

# Lights of the Holy Qur'an

For Study and Guidance

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Translations by Camille & Kabir Helminski, closely based on the  
translations of A. Yusuf Ali and Muhammad

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## Introduction

This is a sourcebook of Quranic selections and accompanying interpretations. These selections were made, above all, to highlight the fundamental spiritual principles contained in the Qur'an. If you are new to the Qur'an, we hope that this book will provide a balanced view of the Heart of the Qur'an. If you are already a student of the Qur'an, we hope that these selections will perhaps awaken a new appreciation for the universal spiritual wisdom of the Book.

The interpretations are not meant to be the final word, but rather a point of entry to the universe of meaning offered to us by Revelation. The reader will encounter a variety of viewpoints and understandings and will be encouraged to deepen his or her understanding by reflecting upon the material offered here. In some cases the interpretations offer background information that establish a context for the ayāh. In other cases one might be opened to a direct soul encounter with the words themselves.

The translations, while remaining fairly close to the widely respected translations of Yusuf Ali and Muhammad Asad, aim at a contemporary idiom that is nevertheless dignified and sacred without being ponderous or archaic. Where changes have been made from the accepted translations of Ali and Asad, they are in the direction of linguistic integrity rather than free interpretation. In other words, we have tried to take as few liberties with the text as possible.

Any selection from the Qur'an will inevitably be somewhat subjective and, perhaps, arbitrary. Nevertheless, it is also true that certain passages have become often-quoted favorites. We apologize if some of your favorites may seem to be missing. We have done our best to include selections that touch upon the major spiritual themes of the Qur'an. May people profit from these pages and may Allah be pleased with our efforts.

*~Kabir Helminski, Santa Cruz, California*

## The Opening: Seven Often-Repeated Verses

In the Name of God, the Infinitely Compassionate, Most Merciful.

All praise is God's,  
the Sustainer of all worlds,  
the Infinitely Compassionate and Most Merciful,  
Sovereign of the Day of Reckoning.  
You alone do we worship  
and You alone do we ask for help.  
Guide us on the straight path;  
the path of those who have received Your favor,  
not the path of those who have earned Your wrath,  
nor of those who have gone astray.

[1:1-7]

This Sūrah is also called *Fātiḥat al-Kitāb* (“The Opening of the Divine Writ”), *Umm al-Kitāb* (“The Essence of the Divine Writ”), *Sūrat al-Ḥamd* (“The Sūrah of Praise”), *Asās al-Qur’ān* (“The Foundation of the Qur’ān), and is known by several other names as well. It is mentioned elsewhere in the Qur’ān as *As’Sab‘ al-Mathānī* (“The Seven Oft-Repeated [Verses]”) because it is repeated several times in the course of each of the five daily prayers. According to Bukhārī, the designation *Umm al-Kitāb* was given to it by the Prophet himself, and this in view the fact that it contains, in a condensed form, all the fundamental principles laid down in the Qur’ān: the principle of God’s oneness and uniqueness, of His being the originator and fosterer of the universe, the

fount of all life-giving grace, the One to whom man is ultimately responsible, the only power that can really guide and help; the call to righteous *action* in the life of this world (“guide us the straight way”); the principle of life after death and of the organic consequences of man’s actions and behavior (expressed in the term “Day of Judgment”); the principle of guidance through God’s message-bearers (evident in the reference to “those upon whom God has bestowed His blessings”) and, flowing from it, the principle of the continuity of all true religions (implied in the allusion to people who have lived – and erred– in the past); and, finally, the need for voluntary self-surrender to the will of the Supreme Being and, thus, for worshipping Him alone. It is for this reason that this *sūrah* has been formulated as a prayer, to be constantly repeated and reflected upon by the believer.

“The Opening” was one of the earliest revelations bestowed upon the Prophet. Some authorities (for instance, ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib) were even of the opinion that it was the very first revelation; but this view is contradicted by authentic Traditions quoted by both Bukhārī and Muslim, which unmistakably show that the first five verses of *sūrah* 96 (“The Germ Cell”) constituted the beginning of revelation. It is probable, however, that whereas the earlier revelation consisted of only a few verses each, “The Opening” was the first *sūrah* revealed to the Prophet in its entirety at one time: and this would explain the view held by ‘Alī. (Asad, p. 1)

## Guidance for the God-Conscious

*Alif. Lām Mīm.*

This Divine Writ—let there be no doubt about it—  
is meant to be a guidance for all the God-conscious,  
who believe in the existence  
of that which is beyond the reach of human perception,  
and are constant in prayer,  
and spend on others out of what We provide for them as sustenance;  
and who believe in that which has been bestowed  
from on high upon you, O Prophet,  
as well as in that which was bestowed before your time:  
for it is they who in their innermost are certain of the life to come!  
It is they who follow the guidance which comes from their Sustainer;  
and it is they, they who shall attain to a happy state!

[2:1-5]

The second *sūrah* starts with a declaration of the purpose underlying the revelation of the Qurʾān as a whole: namely, man’s guidance in all his spiritual and worldly affairs.

“A guidance for all the God-conscious”: the conventional translation of *muttaqī* as “God-fearing” does not adequately render the *positive* content of this expression, namely the awareness of His all-presence and the desire to mold one’s existence in the light of this awareness. The interpretation adopted by some translators, “one who guards himself against evil” or “one who is careful of his duty” does not give more than one particular aspect of the concept of “God-consciousness.”

“Beyond the reach of human perception”: *al-ghayb* (commonly, and erroneously, translated as “the Unseen”) is used in the Qur’ān to denote all those sectors or phases of reality which lie beyond the range of human (sense) perception and cannot, therefore, be proved or disproved by scientific observation or even adequately comprised within the accepted categories of speculative thought. These include, for instance, the existence of God and of a definite purpose underlying the universe, life after death, the real nature of time, the existence of spiritual forces and their inter-action, and so forth. Only a person who is convinced that the ultimate reality comprises far more than our *observable* environment can attain to belief in God and, thus, to a belief that life has meaning and purpose. By pointing out that it is “a guidance for those who believe in the existence of that which is beyond human perception,” the Qur’ān says, in effect, that it will – of necessity – remain a closed book to all whose minds cannot accept this fundamental premise.

“And spend on others out of what We provide for them as sustenance”: provision of sustenance applies to all that may be of benefit to man, whether it be concrete (like food, property, offspring, etc.), or abstract (like knowledge, piety, etc.) The “spending on others” is mentioned here in one breath with God-consciousness and prayer because it is precisely in such selfless acts that true piety comes to its full fruition. It should be borne in mind that the verb *anfāqa* (lit., “he spent”) is always used in the Qur’ān to denote spending freely on, or as a gift to, others, whatever the motive may be.

“That which was bestowed before your time”: this is a reference to one of the fundamental doctrines of the Qur’ān, the doctrine of the historical continuity of divine revelation. Life – so the Qur’ān teaches us – is not a series of unconnected jumps but a continuous, organic process: and this law applies also to the life of the mind, of which man’s religious experience (in its cumulative sense) is a part. Thus, the religion of the Qur’ān can be properly understood only against the background of the great monotheistic faiths which preceded it, and which, according to

Muslim belief, culminate and achieve their final formulation in the faith of Islam. (Asad, pp. 3-4)



## Denial

Behold, as for those who are bent on denying the truth—  
it is all one to them whether you warnest them or dost not warn them:  
they will not believe.  
God has sealed their hearts and their hearing,  
and over their eyes is a veil;  
and awesome suffering awaits them.

[2:6-7]

In contrast with the frequently occurring term *al-kāfirūn* (“those who deny the truth”), the use of the past tense in *alladhīna kafārū* indicates conscious intent, and is therefore appropriately rendered as “those who are bent on denying the truth.” This interpretation is supported by many commentators, especially Zamakhsharī (who, in his commentary on the verse, uses the expression “those who have deliberately resolved upon their *kufū*”). Elsewhere in the Qur’ān such people are spoken of as having “Hearts with which they fail to grasp the truth, and eyes with which they fail to see, and ears with which they fail to hear” (7:179). For an explanation of the terms *kufū* (“denial of the truth”) and *kāfir* (“one who denies the truth”), see the Book of Language under [Denier](#).

“Over their eyes is a veil”: this is a reference to the natural law instituted by God, whereby a person who persistently adheres to false beliefs and refuses to listen to the voice of truth gradually loses the *ability* to perceive the truth, “so that finally, as it were, a seal is set upon his heart” (Rāghib). Since it is God who has instituted all laws of nature—which, in their aggregate, are called *sunnat Allāh* (“the way of God”)—this “sealing” is attributed to Him: but it is obviously a consequence of man’s free choice and not an act of “predestination.” Similarly, the suffering which, in the life to come, is in store for those who during their life in

this world have willfully remained deaf and blind to the truth, is a natural consequence of their free choice—just as happiness in the life to come is the natural consequence of man’s endeavor to attain to righteousness and inner illumination. It is in this sense that the Qur’anic references to God’s “reward” and “punishment” must be understood. (Asad, pp. 4-5)

## The Bond with God

In this way<sup>1</sup> does He cause many a one to go astray,  
just as He guides many a one aright:  
but none does He cause thereby to go astray except the iniquitous,  
who break their bond with God  
after it has been established [in their nature],  
and cut asunder what God has bidden to be joined,  
and spread corruption on earth:  
these shall be the losers.

[2:26-27]

The “bond with God” (conventionally translated as “God’s covenant”) apparently refers here to man’s moral obligation to use his inborn gifts—intellectual as well as physical—in the way intended for them by God. The “establishment” of this bond arises the faculty of reason which, if properly used, must lead man to a realization of his own weakness and dependence on a causative power and, thus, to a gradual cognition of God’s will with reference to his own behavior. This interpretation of the “bond with God” seems to be indicated by the fact that there is no mention of any specific “covenant” in either the preceding or the subsequent verses of the passage under consideration. The deliberate omission of any explanatory reference in this connection suggests that the expression “bond with God” stands for something that is rooted in the human

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<sup>1</sup> The preceding ayats say: “Behold, God does not disdain to propound a parable of a gnat, or something even less than that. Now, as for those who have attained to faith, they know it is the truth from their Sustainer—whereas those who are bent on denying the truth say, “What could God mean by this parable?”

situation as such, and can, therefore, be perceived instinctively as well as through conscious experience: namely, that innate relationship with God which makes Him: “closer to man than his neck-vein” (50:16). For an explanation of the subsequent reference to “what God has bidden to be joined” see *surah* 13:21. (Asad, pp. 7-8)

## God's Representative on Earth

He it is who created for you all that is upon the earth; then He turned  
toward the heaven and made seven firmaments,  
and He has perfect knowledge of all things.

And behold! Your Sustainer said to the angels:

**"I am about to establish upon earth  
a representative, a *khalifah*."**

They said: "Will You place on it one who will spread corruption thereon  
and shed blood—

whereas it is we who proclaim Your limitless glory  
and praise You and hallow Your name?"

God answered: "Truly, I know that which you do not know."

**And He imparted to Adam the names of all things;**

then He brought them within the ken of the angels and said:

"Declare to Me the names of these,  
if what you say is true."

They replied: "Limitless are You in Your glory!  
No knowledge have we save that which  
You have imparted to us.

Truly, You alone art all-knowing, truly wise."

Said He: "O Adam, convey to them the names of these."

And as soon as Adam had conveyed to them their names,

God said: "Did I not say to you, 'Truly, I alone know  
the hidden reality of the heavens and the earth,  
and know all that you bring into the open  
and all that you would conceal?'"

