Qur’ān in Arabic That you may be able to understand and learn wisdom’ (43:2-3)⁹

وَالْكِتَابِ الْمُبِينِ
إِنَّا جَعَلْنَاهُ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا لَعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ

The first, foremost and essential principle stipulated by the Qur’ān to take the initial step toward understanding its message is the acknowledgement of its Author. For it is natural in a communication to recognize the communicator, his status, his stance and his aim. It is also natural on the part of the receiver of the communication to be cognizant of his own relation to the communicator, whether he knows and recognizes him?

Significantly, the Qur’ān declares in its very opening statement (2:3) that it was ‘a guidance for the righteous’ الَّذِينَ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِالْغَيْبِ وَيُقِيمُونَ الصَّلَاةَ وَمِمَّا رَزَقْنَاهُمْ يُنفِقُونَ; the question arises whether one who was not righteous or had little interest in the Divine Guidance could also attain any meaningful comprehension of this Book?

As stated earlier, the answer is yes, provided such a so-called objective observer/reader or a non-believing learner affirms the four fundamental principles, the essential premises of the Qur’ān, (monotheism, prophethood, human vicegerency and hereafter) as working hypotheses, without which one could not even enter the threshold of the Qur’ānic universe; thereafter he could freely make up his mind to accept or reject the message;

As to those who do seek guidance and crave for the great Divine Favour of reform and guidance, such ones are required to attest the unseen truths before plucking any fruits from this life-yielding garden

⁸ These four doctrines constitute the foundational principles of the Qur’ānic world-view. In fact, the very first of these principles namely, tawhīd (roughly translated as monotheism) is the quintessence of the Qur’ānic message. From this fountainhead, the other three principles (prophethood, hereafter, human status as vicegerent on earth) follow ipso facto. When one affirms the unity of God with His necessary Attributes, the acknowledgement of Prophets as the carriers, the practical and inspiring models of His guiding Message comes automatically. Acknowledging God as the Absolute Arbiter on the Day of Judgement is the other logical consequence because otherwise God is reduced to the position of a passive spectator of history. This will undermine His essential Attributes. Lastly, the position of man as a vicegerent is a logical corollary of *tawhīd* because it is man who is sent to this world by God with necessary qualities and resources as the agent of change. It is he who has been addressed by the Revelation. He is called upon to develop his potential, reform his character, overcome his lower passions, enhance his moral and spiritual qualities and fashion this world in accordance with the cultural objectives laid down by the Creator of man and his habitat. If the potential Khalīfah, vicegerent on earth responds positively to the Divine call, he succeeds in this test and assumes the august status of actual and active khalīfah, he is promised constant Divine support to achieve felicity here and now and the most gracious reward of an immortal life of bliss and the final abiding approval by his Lord hereafter.

⁹ For details see: Mahmud Tawfiq, *Subulu Istinbātāl-Ma’ānī min al Qur’ān wa’l Sunnah*, Cairo, 2011, (1st edition) Maktabatu Wahbah, pp. 51-93.

of guidance. The latter is an intrinsic ingredient of the Qur'ānic definition of the term 'the righteous ones' (مُتَّقِينَ). Indeed according to the Qur'ān, without recognizing the transcendental sphere of the reality, no adequate understanding or meaningful appreciation of even the most visible immediate environs and the paramount principles regulating their functions was possible, leave alone a meaningful recourse to the Ultimate Truth embodied in Divine Guidance.

