

Alluha Akba

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Sunnis are muslims who claim to follow the tradition of the prophet Mohammad, his hadiths (sayings) and the first three caliphs as his legitimate successors. They distinguish themselves from Shias who regard Ali, son-in-law of the prophet, as the sole legitimate successor. The Sunnis who battle to establish the Islamic State prefer to be known as Salafis, proponents of a caliphate, a political kingdom, as opposed to Wahhabis, disciples of Mohammad ibn al-Wahhab (1703-1792), who espouse the strict application of the Sharia (Islamic law derived from the Quran). Whether the emphasis be on the caliphate or on the sharia, Salafis and Wahhabis alike aspire to nothing less than a global, totalitarian theocratic system.

This system is derived from a radical monotheism (tawhid) based on selective verses (ayats) and chapters (surats) of the noble Quran. The Quran is not to be taken as an inspired book as, say, the Bible but as the revealed Word of Allah to the prophet by the archangel Gabriel. Allah spoke in classical Arabic. Hence the necessity to know classical Arabic to properly read the Quran, let alone understand and interpret it. In effect, this Revelation, the pristine Word of Allah is, in its content, greater than the pedestrian words that serve to transcribe it. The essence of the Quran is distinct from its morphology and syntax, however noble the poetic quality of the expression. The Word of Allah is of the domain of the intangible, of the immaterial; strictly speaking, Allah alone can fully interpret Allah's Word. The Quran does point out, however, "none can grasp it (Quran) except those pure" (Q.56:77-81). For the Revelation corresponds to that which is already inscribed in the hearts of men. "O you who have been given the Scripture! Believe in what we have revealed confirming what is within you." (Q.4:47). Islamists have also noted that, given the universal dimension of the Quran, translation into other languages has been necessary, a second-hand access being preferable to no access at all.

A proper exegesis (tafsir) of the Quran raises issues muslim scholars have tried to resolve by adopting four foundational principles: (i) the whole Quran must be used to interpret individual ayats;(ii) the Hadiths (sayings of the prophet) are an acceptable source of interpretation;(iii)the life experience of Sahaba (the prophet's companions) and of Tab'ium (his followers)can be taken into account; (iv) ijihad (reasoning). Furthermore, when transcribed to reach the minds of ordinary mortals, especially when addressing the nature of Allah, a clear distinction is to be made between anthropomorphism and analogy.

When Islam declares that Allah has ninety-nine names, this in no way means that this number is absolute. The attributes mentioned are to be taken analogically; the virtues, though descriptive of human qualities, contain and go beyond that which is manifested by finite, common mortals. The attributes constitute adequate expressions to give us some insight into the nature of Allah. But Allah is transcendent of time and space, is eternal, is totally other. He is the self-subsisting Creator (al-Qayyum). As Al-Wadud, the loving Allah (Q.11:90) has chosen to be involved in the affairs of men, despite the opinion of some angels, because He is the merciful Giver of life (Q7:158; 15:23; 30:50). As Al-Hadi (Q.2:256), He remains the true way. This Allah of pure Love (Q.30:25) is also immanent: "closer to you than the jugular vein" (Q.50:16).

As Ismi Azam, Allah has the greatest name. He is the Alpha and the Omega (Q.57:3). As such, He exists prior to all creations, to all visible and invisible manifestations. Allah is greater than all avatars; muslims have no qualms admitting that Allah is greater than Mohammad. The Quran too, in all its magnificence and magnitude, cannot contain the totality of Omnipotent Allah. Allah is only partially revealed in the Holy Quran (or any other Book for that matter). Therefore Allah is greater than the Quran.

If that be the case, there are at least two major issues that need to be addressed: (1) the Quran as final revelation and (2) the principle of abrogation mentioned above (only the Quran can be used to interpret individual ayats). Islamists assert that Allah has sent a succession of prophets, beginning with Adam himself, through Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and finally Mohammad, all of whom are muslims by the way (a muslim is one who submits entirely to Allah). Within the specific cultural context of the times, Allah sent His Word to educate us in His ways. But every time, Mankind has failed to abide by the prophets' and Allah's standard. To protect the people from error and falsifications, to preserve the integrity and sanctity of His Word, Allah gave this specific warning concerning the Torah: "You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God, that I command you" (Deut. 4:2). The Torah was the final revelation for the Jewish people but, Islamists contend, when the people failed in their mandate, Allah sent new revelation through Jesus and the New Testament. Again the word of warning: "If anyone adds to them God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book. And if anyone takes word from this scroll of prophecy, God will take away from that person any share in the tree of life and in the Holy City." (Rev. 22:9). Not to be thwarted, Allah sent His "final" Revelation through Mohammad with the same admonition: "... no one can alter His Words" (Q.6:115).