[2:30-34]

The term [\*khalifah\*](#) – translated here as “representative” – has also the meaning of “one who shall inherit.” It is derived from the verb *khalafa*, “he succeeded [another].” The accent is on God’s having caused man to inherit the earth by endowing him with specific faculties and abilities. Its use elsewhere in the Qur’ān implies the grant to humanity of the ability to discern between right and wrong, truth and falsehood.

“And He imparted to Adam the names of all things”: literally, “all the names.” The term *ism* (“name”) implies, according to all philologists, an expression “conveying the knowledge [of a thing]...applied to denote a substance or an accident or an attribute, for the purpose of distinction” (Lane IV, 1425): in philosophical terminology, a “concept.” From this it may legitimately be inferred that the “knowledge of all the names” denotes here man’s faculty of logical definition and, thus, of conceptual thinking. That by “Adam” the whole human race is meant here becomes obvious from the preceding reference, by the angels, to “such as will spread corruption on earth and will shed blood,” as well as from 7:11. (See [Attributes or Beautiful Names](#) in the Book of Language.) (Asad, pp. 8-9)

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Adam is man, and man is the secret of God’s Self-knowledge, “the secret of the heavens and the earth.” Whatever is to be found in the heavens and the earth, the names of all things which are also the Names of God, are all to be found in man. By the matter of our physical bodies we are mineral. By our unconscious physiological processes we are vegetable. By our ability to move and sexually reproduce and respond to the world around us we are animal. By our ability to reason and choose, we are human. By our ability to conceive of invisible, celestial realities, we are angelic. And by our ability -- necessarily limited -- to conceive of the reality and nature of God, we participate -- indirectly, and as it were

by analogy -- in God's Divinity, though we do so not by our own exertions, but by His free gift.

Have you ever noticed how characters like those which belong to entire animal species, in the case of man seem to belong to single individuals? We all know people we would describe as peacocks, or lions, or snakes, or foxes, or gazelles. In our separate individuality we may be "dominated" by specific Names of God, something which is fairly easy to see in the case of the great leader, the great craftsman, the great athlete, the great physician, the great poet. But in our intrinsic humanity, we are all of these things. Everything in God is reflected, in one way or another, in the human state. And because this is true, by God's generosity, man can potentially know the seeds or prototypes of things; his art, his science, his philosophy, and his spiritual realization are clear proofs of this. The angels in this verse are the intrinsic prototypes or Names of all created things, all things in the heavens and the earth; and since all things are signs of God, these Names are both the names of created beings, and the Names of God which form and animate those beings. The angels are symbols or representatives of these Names, but they don't *know* these Names; only Adam, only humanity, can tell the angels their own names.

It is this knowledge which gives man his central and sovereign position in the created order -- a power which, when appropriated by the ego, makes man capable of destroying the earth. According to verse 29 of this surah, "He it is Who created for you all that is in the earth." We know that without earth there would be no man; but the deeper truth is: without man there would be no earth. (Upton)

## Freedom of Religion

Hence, who could be more unjust than those  
who bar the remembrance of God's name  
from any of His houses of worship (masājid)  
and strive for their ruin,  
although they have no right to enter them save in fear?  
For them, in this world, there is ignominy in store;  
and for them, in the life to come, awesome suffering.

[2:114]

It is one of the fundamental principles of Islam that every religion which has belief in God as its focal point must be accorded full respect, however much one may disagree with its particular tenets. Thus, the Muslims are under an obligation to honor and protect any house of worship dedicated to God, whether it be a mosque or a church or a synagogue (see 22:40), and any attempt to prevent the followers of another faith from worshipping God according to their own lights is condemned by the Qur'an as a sacrilege. A striking illustration of this principle is forthcoming from the Prophet's treatment of the deputation from Christian Najrān in the year 10 A.H. They were given free access to the Prophet's mosque, and with his full consent celebrated their religious rites there, although their adoration of Jesus as "the son of God" and of Mary as "the mother of God" were fundamentally at variance with Islamic beliefs. (Asad, p. 24)



## What is Needed for Salvation

Those who have attained to faith  
and those who follow the Jewish Scriptures  
and the Christians and the Sabians,  
and who believe in God and the last day and who do good works  
shall have their reward with their Sustainer;  
on them shall be no fear nor shall they grieve.

[2:62]

There seems to be a human tendency in almost every religion to claim some exclusive salvation for its adherents. Clearly, many Jews and Christians have made this claim. Many Muslims, including well-known commentators on the Qur'an, have also expressed this belief despite the fact that there are numerous places in the Qur'an that make spiritual attainment independent of professed beliefs or ethnic origin, and dependent on mindfulness of God (taqwa) and moral action (ṣalihātī).

Muhammad Asad writes: The above passage—which recurs in the Qur'an several times—lays down a fundamental doctrine of Islam. With a breadth of vision unparalleled in any other religious faith, the idea of “salvation” is here made conditional upon three elements only: belief in God, belief in the Day of Judgment, and righteous action in life. The statement of this doctrine at this juncture—that is in the midst of an appeal to the Children of Israel—is warranted by the false Jewish belief that their descent from Abraham entitles them to be regarded as “God’s chosen people.” [Asad, 114]

Yusuf Ali writes in a similar vein:

“On them shall be no fear nor shall they grieve.” Compare 2:38, where the same phrase occurs. And it recurs again and again afterwards. In Sūrah Baqara (the second sūrah) it occurs in verses 11, 38, 62, 112, 262, 274, and 277. The point of the verse is that Islam does not teach an exclusive doctrine, and is not meant exclusively for one people. The Jews claimed this for themselves, and the Christians in their own origin were a sect of the Jews. Even the modern organized Christian churches, though they have been, consciously or unconsciously, influenced by the time-spirit, including the historical fact of Islam, yet cling to the idea of vicarious atonement, which means that all who do not believe in it or who lived previously to the death of Christ are at a disadvantage spiritually before the Throne of God. The attitude of Islam is entirely different. Islam existed before the preaching of Muḥammad on this earth; the Qur’ān expressly calls Abraham a Muslim (3:67). Its teaching (submission to God’s will) has been and will be the teaching of religion for all time and for all peoples. (A. Yusuf Ali, p. 33-34)

And according to Mahmoud Ayoub:

Commentators have differed concerning the intent of this verse and the reason for its revelation. The verse is one of many general statements in the Qur’an in which faith is raised above any religious or ethnic identity. Commentators have, however, sought to limit its universal application in several ways. Four main approaches may be distinguished. The first was to declare the verse abrogated and therefore inapplicable. The second was to limit the application of the verse by assigning the reason for its revelation to a specific group of people. The third approach has been to limit the verse to a strictly legalistic interpretation, and the fourth has been to accept the universality of the verse until the coming of Islam, but thereafter to limit its applicability only to those who hold the faith of Islam.<sup>2</sup>

The weakness of the argument for abrogation is that while God may abrogate a legal ruling, it would seem absurd for God to abrogate a

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<sup>2</sup> Ayoub, Muhammad. *The Qur’an and its interpreters*. Albany 1984. p.110.

spiritual principle, which would amount to redefining the nature of what is essentially good.

Some commentators, including Tabarsi, have maintained, for instance that the above verse is abrogated by: If anyone desires a religion other than Islam (submission to God), it will never be accepted from him. [3:85]. When one examines the context of this verse, we see that it is preceded by this very broad statement: Do they seek for other than the religion of God, while all creatures in the heavens and upon the earth have willingly or unwillingly submitted (i.e. become *muslim*). [3:83]

Clearly “islam” in this context is a universal and natural state of submission, not a religion as such. This is followed by the ayat: “Say we believe in God, and in what has been revealed to us and what was revealed to Abraham, Isma`il, Isaac, Jacob, and the tribes, and in the books given to Moses, Jesus, and the Prophets from their Lord: we make no distinction between one and another among them, and to God we submit. [3:84]

To limit the verse to the time before the coming of the prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings upon him) is based on a certain story related by Al Suddi. In this story, Salman Farsi, a close companion, was asking the Prophet whether some of his pious friends who had died before meeting the Prophet were in heaven or hell. The Prophet is said to have replied, “They are people of the Fire,” which disturbed Salman very much. Later this verse was revealed, supposedly correcting Muhammad’s misperception.

If we accept this story, we must accept that the prophet spoke something that was patently false regarding an essential spiritual matter and that he then needed to be corrected by God. Obviously this raises serious problems since the Prophet said, “If I advise you on worldly matters and you know better, then I may be wrong, but if I advise you on spiritual matters, you must believe me.”

Furthermore, Muhammad now is reported to have said that this refers only to those who died before the advent of his prophethood. Why then did not God say clearly, “Those before the coming of the Qur’an

and the Prophet Muhammad. . .” or at least put this verse in the past tense: “Those who *believed*. . . and those who *did* good works. . .”

This verse is a clear lesson in a very fundamental principle of Quranic interpretation: Take God at His word. Look at the primary and obvious meaning of the text. Do not allow the text to be contradicted or obscured by commentaries, or even purported Hadith that may contradict those truths and principles that are repeatedly found in the whole of the Qur’an. The Qur’an is guaranteed reliable. No Hadith is absolutely guaranteed in the same way.

The Hadith collections were assembled about three centuries after the life of Muhammad. About a million supposed Hadith were reduced by sincere scholars down to some tens of thousands, using the best methodology they could develop at the time. Scholarship of recent centuries, however, has raised questions about the reliability of even the sound hadith collections. While a substantial portion of the Hadith literature undoubtedly represents the spirit, and the exact words of Muhammad, nevertheless there must be admitted the possibility of inaccurate or fabricated Hadith finding their way into the Hadith collections.

A safe and secure principle might then be to give our attention to those Hadith that are beautiful and inspiring and that do not contradict or modify what is explicitly said in the Qur’an, and to take the Qur’an at its word. (Helminski)

## Essential Submission

Truly: one who submits his whole being (lit. face) to God,  
and is in a state of virtue, shall have their reward with their Sustainer;  
these need have no fear, neither shall they grieve.

[2:112]

This verse follows the argument between Christians and Jews, each of whom claims that the other will not enter Paradise. Here we have the definitive answer to anyone who claims that nominal adherence to a belief system will bring salvation. As always, the Qur'an refocuses us on what is essential: the surrender of one's whole self to God and the beautiful state of consciousness (*ihsan*) that results.

*Ihsan* is a word that is difficult to translate. It is the third element of the canonical definition of Islam (*islam, iman, ihsan*) and was described by the Prophet Muhammad in this way: "Worship (or serve) God as if you saw Him, but even if you don't see him, know that you are seen." *Ihsan*, which is related to the root meaning of "beauty" (*h.sn*), implies doing something in the most excellent and beautiful way. The prophet once remarked upon seeing a certain grave, which had been hastily shoveled, that a Muslim should do everything well, and requested that the gravesite be properly finished.

So for those who surrender and become a *muhsin*, a person of excellence, they shall have no fear (*khawf*) or grief. Surrender then leads to the overcoming of fear, including the fear of God. What we should have instead of fear of God, is *taqwa*, the vigilant awareness of God's presence and the guarding of ourselves from our own neglectfulness (*ghaflah*).

Just a few verses later, the word face appears again. This time we are reminded that we can see God's face everywhere.

Do we understand the relationship between surrendering our whole being to God, on the one hand, and being free of fear and grief, on the other? What is the connection between this surrender and being free of fear and grief? (Helminski)

## Wherever you turn. . .

*To God belong the East and the West.  
Wherever you turn, there is the face of God.  
Indeed, God is infinite, all-knowing.*

[2:115]

Here the East and the West also mean the sunrise and the sunset, so we are given a beautiful picture of both the directions of east and west, as well as these beautiful moments in time when we witness the beautiful display of nature.