According to the Qur'ān, when one denies the unseen sphere of the reality lying beyond the limits of our cognitive outreach, then any amount of incremental empirical data or accumulated rational wisdom becomes irrelevant and is relegated into insignificance. It is then virtually reduced to nothing if only because it offers no august explanation for the genesis of man, his temporary abode and terminable life in this highly organized and harmonious habitat made available to him upon his birth without his least effort or investment. It is a life in which the mortal end of this boastful arrogant man is far more definite and certain than his initial uncertain, rather complicated entry. According to profuse statements of the Qur'ān, in a state of mind in which an agnostic or atheistic man persists in his arrogance, he stubbornly celebrates his own jealously guarded bigotries such as: "enlightenment" and his self-proclaimed "autonomy". In his sheer ignorance, he reassures himself that he already 'rid himself' of any feeling of 'superstitious' insecurity, 'an unfounded phobia' of God and His invisible –therefore mythical– transcendental authority. In such a state of mind – regarded by the Qur'ān as sickness, pure and simple, (24:50; 25:5; 2:9-10; 2:74) man forgets himself and lives like an abnormal hominoid existing at the sub-animal level (7:175-176, 179; 2:74) or becomes like some kind of primate gibbons. Yet, despite this heavy veil of ignorance and primitivity clouding his senses and shrouding his mind, heart and conscience, he enjoys his artificially created state of intoxicated suspension of cognitive powers and near extinction of higher intellectual resources as a great achievement. He pursues the thankless aim of immortalizing this self-deceptive 'state of fulfillment' as if he had secured an unchallenged ownership of this world with an unending permanent moral holiday (45:35). In this state of human crisis and heedlessness of the mind and heart, his all pervasive ignorance is continuously expanded until it covers his entire vision of the horizon and the underlying cosmic reality. His mind's eye is then particularly blinded to any vision of the holistic and integrated reality. He is disabled to notice anything beyond his own artificially created quarantine of lowly passions, beastly instincts, self-congratulatory intellectual exploits or highly fallible tentative scientific discoveries. His whole cognitive process becomes imprisoned in the narrow categories of those disciplines that he creates himself in the name of objectivity, positivism or rationalism.

As soon as this calamity befalls man, this clever creature of God, the best of His creational specimens, originally created for a noble mission and fashioned in the finest forms, (95:4-8) is thrown from the lofty locus of Divine Vicegerent to the lowest levels of worthless perishable homo sapiens; he lives here all right, but not to pursue any moral aim or spiritual ideal. He thinks he came here by chance and should be counting his hours of physical survival in this mortal world before his sudden perdition.

During the present probation and respite given by God to man, like an infant, the Qur'an points out, man observes the scenes of life as an endless purposeless play and pastime, craving hungrily for an immediate fulfillment that could saturate him in the present (45:23-24). This urge always stays with him like an impossible dream. Though it is impossible to live here for ever and man perhaps also knows that it is something he never achieves, yet he pursues this dream endlessly and intermittently; He pursues this dream until his physical and mental resources are exhausted in this thankless endless travail. Despite all his fascination with this world and his incessant craving for consumption of its resources, in actuality, the Qur'ān warns, the entire phenomenal world, the source of all his ambitions and the cause of his endless troubles, is no more than a deceptive mirage bereft of all the ultimately essential truths.

'As for those who disbelieve, their deeds are like a mirage in a barren desert. The thirsty one mistakes it for water until he comes upon it and finds it to be nothing; but he does encounter God standing face to face with his Creator and Master, his Lord law-giver and his life's ultimate Arbiter. He has then nothing to save him from this sudden exposure to reality. God settles his accounts with him then and there to pay him his due (Hell); and God is indeed swift in taking account; Or the state of a disbeliever is like the darkness in a vast deep sea overwhelmed with waves, topped by waves, tapped by dark

clouds, layers of darkness upon darkness envelop him. If a man stretches out his hand, he can hardly see it! And he for whom God has not provided light, for him there is no light' (24:39-40)

وَالَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا أَعْمَالُهُمْ كَسَرَابٍ بِقِيَعَةٍ يُحْسِبُهُ الظَّمْآنُ مَاءً حَتَّىٰ إِذَا جَاءَهُ لَمْ يَجِدْهُ شَيْئًا وَوَجَدَ اللَّهَ عِنْدَهُ فَوَفَّيَهُ حِسَابَهُ وَاللَّهُ سَرِيعُ الْحِسَابِ
 أَوْ كظلماتٍ في بحرٍ لجِّيٍّ يَعْتَشِيهِ مَوْجٌ مِنْ فَوْقِهِ مَوْجٌ مِنْ فَوْقِهِ سَحَابٌ ظلماتٌ بعضها فوق بعضٍ إِذَا أَخْرَجَ يَدَهُ لَمْ يَكَدْ يَرِيهَا وَمَنْ لَمْ
 يَجْعَلِ اللَّهُ لَهُ نُورًا فَمَا لَهُ مِنْ نُورٍ