The legitimate question is whether mankind as a whole and Islam in particular are living up to the standards of the Quran, living up to the expectations of Allah. For it is written, and these words seem to be addressed particularly to selfish, lapsed Muslims, “And if you turn away, He will replace you by another people, and they will not be like you” (Q.47:38). The Last Word, the Word of Judgment, rests with Allah who is free to speak as He wills, when He wills, through whom He wills, undaunted by men or angels. Allah’s will is absolute. What He purposes He does. His plan for humankind requires, as a special grace, a minimal participation of men, created with free will. It is by the grace of merciful Allah that Muslims can implement the five pillars of Islam, proclaim the Shahada (there is no god but Allah); pray five times a day (salat); practise the zakat (charity), fast during the month of Ramadan (sawm); go on pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj). Always and forever, precedence and tribute are to be given to Allah. Hadiths give way to the Quran and the Quran will always point to Allah. Similarly the Sahaba and the Tabi’um (companions and followers of the prophet) are to be emulated only in those aspects of behaviour that correspond to Allah’s standard of love, agape love, bearing in mind the fact that no common mortal can match Allah’s moral integrity.

And when it comes to the principle of abrogation, whereby only the Quran can interpret the Quran (Q.2:106; 16:101), care is to be taken that the Holy Book does not become a closed, legalistic system. Preeminence is again to be given to the spirit of Allah. His attribute of universal love remains the ultimate standard by which we are called to live. For the Word of Providential, Merciful Allah is also a liberating Word, a Word of emancipation that subsumes and completes the Law and the prophets. The principle of Allah’s absolute, unconditional Love takes precedence over all other principles of interpretation of the Quran.

In order that we may be able to respond to His calling and participate in His Providential work, Allah gave us the gift of the intellect. To be sure, this gift has been abused and misused in the exploitation and domination of Allah’s creation. Still science can be a powerful instrument to further Allah’s Providence. It would thus be a mistake to want to ban mathematics from the curriculum, as an African academic proposed, on the ground that it is a product of white European colonialism. The human mind has no colour. However, western civilisation does expose itself to the radical criticism of militant Islamists for whom materialism, akin to idolatry, constitutes the worst abomination.

Islam rightly promotes the use of ijtihad (reasoning) in doing the will of Allah. Thus it is necessary to understand, for example, that History is perpetually on the move. Salafis, the Taliban, Al Qaeda or Boko Haram may be doing a great disservice to Islam, to Allah’s Providence, by resolutely looking with nostalgia to the supposedly golden age when the prophet Mohammad walked the earth. They are most likely galloping backward into History. There is no return to this pre-medieval era. With the Quran in one hand and the sword in the other, clamouring “Allahu Akbar!” they are plunging headlong into the bottomless pit.

Sunnis and Shias alike believe in Allah, in the Holy Quran, in the prophet Mohammad, in the five pillars of Islam and yet they cannot stand one another, to the point of killing one another, (let alone other “infidels”) in the name of Allah! This is surely a huge embarrassment to the prophet when he is called to face Allah, let alone the utter desolation of Allah Himself. Why this conundrum? Succession, blood lineage, economic and political power, refusal to keep proper position, to listen to and follow Allah in humility. ISIS, now IS, deceived by Iblis, the rebellious angel (Q.7:11-12), the same ancient hissing serpent, this Whisperer (Q.114:1-6), who became Shaytan (Q.7:14-18), the one who originally seduced Adam and Eve and was granted limited permission to lead humans astray.

But Allah the Omnipotent is, and shall forever remain, greater than any shaytan. Allah Bismillah (the Merciful) has forgiven Adam. He will never abandon humankind. He will send the Mahdi (Q.47:38) in the end time to reveal Himself still more clearly to us, to explain why He chose to create us and how His plan will be accomplished. These may be troubled times, but there are signs that Allah’s Kingdom is at hand. God is the Greatest! Allahu Akbar!