We can be reminded of God's presence by the sunrise and sunset, and we can be reminded that wherever we turn our gaze, there we can see God's "Face." The face of a human being is that by which we can most easily recognize that person, so here we are also being told that God's most recognizable feature can be seen anywhere, anytime, if we are in the right state of openness.

Furthermore we are told: Witness. To witness means to see for ourselves with all the faculties that our given to us. In the same way that we say: I witness that there is no god but God, we can witness God's recognizable signature wherever we look. This is an astounding proposition, yet we would not be asked to witness in this way if it were not possible for us. God is infinite and all-knowing. God's perception and intelligence permeates everything. The signs of it are the lawfulness that science uncovers, the beauty and order of nature, as well as the meaning that relates one thing to another, as well as the sense of significance in all of this that the human heart experiences. God is not a distant abstraction,

not merely some utterly transcendent “truth,” but something that is also something here and now before our very eyes and hearts. (Helminski)

**Sample Questions:** *Do you sense that this might be possible? Is there some resistance or skepticism that you can detect in yourself to this proposition? What is the closest you have come to experiencing God's Face?*



## Signs for the Intelligent

Truly, in the creation of the heavens and of the earth,  
and the succession of night and day:  
and in the ships that speed through the sea with what is useful to man:  
and in the waters which God sends down from the sky,  
giving life thereby to the earth after it had been lifeless,  
and causing all manner of living creatures to multiply thereon:  
and in the change of the winds,  
and the clouds that run their appointed courses between sky and earth:  
**these are messages indeed for people who use their intelligence.**

[2:164]

This passage is one of the many in which the Qur'ān appeals to “those who use their intelligence” [ya`qilūn] to observe and reflect upon the wonders of nature, including the evidence of man's own ingenuity (“the ships that speed through the sea”), as so many indications of a conscious, creative Power pervading the universe. Everywhere there are signs that call us to wake up and notice how miraculous this life is. People with intelligence can have their hearts filled with awe and thus be led to what is essentially a religious consciousness. Faith and intelligence can serve each other. (Helminski)

## The Reciprocity of Remembrance

So remember Me, and I remember you.

[2:152]

The Qur'an calls upon us to remember God. But how are we to do this? To remember something is to call it to mind, to cause it to take place in our minds. But there is no room in our little human minds for the vastness of God. Only the human spiritual Heart has room for Him, and the Heart exists on a deeper level than the work of deliberate, constant and conscious Remembrance we are commanded by the Qur'an to carry out.

In verse 151 of this surah it is made clear that the thing which gives us the power to remember God is the "messenger....who reciteth to you Our revelations". So God first remembered us, in our helpless need, and then commanded us to remember Him, thus making Remembrance synonymous with gratitude. But if, after His merciful act of remembering us, we fail to remember Him, He may not remember us again.

According to the second verse, however, it is not God's revelation of the Qur'an through Muhammad (peace and blessings upon him) which causes us to remember Him; rather, the revelation of the Qur'an is the Remembrance itself. By His own act, He implants the Remembrance of Him in our Hearts. In the first case, the Remembrance is a response to revelation; in the second, the Remembrance itself *is* the revelation; this refers, on one level, to an "infused Remembrance," a Remembrance of God implanted in our Hearts by the direct action of God; to the unveiling of Divine realities; to the direct knowledge of God.

Remembrance of a distant object takes work; remembrance of an "object" so overwhelmingly present that It can have no rival is a foregone

conclusion. As God says in the Qur'an, What is difficult for you is easy for Me. The work of remembering God can never bring us to Him -- yet if we fail to remember Him, what can we expect? We remember Him, and fall infinitely short of His Reality. He remembers us, and reaches us in a heartbeat, or even sooner.

It is We Who have sent down to you the Remembrance  
[Al-Hijr, 15:9]

He was, in fact, already here. His Remembrance of us *is* our Remembrance of Him within us. In a certain sense, we *are* that Remembrance. (Upton)

# Virtue

Virtue is not that you turn your faces to the East or West,  
but virtue is to be faithful to God, the Last Day,  
and the angels, and the Book, and the Messengers;  
to spend of your substance out of love for Him,  
for your kin, for orphans, for the needy, for the traveler,  
for those who ask and for the ransom of slaves;  
to be steadfast in prayer, to offer regular charity,  
to fulfill the contracts you have made,  
to be firm and patient in pain and adversity,  
and throughout all periods of panic.  
Such are the sincere and God-conscious.

[2:177]

As if to emphasize again a warning against deadening formalism, we are given a beautiful description of the righteous and God-fearing man. He should obey salutary regulations, but he should fix his gaze on the love of God and the love of his fellow-men. We are given four heads: (1) our faith should be true and sincere, (2) we must be prepared to show it in deeds of charity to our fellow-men; (3) we must be good citizens, supporting local organization; and (4) our own individual soul must be firm and unshaken in all circumstances. They are interconnected and yet can be viewed separately.

“To be faithful to God”: faith is not merely a matter of words. We must realize the presence and goodness of God. When we do so, the scales fall from our eyes; all the falsities and fleeting nature of the Present cease to enslave us, for we see the Last Day as if it were today. We also

see God's working in His world and in us; His Powers (angels), His Messengers and His Message are no longer remote from us, but come within our experience.

“To spend of your substance out of love for Him....” Practical deeds of charity are of value when they proceed from love, and from no other motive. In this respect, also, our duties take various forms, which are shown in reasonable gradation: our kith and kin; orphans (including any persons who are without support or help); people who are in real need but who never ask (it is our duty to find them out and they come before those who ask); the stranger, who is entitled to laws of hospitality; the people who ask and are entitled to ask, i.e., not merely lazy beggars but those who seek our assistance in some form or another (it is our duty to respond to them); and the slaves (we must do all we can to give or buy their freedom). Slavery has many insidious forms, and all are included.

“To be steadfast in prayer, to offer regular charity, to fulfill the contracts you have made....” Charity and piety in individual cases do not complete our duties. In prayer and charity we must also look to our organized efforts; where there is a Muslim State, these are made through the State, in facilities for public prayer, and public assistance, and for the maintenance of contracts and fair dealing in all matters.

Then come the Muslim virtues of firmness and patience. They are to “preserve the dignity of man with soul erect” (Burns). Three sets of circumstances are especially mentioned for the exercise of this virtue: (1) bodily pain or suffering, (2) adversities or injuries of all kinds, deserved and undeserved, and (3) periods of public panic, such as war, violence, pestilence, etc. (A. Yusuf Ali, pp. 69-70)

## Fasting

O you who have attained to faith!  
Fasting is ordained for you as it was ordained for those before you,  
So that you might remain conscious of God:  
During a certain number of days,  
but whoever of you is ill or on a journey,  
Shall instead fast a number of other days,  
And it is incumbent on those who can afford it  
to make the sacrifice of feeding a needy person.  
And whoever does more good than he or she is bound to do  
thereby does good to himself or herself;  
for to fast is to do good to yourselves—if you only knew it.

[2:184]

Fasting has been a nearly universal practice in the spiritual history of humanity. Islam continues this by prescribing it for one lunar month for all believers.

“Fasting is the bread of the Prophets, the sweet morsel of the saints,” wrote a Muslim saint of the twentieth century, Hasan Shushud. Fasting is meditation of the body, and meditation is fasting of the mind. Fasting helps the body to purify itself of the toxins that accumulate through the impurities of food and incomplete digestion.

Fasting, as long as it is not excessive, is based on a positive relationship to the body for it eases the burdens the body must carry. Indulgence—whether in food, intoxicants, or pleasures—is a form of cruelty toward the body because of the price the body must pay for our so-called pleasures.

Purification leaves the body, especially the nervous system, in a more responsive state. Hunger reduces the need for sleep and increases wakefulness. Eating our fill hardens the heart, while hunger opens the heart and increases detachment. In hunger some of the veils between us and what is real are removed; remembrance becomes a way of life. Fasting has been a catalyst for awakening in all sacred traditions. Coleman Barks in *Open Secret* translates a Rumi saying this way: “If the brain and belly are burning clean with fasting, every moment a new song comes out of the fire.”

With gratitude for being embodied we will listen to what the body has to tell us and use it well. As always, gratitude will restore the proper perspective and remind us that the body is a means for awakening the soul.

Yusuf Ali writes:

The Muslim fast is not meant for self-torture. Although it is stricter than other fasts, it also provides alleviations for special circumstances. If it were merely a temporary abstention from food and drink, it would be salutary to many people, who habitually eat and drink to excess. The instincts for food, drink, and sex are strong in the animal nature, and temporary restraint from all these enables the attention to be directed to higher things. This is necessary through prayer, contemplation, and acts of charity, not of the showy kind, but by seeking out those really in need. Certain standards are prescribed, but much higher standards are recommended. (A. Yusuf Ali, p. 72)

In the final lines we are given two principles. The first is to do more than the bare minimum of goodness, to stretch ourselves and thus to do good to ourselves, as in supererogatory fasting. To live with the attitude that I am going to do just enough to get by is not the way of life suggested by the Qur’an. We are the recipients of our own generous and good deeds. Benefiting others is benefiting ourselves. The fundamental principle is to live generously, to do even more good than we are obligated to do.

The second idea in this ayat is that fasting is doing good to ourselves. It may not be immediately obvious in our ordinary state of consciousness, when we are preoccupied with satisfying our desires and hungers, but there is a benefit in intentionally abstaining from certain lawful and necessary things, for a limited, prescribed period of time, and with a spiritual intention. This helps us to develop a healthy sense of sacrifice. It develops our will and ultimately our freedom of choice, thus making us even more human. (Helminski)

**Sample Questions for reflection:** *Reflect on one specific area of your life where you could be doing more, where you have just letting yourself get by with the minimum. Let this be some part of your life where you could feel motivated to change.*



## Divine Relationship

And if My servants ask you about Me—witness, I am near;  
I respond to the call of the one who calls,  
whenever he calls Me:  
let them, then, respond to Me, and have faith in Me,  
so that they may follow the right way.

[2:186]

“If My servants ask you. . .” Not everyone lives at the same level of faith or knowledge of the Truth. Some people may confide in others, seeking some evidence or reason to have faith, because often the struggles and disappointments of life may shake people’s faith in the beneficent order of life.

We are told to “witness.” To witness means being in that state when we know that God is real, as if we saw Him in front of us at this very moment. “Wheresoever you turn is the Face of God.” [2:115] When we are in that state, that “hal,” we can truly be of service to others, sharing with them by our own conviction and kindness, that God is near and always responds to the one who calls, whenever He is called.

When much of the world seems blind to the Truth of God’s nearness and Mercy, the faithful, the mumineen, are the ones who must carry this responsibility as the living witnesses of God’s generosity and responsiveness, until people can know this for themselves. (Helminski)

*Relate an occasion when you were helped by the faith of another person, or could offer help to someone yourself.*

## Defensive Warfare

And fight in God's cause against those who wage war against you,  
but do not commit aggression—for, verily, God does not love aggressors.

And slay them wherever you may come upon them,  
and drive them away from wherever they drove you away—  
for oppression is even worse than killing.