In fact, it should be evident by slight reflection that this phenomenal world loses all meaning and purpose when it is explained away in pure empirical or existentialistic terms. The Qur'an takes due notice of this myopic view of history and highly superficial and narrow vision of life when it says:

'They know only of the outer appearance of the life of this immediate world but they are heedless of the hereafter. Do they not think deeply in their own selves about themselves? God has created not the heavens and the earth and all that is between them (in time and space), except with a true intent and definite purpose and that for an already appointed term; yet many of mankind deny the definitive meeting with their Lord Sustainer' (30:7-8)

يَعْلَمُونَ ظَاهِرًا مِنَ الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا وَهُمْ عَنِ الْآخِرَةِ هُمْ غَافِلُونَ
 أَوَلَمْ يَتَفَكَّرُوا فِي أَنفُسِهِمْ مَا خَلَقَ اللَّهُ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا إِلَّا بِالْحَقِّ وَأَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى وَإِنَّ كَثِيرًا مِنَ النَّاسِ بِلِقَائِ رَبِّهِمْ (٧)
 لَكَافِرُونَ

At several places, the Qur'an frequently pauses and records, according to the particular context of the ongoing discourse, this attitude of general heedlessness and laments the negligence of man toward the impending unavoidable consequences of his present life – a life which he continues to drag on listlessly in a void and vacuum. Yet these masses, the human multitudes, les misérables in the true sense, go on leading this empty life rather proudly pursuing such aims as they never could achieve. They go on continuing with this journey of life deep steep in the prison of pure materiality and epicurean ambitions without any sense of final eschatological destination, enthusiastically pursuing new and innovative patterns of momentary pleasures. They seldom give attention to the obvious fact that they were in fact only completing their limited given number of heart beats and pulse counts. Yet they seem to feel, out of sheer ignorance, that they will go on enjoying this animalistic existence with utmost sense of security; they seldom look back to take a stock of their own and their ancestor's past life. In the perspective of the Qur'an, this kind of biological living is hardly worth man's while (47:12). It is a futile existence, a lifeless sheer biological living without any spirit because it is devoid of any teleological sense of purpose. At best, this kind of sub-human anthropoid might create an environment that helps him pass his days in the present moment with seeming security and passing superficial pleasure. However, this fleeting comfort and seeming safety presently enjoyed by man is only confined to the present moment, restricted to immediate surroundings; and in truth this narrow aim hardly goes beyond his nose and a childish game. The Qur'an says of the man who has placed himself in such a languid state incurring horrendous consequences in afterlife at heavy cost by his own voluntary will:

'And verily, he thought that he would never come back (to us)! Yes! Verily, his Lord has been ever beholding him! So I swear by the afterglow of sunset; And by the night and whatever it gathers in its darkness, And by the moon when it is at the full, you shall certainly travel from stage to stage (in this life and in the Hereafter). What is the matter with them then, that they believe not, running away from lasting security and bliss? And when the Qur'an is recited to them, they fall not prostrate.¹⁰ Nay, those who disbelieve, deny. And Allah knows best what they gather (of good and bad deeds), So announce to them a painful torment. Except those who believe and do righteous deeds, for them is a reward that will never come to an end (i.e. Paradise).' (84:14-25)

إِنَّهُ ظَنَّ أَنْ لَنْ يَخُورَ (14) بَلَىٰ إِنَّ رَبَّهُ كَانَ بِهِ بَصِيرًا (15) فَلَا أُفْسِمُ بِالشَّفَقِ (16) وَاللَّيْلِ وَمَا وَسَقَ (17) وَالْقَمَرِ إِذَا اتَّسَقَ (18) لَتَرْكَبُنَّ طَبَقًا عَنْ طَبَقٍ (19) فَمَا لَهُمْ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ (20) وَإِذَا قُرِئَ عَلَيْهِمُ الْقُرْآنُ لَا

¹⁰ Falling prostrate upon hearing the Qur'an is the symbolic demonstration of responding by the submitting auditors to the Divine Call morally and spiritually, emotionally and intellectually.