[2:190-191]

These verses lay down unequivocally that only self-defense (in the widest sense of the word) makes war permissible for Muslims. Most commentators agree that the expression *lā ta'tadū* signifies, in this context, “do not commit aggression;” while by *al-mu'tadīn* “those who commit aggression” are meant. The defensive character of a fight “in God's cause”—that is, in the cause of the ethical principles ordained by God—is moreover self-evident in the reference to “those who wage war against you,” and has been still further clarified in 22:39 “permission [to fight] is given to those against whom war is being wrongfully waged.” According to all available Traditions, that constitutes the earliest (and therefore fundamental) Qur'anic reference to the question of *jihād* or holy war.... That this early, fundamental principle of self-defense as the only possible justification of war has been maintained throughout the Qur'ān is evident from 60:8 and 4:90-91, both of which belong to a later period than 22:39. (Asad, p. 41)

As for those who do not fight against you  
on account of [your] faith,  
and neither drive you forth from your homelands,

God does not forbid you to show them kindness  
and to behave towards them with full equity,  
for verily, God loves those who act equitably.

[60:8]

Thus, if they let you be, and do not make war on you,  
and offer you peace, God does not allow you to harm them.  
You will find others who would like to be safe from you  
as well as safe from their own folk, but who,  
whenever they are faced anew with temptation to evil,  
plunge into it headlong.  
Hence, if they do not let you be, and do not offer you peace,  
and do not stay their hands,  
seize them and slay them whenever you come upon them:  
for it is against these that We  
have clearly empowered you [to make war].

[4:90-91]

The injunction “slay them wherever you may come upon them” is valid only within the context of hostilities already in progress (Rāzī) on the understanding that “those who wage war against you” are the aggressors or oppressors (a war of liberation being a war “in God’s cause”). The translation in this context of *fitnah* as oppression is justified by the application of this term to any affliction that may cause man to go astray and to lose his faith in spiritual values. (Asad, p. 41)

## Preserve the Regularity of Prayer

Preserve and be continuously mindful of the prayers,  
and of praying in the most excellent way;  
and stand before God in devoted surrender.

[2:238]

This verse reminds us to preserve and protect the regularity and rhythm of the ritual prayers, which set up a sacred pattern in our lives and help us to continue on in a state of remembrance at all times. Some translators have taken the second part of the ayat to mean, “especially the middle prayer,” while others take it to mean “the most excellent prayer.” Muḥammad ‘Abduh advances the view that “praying in the most excellent way” may mean “the noblest kind of prayer – that is, a prayer from the fullness of the heart, with the whole mind turned towards God, inspired by awe of Him, and reflecting upon His word” (*Manār* II, 438). Finally, we are enjoined to maintain a state of awe and devoted surrender as we pray. (Helminski)

## The Throne Verse

God—there is no deity but Hu,<sup>3</sup>  
the Ever-Living, the Self-Subsisting Source of all Being.  
No slumber can seize Him nor sleep.  
All things in heaven and on earth belong to Hu.  
Who could intercede in His Presence  
without His permission?  
He knows what appears in front of and behind His creatures.  
Nor can they encompass any knowledge of Him  
except what He wills.  
His throne extends over the heavens and the earth,  
and He feels no fatigue in guarding and preserving them,  
for He is the Highest and Most Exalted.

[2:255]

This is the *Ayat-ul-Kursi*, the “Verse of the Throne.” Who can translate its glorious meaning or reproduce the rhythm of its well-chosen and comprehensive words? Even in the original Arabic the meaning seems to be greater than can be expressed in words.

The attributes of God are so different from anything we know in our present world that we have to be content with understanding that the only fit word by which we can name Him is “He”: the pronoun standing

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<sup>3</sup>*Hu*: the pronoun of Divine Presence. All words in Arabic have a gender grammatically ascribed to them as they do in French and Spanish, etc. Although *Allah* is referred to with the third person masculine pronoun *Hu* (*Huwa*), it is universally understood that *Allah's* Essence is beyond gender or indeed any qualification. In this translation occasionally *Hu* will be used and sometimes “He/She” in an attempt to avoid the mistake of attributing human gender to That which is beyond all our attempts at definition, limitless in subtle glory.

for His name. His name – God or Allah – is sometimes misused and applied to other beings or things; and we must emphatically repudiate any idea or suggestion that there can be any compeer of God, the one true living God. He lives, but His life is self-subsisting and eternal: it does not depend upon other beings and is not limited to time and space. Perhaps the attribute of *Qayyum* includes not only the idea of “Self-Subsisting” but also the idea of “Keeping up and maintaining all activity, in contrast to the imperfect life which we see around us, which is not only subject to death but to the need for rest or slowed-down activity (something which is between activity and sleep, commonly translated as “slumber”), and the need for full sleep itself. But God has no need for rest or sleep. His activity, like His life, is perfect and self-subsisting.

After we realize that His Life is absolute Life, His Being is absolute Being, while others are contingent and evanescent, our ideas of heaven and earth vanish like shadows. What is behind that shadow is He. Such reality as our heavens and our earth possess is a reflection of His absolute Reality. The pantheist places the wrong accent when he says that everything is He. The truth is better expressed when we say that everything is His. How then can any creatures stand before Him as of right, and claim to intercede for a fellow-creature? In the first place, both are His, and He cares as much for one as for the other. In the second place, they are both dependent on His will and command. But He in His Wisdom and Plan may grade his creatures and give one superiority over another. Then by His will and permission such a one may intercede or help according to the laws and duties laid on him. God’s knowledge is absolute, and is not conditioned by Time or Space. To us, His creatures, these conditions always apply. His knowledge and our knowledge are therefore in different categories, and our knowledge only gets some reflection of Reality when it accords with His Will and Plan.

His throne could also be translated seat, power, knowledge, symbol of authority. In our thoughts we exhaust everything when we say “the heavens and the earth.” Well, then, in everything is the working of God’s power and will and authority. Everything of course includes spiritual

things as well as things of sense. Compare Wordsworth's fine outburst in "Tintern Abbey": "Whose dwelling is the light of setting sun, And the round ocean and the living air, And in the blue sky, and in the mind of man: A motion and a spirit that impels are thinking things, all objects of all thought, And rolls through all things."

"He feels no fatigue in guarding and preserving them..." A life of activity that is imperfect or relative would not only need rest for carrying on its own activities, but would be in need of double rest when it has to look after and guard, or cherish, or help other activities. In contrast with this is the Absolute Life, which is free from any such need or contingency. For it is supreme above anything that we can conceive. (A. Yusuf Ali, pp. 102-103)

## No Coercion in Faith

Let there be no coercion in faith.  
The right way now stands out from error:  
And so whoever rejects the powers of evil  
And believes in God has certainly taken hold of a reliable support,  
Which shall never give way,  
For God is all-hearing, all-knowing.

[2:256]

There are several stories associated with the revelation of this verse. Wahidi relates that on the authority of Ibn `Abbas, “When the children of a woman of the *Ansar* (the helpers in Medina) all died in infancy, she vowed that if one lived, she would bring it up as a Jew. Thus, when the Jewish tribe of Al-Nadir was banished from Medina (4/625), there were with them some children of the Ansar. The Ansar said, ‘O Prophet of God, what will happen to our children!’ And so God sent down this revelation. Ibn Jabayr thus said, “And so, whoever wished to join them, were free to do so, and whoever wished to enter Islam were also free.” [Ayoub: 252-253] On a few other occasions that we know of Muslims who tried to coerce people to accept Islam were dissuaded by the Prophet. In one case, two sons of Abu al-Husayn were converted to Christianity by some Syrians and left Medina. When al-Husayn heard of this, he went to the Prophet and asked whether he should pursue them. God then sent down: There is no compulsion in religion.



The word *dīn*, translated here as “religion,” signifies “religion” in the widest sense of this term, pertaining to morality, worship, and beliefs regarding what is of ultimate value in life.

Muhammad Asad writes:

The rendering of *dīn* as “religion,” “faith,” “religious law,” or “moral law” depends on the context in which this term is used.

“There shall be no coercion in matters of faith.” On the strength of the categorical prohibition of coercion (*ikrāh*) in anything that pertains to faith or religion, all Islamic jurists (*fuqahā*), without any exception, hold that forcible conversion is under all circumstances null and void, and that any attempt at coercing a non-believer to accept the faith of Islam is a grievous sin: a verdict which disposes of the widespread fallacy that Islam places before the unbelievers the alternative of “conversion or the sword.” See *Dīn* in the Book of Language. (Helminski)

## Out of the Darkness and Into the Light

God is the Friend<sup>4</sup> of those who have faith,  
Leading them out of the darkness toward the light  
Whereas those who are bent on denying the truth  
Have the powers of evil as their allies  
that take them out of the light and deep into the darkness.  
It is they who are destined for the Fire, there to abide.

[2:257]

This passage contains both a promise from God and a description of how people of faith are guided toward the light, while those in denial will be guided by “powers of evil” toward darkness. In other words, we attract to ourselves certain powers or energies which will either guide and protect us, or insure our descent into darkness. This should make us more aware of the significance of the power of choice we must exercise. Within the human being is this free will and power of choice, which not only governs us as individuals, but sets in motion powers outside of ourselves, whether for good or for evil.

God is the “Friend,” the Wali, of those who possess *iman*, faith. Faith is, therefore, a form of friendship with God. The word Wali implies being near to someone, as well as the protection such nearness offers. The result of this friendship is that we are brought toward the Light. Light, therefore, must have some inherent value, as opposed to darkness which is the reward of those who are “bent on denying the truth,” those who willfully turn away from spiritual reality to follow the selfish desires and negative impulses of their own egos. It may even be that certain people

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<sup>4</sup> Wali, friend, ally, protector.

are perversely attracted to this darkness, oblivious to the suffering they cause themselves and others.

It is said in Surah Nur: *“Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth.”* Light is a phenomena that facilitates perception. Therefore Allah is that power through which we see both in the visible world, the world of the physical senses, and also the invisible world of thoughts, emotions, and subtler perceptions. One attribute of Allah, therefore, is this power of making perception possible. God is called Sami (hearing), and Basir (seeing), and Alim (knowing), and these are attributes shared to some extent by us human beings.

Our need for God, therefore, is also a need to grow in our ability to listen, see, and know through the power of His Light, while those who live in denial, in kufr, are actually choosing to become less aware, more oblivious. Such people, therefore, are less free and less alive. Youre have forfeited their essential human capacities, out of a perverse attachment to their own willfulness, denial, and separation from the Divine Reality.

Therefore the choice that confronts human beings, is not only a choice between good and evil, but also a choice between awareness and heedlessness, conscious choice and compulsive habit. We can choose freedom within the broad margins allowed by the Divine Mercy or a compulsive slavery to the egos whims and desires.

Whichever we choose, we will attract to ourselves either the powers of evil guiding us into ever more darkness or God the Friend, guiding us toward greater consciousness, freedom, and light. (Helminski)

## Wisdom is the Greatest Wealth

O you who have faith!  
Spend on others out of the good things which you may have acquired,  
and out of that which We<sup>5</sup> bring forth for you out of the earth;  
and do not choose for your spending  
anything bad which you yourselves would not accept  
without averting your eyes in disdain.  
And know that God is the One Who is Rich,  
the One Worthy of Praise.  
Satan threatens you with the prospect of poverty  
and bids you to be stingy,  
while God promises you His forgiveness and abundance;  
and God is infinite, all knowing,  
He grants wisdom [*hikmah*] to whom He wills:  
and whoever is granted wisdom  
has indeed been granted abundant wealth,  
but none are conscious of this  
except those who are gifted with insight.

[2:267-9]

Wisdom is explicitly called for in the verse we have cited above; and wisdom, by definition, is not something that can be laid down, in advance of all the concrete and unique situations in which wisdom needs to be

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<sup>5</sup>In the revelation of the Qur'an, the Divine Being sometimes chooses to speak or refer to Itself from the first person singular, // *Me*, sometimes as the third person singular, and sometimes as the first person plural, *We*. Some commentators suggest that the usage of *We* refers to the attributes of God.

applied, as if it were a formal rule or a blueprint. On the contrary, it is, on the one hand, a divine bestowal, and on the other, a quality that can be developed and cultivated through intellectual, moral, and spiritual effort. In Qur'anic terms, wisdom is described as a gift from God: *He gives wisdom to whom He will; and he to whom wisdom is given has been granted great good* (2: 269). And at the same time, it is a quality that can be cultivated, acquired, or learnt; this is implied in the following verse, where the Prophet is described as one who teaches and imparts, not just the formal message, but the wisdom required to understand and creatively apply that message:

*He it is Who has sent among the unlettered ones a Messenger of their own, to recite to them His revelations and to make them grow [in purity], and to teach them the Scripture and wisdom... (62: 2)*

One of the most important aspects of wisdom taught by the scripture of the Qur'an and the conduct of the Prophet is tolerance of those with belief-systems different from one's own; a tolerance grounded in a consciousness of the reality which transcends all systems of belief, one's own included, and yet is also mysteriously present in the depths of each human soul. Authentic dialogue emerges in the measure that this presence of God in all human beings is respected. For Muslims living at a time when the alternative to dialogue is not just diatribe but violent clash, the imperative of highlighting that which unites the different religions, of upholding and promoting the common spiritual patrimony of mankind, is of the utmost urgency. There is ample evidence in the Qur'anic text itself, and compelling commentaries on these verses by those most steeped in the spiritual tradition of Islam, to demonstrate that the Qur'an not only provides us with a universal vision of religion, and thus with the means to contemplate all revealed religions as 'signs' (*âyat*) of God; it also opens up paths of creative, constructive dialogue between the faithful of all the different religious communities, despite their divergent belief-systems. It provides us with the basis for dialogue and mutual enrichment on aspects

of religious life and thought that go beyond the outward forms of belief, yielding fruit in the fertile fields of metaphysical insight, immutable values, contemplative inspiration, and spiritual realization. (Shah-Kazemi)

## Making No Distinction Among His Messengers

The messenger, and the faithful with him,  
have faith in what has been revealed to him by his Sustainer:  
they all have faith in God, and His angels,  
and His revelations, and His messengers,  
making no distinction between any of His messengers;  
and they say: "We have heard, and we pay heed.  
Grant us Your forgiveness, O our Sustainer,  
for with You is all journeys' end!"

[2:285]

Sūrah Baqara started with the question of faith (2:3-4), showed us various aspects of faith and the denial of faith, gave us ordinances for the new people of Islam as a community, and now rounds off the argument again with a confession of faith and of its practical manifestation in conduct ("we have heard and we pay heed"), and closes on a note of humility, so that we may confess our sins, ask for forgiveness, and pray for God's help and guidance.

It is not for us to make any distinction between one and another of God's apostles: we must honor them all equally, though we know that God in His wisdom sent them with different kinds of mission and gave them different degrees of rank.

When our faith and conduct are sincere, we realize how far from perfection we are, and we humbly pray to God for the forgiveness of our sins. We feel that God imposes no burden on us that we cannot bear, and

with this realization in our hearts and in the confession of our lips, we go to Him and ask for His help and guidance. (A. Yusuf Ali, p. 116)

Literally, “we make no distinction between any of His apostles”: these words are put, as it were, in the mouths of the believers. Inasmuch as all the apostles were true bearers of God’s messages, there is no distinction between them, albeit some of them have been “endowed more highly than others” (2:253). (Asad, p. 64)



## Let Not Our Hearts Swerve from the Truth

Step by step He has sent down to you this Book,  
setting forth the truth which confirms  
whatever remains of earlier revelations:  
for it is He who earlier bestowed from on high  
the Torah and the Gospel, as a guidance to humankind,  
and it is He who has bestowed the standard for discernment. . .  
He it is who has bestowed upon you from on high this divine writ,  
containing messages that are clear in and by themselves—  
and these are the essence of the divine writ—  
as well as others that are allegorical.

Now those whose hearts are given to swerving from the truth  
go after that part of the divine writ which has been expressed in allegory,  
seeking out [what is bound to create] confusion,  
and seeking its final meaning;  
but none except God knows its final meaning.  
Hence, those who are deeply rooted in knowledge say:  
“We believe in it; the whole of it is from our Sustainer—  
although none takes this to heart  
except those who are endowed with insight.

O our Sustainer!  
Do not let our hearts swerve from the truth  
after You have guided us;  
and bestow on us Grace from Your presence:  
for truly, You are the Generous Bestower.

*Rabbanā lā tuzig qulubanā ba' da 'idh hadatanā*

*wa hab lanā milladunka raḥmah;  
‘innaka ‘Anta Wahhāb.*

[3:3,7-8]

The above passage may be regarded as a key to the understanding of the Qur’ān. Ṭabarī identifies the *āyāt muḥkamāt* (“messages that are clear in and by themselves”) with what the philologists and jurists describe as *naṣṣ*—namely, ordinances or statements which are self-evident (*zāhir*) by virtue of their wording. Consequently, Ṭabarī regards as *āyāt muḥkamāt* only those statements or ordinances of the Qur’ān which do not admit of more than one interpretation (which does not, of course, preclude differences of opinion regarding the implications of a particular *āyāt muḥkamāh*). In my opinion, however, it would be too dogmatic to regard any passage of the Qur’ān which does not conform to the above definition as *mutashābih* (“allegorical”): for there are many statements in the Qur’ān which are liable to more than one interpretation but are, nevertheless, not allegorical—just as there are many expressions and passages which, despite their allegorical formulation, reveal to the searching intellect only one possible meaning. For this reason, the *āyāt mutashābihāt* may be defined as those passages of the Qur’ān which are expressed in a figurative manner, with a meaning that is metaphorically implied but not directly, in so many words, stated. The *āyāt muḥkamāt* are described as the “essence of the divine writ” (*umm al-kitāb*) because they comprise the fundamental principles underlying its message and, in particular, its ethical and social teachings: and it is only on the basis of these clearly enunciated principles that the allegorical passages can be correctly interpreted.

“...[B]ut none save God knows its final meaning.” According to most of the early commentators, this refers to the interpretation of allegorical passages which deal with metaphysical subjects—for instance, God’s attributes, the ultimate meaning of time and eternity, the resurrection of the dead, the Day of Judgment, paradise and hell, the

nature of the beings or forces described as angels, and so forth—all of which fall within the category of *al-ghayb*, i.e., that sector of reality which is beyond the reach of human perception and imagination and cannot, therefore, be conveyed to man in other than allegorical terms. This view of the classical commentators, however, does not seem to take into account the many Qur'ānic passages which do *not* deal with metaphysical subjects and yet are, undoubtedly, allegorical in intent and expression. To my mind, one cannot arrive at a correct understanding of the above passage without paying due attention to the nature and function of allegory as such. A true allegory—in contrast with a mere pictorial paraphrase of something that could equally well be stated in direct terms—is always meant to express in a figurative manner something which, because of its complexity, *cannot* be adequately expressed in direct terms or propositions and, because of this very complexity, can be grasped only intuitively, as a general mental image, and not as a series of detailed “statements”: and this seems to be the meaning of the phrase, “none save God knows its final meaning.” (Asad, pp. 66-67)

## The Essential Religion is Submission

Indeed, with God the religion is submission,  
And it was only because of envy that the People of the Book  
developed other views, and only after knowledge had come to them,  
but whoever denies the signs of God,  
with God the reckoning is swift.

[3:19]

Here we have one of the most important passages in the Qur'an, one that deserves careful reflection. It's context, at the beginning of Surah Imran, is a discussion of the essential elements of faith.

Surah Imrān begins with a confirmation of the authenticity of books revealed to Moses and Jesus, referring specifically to the Torah and the Gospel. These are called "guidance for mankind." The appropriateness and actuality of a diversity of religions is acknowledged in numerous places in the Qur'an, for instance:

To every community We have appointed ways of worship, which they ought to observe. And so, do not let others draw you [O Muhammad] into arguing about it, but invite them to your Sustainer: for you are indeed on the right way. And if they argue with you, say: "God knows best what you are doing." Indeed, God will judge between you on the Day of Resurrection concerning everything about which you would differ. [22:67-69]

Within the context of this acknowledgement of religious pluralism, humankind is given a clear warning: "Those who reject the signs of God will suffer the severest penalty." [3:4] What does it mean to reject the

signs of God? It is said that various things distract us from recognizing the signs of God: women and sons, heaps of gold and silver, fine horses (or nowadays cars), and real estate. Our exclusive preoccupation with the things of the world [*dunya*] blinds us to the signs (*ayāh*).

Therefore, submission, here, should be understood as “islam” with a small “i,” that is a state of being, a kind of relationship with God, rather than the specific forms of religion which we would understand as “Islam” with a capital “I.”

An important unifying theme of these first nineteen ayats of Surah Imrān might be summarized by the supplication: “Our Sustainer, do not let our hearts deviate after you have guided us, but grant us Mercy from Your Presence [3:8].” This deviation occurred among people of the Book and it can also occur among people who are nominally Muslim.

The people of true faith, of submission, *islam*, are described in this way:

Those patiently persevere, who are sincere, who are worshipful, who share their resources, and who ask forgiveness from their hearts.  
[3:17]

These are the essential characteristics of “islam,” which theoretically are possible for any human being in any divinely revealed form of religion. The fact that some Christians and Jews, out of *envy among themselves* (*bagyam baynahum*), invented beliefs beyond those which had been revealed to them, and claimed for their religion an exclusive validity, denying the validity of other approaches to God, is the way in which they negated their submission to God. Out of envy and denigration of others we fall into the sins of arrogance and self-righteousness. Then, instead of competing in the realm of virtue, there appears a competition based on adherence to beliefs and forms. Rather than true submission to God, and the qualities that submission entails—patience, sincerity, worship, charity, and humility before God—human

beings, distracted by their own false selves, become the source of conflict [*fitna*].

If Muslims are to maintain their true alignment with God's Grace [*rahmah*] and Guidance [*hudah*], we will have to realize the truth of: Indeed with God the religion is submission [*islam*]. (Helminski)

## Christ, the Word

Lo! The angels said:  
“O Mary! Behold, God sends you the glad tidings,  
through a Word from Him,  
[of a son] who shall become known as the Christ Jesus, son of Mary,  
of great honor in this world and in the life to come,  
and of those who are near to God.”

[3:45]

Christ means literally “whose name shall be ‘the Anointed’ (*al-masīḥ*).” The designation *al-masīḥ* is the Arabicized form of the Aramaic *meshīḥā* which, in turn, is derived from the Hebrew *māhsīaḥ*, “the anointed”—a term frequently applied in the Bible to the Hebrew kings, whose accession to power used to be consecrated by a touch with holy oil taken from the Temple. This anointment appears to have been so important a rite among the Hebrews that the term “the anointed” became in the course of time more or less synonymous with “king.” Its application to Jesus may have been due to the widespread conviction among his contemporaries that he was descended in direct... line from the royal House of David.... Whatever may have been the historical circumstances, it is evident that the honorific “the Anointed” was applied to Jesus in his own lifetime. In the Greek version of the Gospels—which is undoubtedly based on a now-lost Aramaic original—this designation is correctly translated as *Christos* (a noun derived from the Greek verb *chrein*, “to anoint”); and since it is in this form—“the Christ”—that the designation *al-masīḥ* has achieved currency in all Western languages, I am using it throughout in my translation.