يُكَذِّبُونَ (22) وَاللَّهُ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا يُوعُونَ (23) فَتَبَيَّنَ لَهُمْ بَعْدَآبِ أَلِيمٍ (24) إِلَّا (25) يَسْجُدُونَ (21) بَلِ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا
الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ لَهُمْ أَجْرٌ غَيْرُ مَمْنُونٍ

The above Message is presented in the Qur'an as the axis of all success and failure of man; and this precisely is the real clarion call of this last Divine Revelation. This final call of the loving God which is addressed to man, started with Adam, the ancestor of mankind. It continued across history (13:7) and culminated with the last Prophet, the spiritual father of all humanity. The last Revelation has presented itself as the Final version of the same Universal Revelation (5:48; 26:196); It claims clearly and frequently that this last Book contains the essential substance of all past revelations. This clear final message consists in *tawhīd*, *risālah*, *ākhirah* and *khilāfah*; It should never escape anyone's attention that the Qur'an was neither a book of dry metaphysics or detached theology nor was it a mere code of dos and don'ts. It is a book which is not just a commentary on man and history. It is a vigorously pragmatic programme of life touching all dimensions of human condition, its constants as well as variables. The rest of the Qur'an's 113 chapters provide an elaborate answer to a supplication taught by the Qur'an in its very first chapter: 'Opening'. The follower of the Straight Path of God is not only shown the way step by step, but is also helped in every other way to follow the path smoothly without let or hindrance. It is a practical manifesto with clear demands on man's inner thought and outer attitude, conscious behavior and consistent habitude leading to a total and wholehearted surrender before God and his unqualified life-long servitude. This surrender is a free decision by the exercise of autonomous human discretion. Man has been invited to take this decision by voluntary choice. 'There is no compulsion in religion' (2:256). 'The Truth is from your Lord; now whosoever wills, let him believe, and whosoever wills, let him disbelieve' (18:29). This is why a decision to respond to this Divine invitation by a positive resolve to listen to the Qur'an and revolve life around its axis could only take place by one's own inner intense urge. This urge has to be animated by love, craving, adoration, obedience, self-transformation through a serious life-long change of outlook and orientation, a sincere undertaking and commitment, an all out struggle and self-sacrifice, even self-extinction of one's own stray thoughts, erratic passions and wanton worldly desires and pursuits. It is in this way that one could understand the Qur'an and adopt its message and qualify oneself for the eternally promised everlasting bliss of meeting the Beloved God, the Ultimate Centre and Source of the Truth, the Knowledge, the Power and the Beauty *par excellence*.

At the same time, there is sufficient acknowledgement of human limitations and natural lapses, granted in this Book. For it has been revealed by none other than the Creator of man Himself and the maker of his body and soul, mind and psychic whole. Who else could have better regard for human weaknesses than the Creator and Sustainer of man Himself? It is He Who alone knows the innermost state and capricious conditions of man's thoughts and feelings, dreams and ambitions, problems and worries, 'who is nearer to him than his own self' (50:16); He has also provided, in the same Manual of Guidance, effective remedies to all natural human failings and maladies. When the believer initiates his spiritual voyage toward his Lord through the Qur'an, he not only confesses faith in His Lord, but also seeks help from Him to overcome all hardships or hurdles that might impede his smooth navigation 'You alone we worship and you alone we ask for help' (1:5). These few words provide the master key to unravel the meanings mysteries of this Divine communication. The rest of the Qur'an is the Divine answer to this humble supplication of God's sincere servants.

The revelation of the Qur'an, therefore, by its nature is a unique event of history incomparable to any human linguistic, literary or philosophical project. It falls beyond the limited scope of human mind and rational resources. It should, therefore, be dealt with in its own peculiar way explained above by all those who are willing to delve keep in its high seas to reach its hidden pearls, rubies and emeralds of knowledge, truth, guidance, wisdom and spiritual light. All other academic modes or linguistic codes are unfit and incompatible. Their application to this Book is wastage of time, pure and simple.