As regards the expression *min al-muqarrabīn* (“of those who are near,” i.e., to God), the most excellent among the inmates of paradise are thus described in 56:10-12: “But the foremost shall be [they who in life were] the foremost [in faith and good works]: they who were [always] drawn close to God. In gardens of bliss [will they dwell]”. (Asad, p. 73)

*But the text continues to remind us not to take Jesus Christ as God:*

It is not conceivable that a human being to whom God had granted  
revelation, and sound judgment, and prophethood,  
should thereafter have said to people, “Worship *me* beside God”;  
but rather: “Become men of God  
spreading the knowledge of the Book,  
and by your own deep study of it.”  
And neither did he bid you  
to take the angels and the prophets for your lords:  
for would he bid you to deny the truth  
after you have surrendered yourselves to God?

[3:79-80]

Zamakhsharī regards the term “*ḥukm*” (“judgment” or “sound judgment”) occurring in the above sentence as synonymous, in this context, with *ḥikmah* (“wisdom”). According to Sībawayh (as quoted by Rāzī), a *rabbānī* is “one who devotes himself exclusively to the endeavor to know the Sustainer (*ar-rabb*) and to obey Him”: a connotation fairly close to the English expression “a man of God.” (Asad, p. 79)



## Hold to the Rope of God

O you who have faith!  
Be mindful of God with all the mindfulness that is due Him,  
and do not allow death to overtake you  
before you have surrendered yourselves to Him.  
And hold fast, all together, to the rope of God,  
and do not draw apart from one another.  
And remember with gratitude the blessings  
which God has bestowed on you:  
how, when you were adversaries, He brought your hearts together,  
so that through His blessings you became as though of one family;  
and how when you were on the brink of a fiery abyss,  
He saved you from it.  
In this way, God makes clear His signs to you,  
so that you might be guided,  
and that there might grow out of you a community  
that invites to all that is good, and encourages the doing of what is right  
and forbids the doing of what is wrong:  
and it is they who shall attain happiness!

[3:102-4]

If anyone ever needed a beautiful reason to live, here it is. When so many people are so often lacking a sense of purpose, seeking happiness so unsuccessfully, there is a purpose to be recognized here in the possibility of human solidarity. This passage suggests the active role of the divine in offering guidance and establishing human togetherness.

To be mindful of God is our translation of *taqwallah*, which Muhammad Asad translates as “be conscious of God” and Yusuf Ali translates as “fear God.”

*What could it mean to hold to the rope of God?*

Ibn Kathir cites a Hadith reported on the authority of ‘Ali who said that “the Qur’an is God’s strong rope and the straight way.” He cites another Hadith on the authority of Abu Sa’id al-Khudri in which the Prophet said, “The Book of God is God’s rope stretched from heaven to earth.” ‘Abd Allah bin Mas’ud reported that the Messenger of God said, “Surely this Qur’an is God’s strong rope, a manifest light, and a beneficial source of healing. It is protection for those who hold fast to it, and a means of salvation for those who abide by it.” [Ayoub, p.275]

According to Yusuf ‘Ali:

*The simile is that of people struggling in deep water, to whom a benevolent Providence stretches out a strong and unbreakable rope of rescue. If all hold fast to it together, their mutual support adds to the chance of their safety.*

“When you were adversaries, He brought your hearts together”: Yathrib was torn with civil and tribal feuds and dissensions before the Apostle of God set his sacred feet on its soil. After that, it became the City of the Prophet, Medina, an unmatched brotherhood, and the pivot of Islam. This poor quarrelsome world is a larger Yathrib; can we establish the sacred feet on its soil, and make it a new and larger Medina?

Furthermore, we are asked to “not draw apart from one another and remember with gratitude the blessings bestowed” on us. The result of these things, the blessing of it is that we will become “like one family.” Adversaries become one in heart. When we are near the brink of the abyss, we are saved from it. Here is a clear picture of what God wishes to communicate to us. Through revelation we are not only offered inner

peace and blessings on the individual level, but when the divine principles are embodied in the life of a society, true well-being is increased for all.

The function of God's signs is to awaken us to true happiness and well-being. Signs are both of a universal nature, available to all sincere human beings. But in this passage the signs, or ayats, have specifically established a community, the Muslim ummah, which "invites to all that is good, and forbids the doing of what is wrong."

"It is they who shall attain happiness" The word for happiness here (*muflih, aflaha, falāh*), suggests the attainment of happiness in this world and the next, success, prosperity, freedom from anxiety and inner conflict. Because it invites to all that is good, enjoins the right, and forbids the wrong, the ideal Muslim community is happy, self-confident, free of doubt and confusion, strong, united, and prosperous.

## Travel Through the World

Many ways of life have passed away before your time.  
Go, then, travel through the world and see what happened  
in the end to those who denied the truth:  
here is a clear lesson for all human beings  
and a guidance and a counsel for those who are mindful of God.  
So do not lose heart, nor fall into despair:  
for if you are faithful you are bound to ascend.

[3:137-9]

“Many ways of life” (*sunan*, plural of *sunnah*) suggests the different value systems, economies, social structures by which human beings have organized their lives. Muhammad Asad has this to say:

The word *sunnah* (of which *sunan* is the plural) denotes a “way of life” or “conduct” (hence its application, in Islamic terminology, to the way of life of the Prophet as an example for his followers). In the above passage, the term *sunan* refers to the “conditions (*aḥwāl*) characteristic of past centuries” (Rāzī), in which, despite all the continuous changes, an ever-recurring pattern can be discerned: a typically, Qur’anic reference to the possibility, and necessity, of learning from man’s past experiences.

The Qur’an is offering us a grand perspective far above the narrow parochialisms which human beings tend to get caught up in. The first sentence expands our sense of time, while the second, which enjoins us to travel through the earth, widens our sense of place. Such travel could even be heard as a Divine imperative, or at least an invitation. If we travel

through the world we will inevitably see evidence of past communities and civilizations which have declined or been destroyed. There is in this a “clear lesson” for everyone, but even more so, for those who are “mindful of God,” those with *taqwa*, this will be a guidance and counsel. The outer life human beings create for themselves is inevitably a reflection of their inner lives. Their values and faith, or the lack thereof, will be evidenced in the societies they create.

But we are told not to fall into discouragement or despair, because if we are among those who keep the faith, we will ascend. Yusuf Ali offers this commentary:

Cf: Tennyson (In Memoriam): “Our little systems have their day. They have their day and cease to be. They are but broken lights of You, and You, O lord! art more than they.” Only God’s Truth will last, and it will gain the mastery in the end. If there is defeat, we must not be dejected, lose heart, or give up the struggle. Faith means hope activity, striving steadfastly on to the goal. (Helminski)

## Facing Mortality

Do you think that you could enter paradise  
unless God takes cognizance of your having striven hard [in His cause],  
and of your having been patient in adversity?  
For, indeed, you did long for death [in God's cause]  
until you came face to face with it;  
and now you have seen it with your own eyes.  
And Muḥammad is only an apostle;  
all the apostles have passed away before him:  
if, then, he dies or is slain, will you turn about on your heels?  
But he that turns about on his heels does no harm to God—  
whereas God will recompense all who are grateful.  
And no human being can die except by God's permission,  
at a term pre-ordained.  
And if one desires the rewards of this world, We shall grant him thereof;  
and if one desires the rewards of the life to come,  
We shall grant him thereof;  
and We shall recompense those who are grateful.

[3:142-145]

It was this very passage of the Qur'an which Abū Bakr, the first Caliph, recited immediately after the Prophet's death, when many faint-hearted Muslims thought that Islam itself had come to an end; but as soon as Abū Bakr added, "Behold, whoever has worshipped Muḥammad may know that Muḥammad has died; but whoever worships God may know that God is ever-living, and never dies (Bukhārī), all confusion was stilled. (Asad, p. 89)

This stress on the mortality of the Prophet—and that of all the other prophets who preceded him in time—connects, in the first instance, with the battle of Uhud and the rumor of his death, which caused many Muslims to abandon the fight and even brought some of them close to apostasy. In its wider implications, however, the above verse re-states the fundamental Islamic doctrine that adoration is due to God alone, and that no human being—not even a prophet—may have any share in it.

And we have need to remember this now and often for two reasons: (1) when we feel inclined to pay more than human honor to one who was the truest, the purest, and the greatest of men, and thus in a sense to compound for our forgetting the spirit of his teaching, and (2) when we feel depressed at the chances and changes of time, and forget that the eternal God lives and watches over us and over all His creatures now as in all history in the past and in the future.

“And if one desires the rewards of this world, We shall grant him thereof”: there is a slight touch of irony in this. As applied to the archers at Uhud, who deserted their posts for the sake of plunder, they might have got some plunder, but they put themselves and the whole of their army into jeopardy. For a little worldly gain, they nearly lost their souls. On the other hand, those who took the long view and fought with staunchness and discipline – their reward was swift and sure. If they died, they got the crown of martyrdom. If they lived, they were heroes honored in this life and the next. (A. Yusuf Ali, pp. 159-160)

## Free Will or Pre-Destination?

Then, after this woe, He sent down upon you a sense of security,  
an inner calm which enfolded some of you,  
whereas the others, who cared mainly for themselves,  
entertained wrong thoughts about God—thoughts of pagan ignorance—  
saying, “Did we, then, have any power of decision?”  
Say: “Truly, all power of decision does rest with God”—  
but, they are trying to conceal within themselves  
that which they would not reveal to you, [O Prophet] saying,  
“If we had any power of decision,  
we would not have left so many dead behind.”  
Say: “Even if you had remained in your homes,  
those [of you] whose death had been ordained  
would indeed have gone forth to the places  
where they were destined to lie down.”  
And [all this befell you] so that God might put to a test  
all that you harbor in your bosoms,  
and render your innermost hearts pure of all dross:  
for God is aware of what is in the hearts.  
Behold, as for those of you who turned away  
on the day when the two hosts met in battle  
—Satan caused them to stumble  
only by means of something that they, themselves, had done.  
But now God has effaced this sin of theirs:  
For truly, God is much-forgiving, forbearing.  
O you who have attained to faith,  
be not like those who are intent on denying the truth  
and say of their brethren



[who die] after having set out on a journey to faraway places  
or gone forth to war,  
“Had they but remained with us, they would not have died,”  
or, “they would not have been slain”–  
for God will cause such thoughts  
to become a source of bitter regret in their hearts,  
since it is God who grants life and deals death.  
And God sees all that you do.

[3:154-156]

“Did we, then, have any power of decision in this matter?” i.e., in the matter of victory or defeat. The “thoughts of pagan ignorance” is obviously an allusion to the initial reluctance of those faint hearted people at the battle of Uḥud to admit their moral responsibility for what had happened, and to their excusing themselves by saying that their failure to live up to their faith had been “**predestined.**”

“Satan caused them to stumble only by means of something that they themselves had done.” This is an illustration of a significant Qur’anic doctrine, which can be thus summarized: “Satan’s influence” on man is not the primary *cause* of sin but its *first consequence*: that is to say, a consequence of a person’s own attitude of mind which in a moment of moral crisis induces him to choose the easier, and seemingly more pleasant, of the alternatives open to him, and thus to become guilty of a sin, whether by commission or omission. Thus, God’s “causing” a person to commit a sin is conditional upon the existence, in the individual concerned, of an attitude of mind which makes him prone to commit such a sin: which, in its turn, presupposes man’s **free will**—that is, the ability to make, within certain limitations, a conscious choice between two or more possible courses of action. (Asad)

## The Prophet's Gentleness

And it was by God's grace that you [O Prophet]  
dealt gently with your followers;  
for it you had been harsh and hard of heart,  
they would indeed have broken away from you.  
Pardon them, then, and pray that they be forgiven.  
And take counsel with them in all matters of public concern;  
then, when you have decided upon a course of action,  
place your trust in God:  
for truly, God loves those who place their trust in Him.

[3:159]

The commentator Razi connects this verse to the battle of Uhud which was a serious defeat for the outnumbered Muslims partly because they had let themselves become distracted by the spoils of war and more importantly because they became faint-hearted when the Prophet was wounded. If there were a time when the Prophet could have showed anger and disappointment toward his followers, this was it. Nevertheless, he treated them with patience and kindness.

Yusuf 'Ali comments:

The extremely gentle nature of Muḥammad endeared him to all, and it is reckoned as one of the Mercies of God. One of the Apostle's titles is "A Mercy to all Creation." At no time was this gentleness, this mercy, this long suffering with human weakness, more valuable than after a disaster like that at Uḥud. It is a God-like quality, which then, as always, bound and binds the souls of countless men to him. (A. Yusuf Ali, p. 164)

Razi also quotes the following Hadith: “No clemency and compassion are more loved by God than those of a leader (imam), and no foolishness and harshness of character are more hateful to Him than his foolishness and harshness.”

Aisha reported that the messenger of God said, “God charged me with gentleness toward all human beings as He also charged me with the implementation of spiritual obligations (farā'id).”

Muhammad Asad sees in this some important principles of governance:

This injunction, implying government by consent and council, must be regarded as one of the fundamental clauses of all Qur'anic legislation relating to statecraft. The pronoun “them” relates to the believers, that is, to the whole community; while the word *al-amr* occurring in this context—as well as in the much earlier-revealed phrase *amruhum shūrā baynahum* in 42:38—denotes all affairs of public concern, including state administration. All authorities agree in that the above ordinance, although addressed in the first instance to the Prophet, is binding on all Muslims and for all times. (For its wider implications, see *State and Government in Islam*, by Muhammad Asad, pp. 44 ff.) Some Muslim scholars conclude from the wording of this ordinance that the leader of the community, although obliged to take counsel, is nevertheless free to accept or to reject it; but the arbitrariness of this conclusion becomes obvious as soon as we recall that even the Prophet considered himself bound by the decisions of his council [as in the battle of Uḥud]. Moreover, when he was asked—according to a Tradition on the authority of ‘Alī ibn Abī Tālib—to explain the implications of the word *‘azm* (“deciding upon a course of action”) which occurs in the above verse, the Prophet replied, “[It means] taking counsel with knowledgeable people (*ahl ar-ra'y*) and thereupon following them [therein].” (Asad, p. 92)

The essence of these ayāts is that the Prophet Muhammad (saws) won the hearts of people through his kindness, patience, and humble willingness to consult others on practical matters, (Helminski)

## Trials

**You shall most certainly be tried in your possessions and in yourselves;**  
and indeed you shall hear much that will cause you grief  
from those to whom revelation was granted before your time,  
as well as from those  
who have come to attribute divinity to others beside God.  
But if you persevere and remain mindful  
this is certainly a great resolve.

[3:186]

During the Prophet's life, he and his companions suffered many hurtful and insulting incidents. Likewise, people of faith should not expect their lives to proceed without challenges, losses, and painful events, including from people who do not share their faith. This should not be a reason to lose heart, but, on the contrary, can be seen as an opportunity to strengthen one's resolve.

Life will inevitably present us with occasions when we are tested by challenges to our self-esteem, our beliefs, our possessions, and our security. The commentator Tabarsi writes: "This world is the realm of tests and afflictions. People of faith will face trials in order that they may develop patience and know spiritual blessings. God is telling us, 'You will encounter trails and hardships in what you possess by way of lessening and loss, and in your lives through death and injury, just as it was suffered on the day of Uhud. God calls all afflictions a trial (balwā) metaphorically. This is because the true purpose of a test cannot be attributed to God. This is because He is omniscient regarding all events before they happen. God allows trials only in order that the people of truth may be distinguished from the people of falsehood.'" (Helminski)

## Sustaining Remembrance

And to God belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth;  
and God has power over all things.

Truly, in the creation of the heavens and the earth,  
and in the succession of night and day,

there are indeed signs for all who are endowed with insight,  
and who remember God standing, and sitting,  
and when they lie down to sleep,  
and contemplate creation—of the heavens and the earth:

“O our Sustainer!

You have not created this without meaning and purpose.

Limitless are You in Your subtle glory!

Deliver us from the anguish of the Fire.”

[3:189-91]

It is characteristic of the Qur'an that rather than offering human beings some complex theology or dogmatic proposition, it tells us instead to reflect with insight (*basira*) on the signs (*ayat*) of the heavens and the earth. All natural processes are the evidence and reminder of the Divine power. We are asked to awaken to this, to open ourselves to the kind of perception which can witness the meaning and purpose behind everything, right down to the obvious fluctuation of night and day, darkness and light. By virtue of this we develop into people who “remember” or call God to mind in all conditions of life, and even as we lie down to sleep at night. This remembrance, in other words, is not to be identified with a special place or time, or any particular behavior; it is a continuous, sustained state of awareness. And it is this state of awareness

that develops into a deeper and deeper faith, the conviction that everything in existence is the manifestation of God's meaning and purpose.

This continual state of remembrance that we are called to will lead us to the awareness that everything has been created in accordance with a meaningful purpose: "You have not created this without meaning and purpose (*bāṭilan*)."

Nothing is accidental: "None of this has God created without [an inner] truth" [10:5] "We have not created heaven and earth and all that is between them without meaning and purpose, as is the surmise of those who are bent on denying the truth." [38:27] The state of those who remember God in all the conditions of life becomes a state of trust and surrender to the unfolding meaning of life. (Helminski)

## Patience

O you who keep the faith!  
Be patient, and encourage patience in each other,  
and be strengthened by your connection,  
and be mindful of God,  
so that you might attain felicity.

[3:200]

*Yā ‘ayyu-hallaḏīna ‘āmanuṣbirū  
wa ṣābirū wa rābiṭū  
wattaqullāha la-‘alakum tufliḥūn*

This short deceptively exhortation contains an immense message of guidance and hope. It calls upon those with iman, those who “keep the faith.” Iman is not the state of belief, not the mental conviction in some concept, but the active state of trusting in the Divine. Such people will turn the noun, “patience,” into a dynamic verb, represented here by *ṣābirū*. We have no equivalent in the English language for the dynamic activity of bearing all things with trust and acceptance. The word *rābiṭū*, which we have translated as “be strengthened by your connection,” means both to bond with something and to be strengthened by that bond. The implication here is twofold: first that we should keep our conscious connection with the Divine presence, and also that we should be actively persevering in unity with other people of faith. The final word, which comes from the root f-l-ḥ, is the same state that the muezzin calls us to in the *āzan*: *hayya ala falah*, come to well-being, felicity, true prosperity. Here is the essential message of Islamic spirituality that faith in and



conscious connection to the Beneficent, Divine Presence results in a state of inner strength, spiritual well-being, and true happiness. (Helminski)

“Persevere in patience”: the full meaning of *Ṣabr* is to be understood here: patience, perseverance, constancy, self-restraint, refusing to be cowed down. These virtues we are to exercise for ourselves and in relation to others: we are to set an example, so that others may vie with us, and we are to view with them, lest we fall short. In this way, we strengthen each other and bind our mutual relations closer, in our common service to God.

Felicity or prosperity (*ḥalāl*) here and in other passages is to be understood in a wide sense, including prosperity in our mundane affairs as well as in spiritual progress. In both cases it implies happiness and the attainment of our wishes, purified by the love of God. (A. Yusuf Ali, p. 176)

## What God Wants For Us

God wants to bestow clarity upon you,  
and guide you to the earlier, (sacred) ways of life,  
and God turns to you:  
for God is all-knowing, wise.  
And God wants to turn to you,  
whereas those who follow their own lusts want you to drift far away.  
God wants to lighten your burdens:  
for man has been created weak.

[4:26-28]

“The earlier, (sacred) ways of life”: an allusion to the *genuine* religious teachings of the past, which aimed at bringing about a harmony between man’s physical nature and the demands of his spirit – a harmony which is destroyed whenever asceticism is postulated as the only possible alternative to licentiousness. This allusion arises from the discussion of sexual morality in the preceding passages devoted to marital relations.

“God wants to lighten your burdens”: i.e., to remove, by means of His guidance, all possibility of conflict between man’s spirit and his bodily urges, and to show him a way of life in which these two elements of human nature can be harmonized and brought to full fruition.

“And were it not that [with the prospect of boundless riches before them] all people would become one [evil] community” (43:33): since “man has been created weak,” it is almost a “law of nature” that whenever he is exposed to the prospect of great wealth, he is liable to lose sight of all spiritual and moral considerations, and to become utterly selfish, greedy, and ruthless.

“And He does not demand of you [to sacrifice in His cause all of] your possessions: [for,] if He were to demand of you all of them, and urge

you, you would niggardly cling [to them], and so He would [but] bring out your moral failings” (47:36-37): the implication is that since “man has been created weak,” the imposition of too great a burden on the believers would be self-defeating inasmuch as it might result not in an increase of faith but, rather, in its diminution. This passage illustrates the supreme realism of the Qur’ān, which takes into account human nature as it is, with all its God-willed complexity and its inner contradictions, and does not, therefore, postulate *a priori* an impossible ideal as a norm of human behavior.

“And [always], O you believers – all of you – turn to God in repentance, so that you might attain to a happy state!” (24:31). The implication of this general call to repentance is that since “man has been created weak,” no one is ever free of faults and temptations – so much so that even the Prophet used to say, “Truly, I turn to Him in repentance a hundred times every day” (Ibn Ḥanbal, Bukhārī, and Bayhaqī, all of them on the authority of ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Umar). (Asad, pp. 108, 753, 783, 539)

## Recompense

Truly, God does not wrong anyone by as much as an atom's weight;  
and if there is a good deed, He will compound it  
and will bestow out of His Presence an immense recompense.

[4:40]

Any little good of our own comes from the purity of our heart. Its results in the world are doubled and multiplied by God's grace and mercy: but an even greater reward comes, from His own Presence, His good pleasure, which brings us nearer to Him. (A. Yusuf Ali, p. 192)

## Friendship With God

For all those who listen to God and the Messenger  
are among those on whom God has bestowed His blessings:  
the prophets, and those who never deviated from the truth,  
**and those who with their lives bore witness to the truth,**  
**and the righteous ones; and what a beautiful friendship this is.**

Such is the abundance of God—  
and it suffices that God is All-Knowing.

[4:69-70]

A passage of the deepest spiritual meaning. Even the humblest man who accepts faith and does good becomes at once an accepted member of a great and beautiful spiritual fellowship. It is a company which lives perpetually in the sunshine of God's Grace. It is a glorious hierarchy, of which four grades are specified: (1) the highest is that of the prophets or apostles, who get plenary inspiration from God and who teach mankind by example and precept. That rank in Islam is held by Muḥammad Muṣṭafā. (2) the next are those whose badge is sincerity and truth; they love and support the truth with their person, their means, their influence, and all that is theirs. That rank was held by the special companions of Muḥammad, among whom the type was that of Ḥadhrat Abū Bakr Ṣiddīq. (3) The next are the noble army of witnesses, who testify to the truth. The testimony may be by martyrdom, as in the case of Imāms Ḥasan and Ḥusain. Or it may be by the tongue of the true preacher or the pen of the devoted scholar, or the life of the man devoted to service. (4) Lastly, there is the large company of righteous people, the ordinary folk who do their ordinary business, but always in a righteous way. They are

the rank and file of the beautiful fellowship, in which each has his place and yet all feel that they derive glory from the common association.

“Such is the abundance of God – and it suffices that God is All-Knowing.” If a generous General gives the private soldier the privilege of sitting with his comrades and officers, high and low, in one common brotherhood, people may perhaps wonder: how may this be? If we are admitted to that fellowship, we want to know more. It is enough to us that God knows our humility and our unworthiness, and with His full knowledge admits us to that glorious fellowship. (A. Yusuf Ali, pp. 200-201)

## Courtesy to People of Other Faiths

O you who have faith! When you go forth in God's cause  
use your discernment and do not—  
out of a desire for the fleeting gains of this worldly life—  
say to anyone who offers you a greeting: "You are not of the faithful!"  
for with God are abundant benefits.  
You, too, were once in the same condition—  
but God has been gracious to you:  
so use your discernment: truly, God is well-aware of all that you do.

[4:94]

"You are not of the faithful," that is to say, "and therefore one of the enemies." This verse prohibits the treating of noncombatants as enemies and using their supposed unbelief as a pretext for plundering them. The injunction "use your discernment" (*tabayyanū*) imposes on the believers the duty of making sure, in every case, whether the persons concerned are actively engaged in hostilities or not.

"You, too, were once in the same condition" is literally "thus have you been aforesaid." Since the preceding injunction refers to the *whole community*, it would seem that the above clause, too, bears the same implication: namely, a reference to the time when the Muslim community was, because of its weakness and numerical insignificance, at the mercy of enemies endowed with greater power. Thus, the believers are told, as it were: "Remember your erstwhile weakness, and treat the peacefully-minded among your enemies with the same consideration with which you yourselves were once hoping to be treated." (Asad, p. 123)

## God's Evidence and Promise

O humankind!  
Evidence has now come to you  
from your Sustainer,  
and We have sent to you a clear light.  
And as for those who have attained to faith in *Allah*<sup>6</sup>  
and hold fast to Him—  
He will cause them to enter into His compassion  
and His abundant blessing,  
and guide them to Himself by a straight way.

[4:174-5]

First of all, this verse is addressed to all of humanity, announcing that “evidence” (*burhān*) and clear light (*nūram mubīn*) has come to us. In verses 164–166 it is said: Of some messengers We have already told you the story, and of others We have not, and to Moses Allah spoke directly. Messengers who brought both good news and warning, so that humanity, after their coming, should have no complaint against God, for God is the Powerful and the Wise. But God bears witness that what He has sent to you, He has sent with His knowledge.

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<sup>6</sup>The Arabic word for God: used by Arabic speaking Christians as well as Muslims.



# Justice

O you who have attained to faith!  
Stand firmly in your devotion to God,  
bearing witness to the truth in complete fairness;  
**and never let hatred of anyone**  
**lead you to make the mistake of deviating from justice.**  
**Be just: this is the closest to being God-conscious.**  
And remain conscious of God:  
truly, God is well-aware of all that you do.

[5:8]

Justice is God's attribute, and to stand firm for justice is to be a witness to God, even if it is detrimental to our own interests as we conceive them, or the interests of those who are near and dear to us. According to the Latin saying, "Let justice be done though heaven should fall." But Islamic justice is something higher than the formal justice of Roman Law or any other human law. It is even more penetrative than the subtler justice in the speculations of the Greek philosophers. It searches out the innermost motives, because we are to act as in the presence of God, to Whom all things, acts, and motives are known.

To do justice and act righteously in a favorable or neutral atmosphere is meritorious enough, but the real test comes when you have to do justice to people who hate you or to whom you have an aversion. But no less is required of you by the higher moral law. (A. Yusuf Ali, pp. 223, 243)

## Killing

If anyone slays a single soul—  
unless it be in punishment for murder  
or for spreading corruption on earth—  
it shall be as though he had slain all humankind;  
whereas, if anyone saves a life,  
it shall be as though he had saved the lives of all humanity.

[5:32]

To kill or seek to kill an individual because he represents an ideal is to kill all who uphold the ideal. On the other hand, to save an individual life in the same circumstances is to save a whole community. What could be a stronger condemnation of individual assassination and revenge? (A. Yusuf Ali, p. 252)

## Cultural Pluralism

And to you We have sent this Book  
of the Truth, confirming the truth  
of whatever remains of earlier revelations  
and guarding what is true within.  
Judge in accordance with what God has bestowed from on high,  
and do not follow erring views,  
forsaking the truth that has come to you.  
For every one of you have We designated a law and a way of life.  
And if God had so willed,  
He could surely have made you all one single community:  
but He willed it otherwise in order to test you  
by means of what He has bestowed on you.  
Strive, then, with one another in doing good!  
Your goal is God;  
and then, He will make you understand  
the truth of everything in which you have differed.

[5: 48]

“Confirming the truth of whatever remains of earlier revelations and guarding what is true within.” The participle *muhaymin* is derived from the quadrilateral verb *haymana*, “he watched [over a thing]” or “controlled [it],” and is used here to describe the Qur’ān as the determining factor in deciding what is genuine and what is false in the earlier scriptures (see *Manār* VI, 410 ff). “Judge in accordance with what God has bestowed from on high.” This apparently applies not merely to judicial cases but also to opinions as to what is right or wrong in the

ethical sense. As is evident from the mention of the “followers of the Gospel” and of the Torah in the verses just preceding this one, the people spoken of here are both the Jews and the Christians. The expression “for every one of you” denotes the various communities of which mankind is composed. The term translated as “law” is *shir‘ah* (or *sharī‘ah*) and signifies, literally, “the way to a watering-place” (from which men and animals derive the element indispensable to their life). It is used in the Qur’ān to denote a system of law necessary for a community’s social and spiritual welfare. The term *minhāj*, on the other hand, denotes an “open road,” usually in an abstract sense: that is, “a way of life.” The terms *shir‘ah* and *minhāj* are more restricted in their meaning than the term *dīn*, which comprises not merely the laws relating to a particular religion but also the basic, unchanging spiritual truths which, according to the Qur’ān, have been preached by every one of God’s apostles, while the particular body of laws (*shir‘ah* or *sharī‘ah*) promulgated through them, and the way of life (*minhāj*) recommended by them, varied in accordance with the exigencies of the time and of each community’s cultural development. This “unity in diversity” is frequently stressed in the Qur’ān (2:148, 21:92-23, [23:52](#)). Because of the universal applicability and textual incorruptibility of its teachings – as well as of the fact that the Prophet Muḥammad is “the seal of all prophets,” i.e., the last of them (33:40) – the Qur’ān represents the culminating point of all revelation and offers the final, perfect way to spiritual fulfillment. This uniqueness of the Qur’anic message does not, however, preclude all adherents of earlier faiths from attaining to God’s grace: for – as the Qur’ān so often points out – those among them who relieve uncompromisingly in the One God and the Day of Judgment (i.e., in individual moral responsibility) and live righteously “need have no fear, and neither shall they grieve.” (Asad, pp. 153-154)

“Guarding what is true within”: after the corruption of the older revelations, the Qur’ān comes with a twofold purpose: (1) to confirm the true and original message, and (2) to guard it, or act as check to its

interpretations. For example, if people seek retaliation in a spirit of revenge, it holds forth mercy. If they glibly mask their cowardice or sentimentalism by empty talk of “turning of their cheek,” it tests them by the practical test of forgiveness and mercy.

“For every one of you have We designated a law and a way of life.” Law is *shir’at*, the rules of practical conduct. Way of life or open way is *minhāj*, the finer things which are above the law, which are yet available to everyone, like a sort of open highway. The *light* in the verses just before this I understand to be something in the still higher regions of the spirit, which is common to mankind, though laws and rules may take different forms among different peoples. (“It was We Who revealed the Law (to Moses); therein was guidance and light” (5:47) and “and in their footsteps We sent Jesus the son of Mary, confirming the Law that had come before him: we sent him the Gospel; therein was guidance and light and confirmation of the Law that had come before him” (5:49).)

“And if God had so willed, He could surely have made you all one single community.” By origin mankind were a single people or nation (4:1 “O mankind! Be conscious of your Sustainer who has created you out a single soul, from that soul created its mate, and out of the two spread abroad a multitude of men and women.” and 2:213. All mankind were once one single community.”) That being so, God could have kept us all alike, with one language, one kind of deposition, and one set of physical conditions (including climate) to live in. But in His wisdom He gives us diversity in these things, not only at any given time but in different periods and ages. This tests our capacity for unity (*waḥdāniyah*) still more, and accentuates the need of unity and Islam.

“Your goal is God; and then, He will make you understand the truth of everything in which you have differed.” As our true goal is God, the things that seem different to us from different points of view will ultimately be reconciled in Him. Einstein is right in plumbing the depths of relativity in the world of physical science. It points more and more to the need of unity in God in the spiritual world. (A. Yusuf Ali, pp. 258-259)

## Ignorance, *Jāhiliyyah*

Do they, perchance, desire the law of pagan ignorance? But for people  
who have inner certainty,  
who could be a better law-giver than God?

[5:50]

The days of ignorance were the days of tribalism, feuds, and selfish accentuation of differences in man. Those days are really not yet over. It is the mission of Islam to take us away from that false mental attitude, towards the true attitude of unity. If our faith is certain, and not merely a matter of words, God will guide us to that unity. (A. Yusuf Ali, p. 259)

By “pagan ignorance” (*jāhiliyyah*) is meant here not merely the time before the advent of the Prophet Muḥammad but, in general, a state of affairs characterized by a lack of moral perception and a submission of all personal and communal concerns to the criterion of “expediency” alone: that is, exclusively to the consideration as to whether a particular aim or action is useful or damaging (in the short-term, practical sense of these words) to the interests of the person concerned or of the community to which he belongs. Inasmuch as this “law of expediency” is fundamentally opposed to the concepts of morality preached by every higher religion, it is described in the Qur’ān as “the law (*ḥukm*) of pagan ignorance.” (Asad, p. 154)

## Moderation in Pleasures

O you who have attained to faith!  
Do not deprive yourselves of the good things of life  
which God has made lawful to you,  
but do not transgress the bounds of what is right:  
truly, God does not love those who go beyond  
the bounds of what is right.  
And so partake of the lawful, good things  
which God grants you as sustenance,  
and be conscious of God, in whom you have faith.

[5:87-88]

[Ali 5:90-91]

In pleasures that are good and lawful the crime is excess. There is no merit merely in abstention or asceticism, though the humility or unselfishness that may go with asceticism may have its value. In 5:85 Christian monks are praised for particular virtues (“Among these are men devoted to learning and men who have renounced the world, and they are not arrogant”), though here and elsewhere monasticism is disapproved of. Use God’s gifts of all kinds with gratitude, but excess is not approved of by God. (A. Yusuf Ali, p. 270)

The implication is firstly, that what has been forbidden does *not* belong to the category of “the good things of life” (*aṭ-ṭayyibāt*), and, secondly, that all that has not been expressly forbidden is allowed. It is to be noted that the Qur’an forbids only those things or actions which are

injurious to man physically, morally, or socially. The term *at-tayyibāt* comprises all that is good and wholesome in life—"the delightful things which human beings desire and towards which their hearts incline" (Ṭabarī): hence my rendering, "the good things of life." (Asad, pp. 142, 161)



## Intoxicants and Gambling

O you who have attained to faith! Intoxicants, and games of chance,  
and idolatrous practices, and the divining of the future  
are but a loathsome evil of Satan's doing:  
shun it, then, so that you might attain to a happy state!  
By means of intoxicants and games of chance  
Satan seeks only to sow enmity and hatred among you,  
and to turn you away from the remembrance of God and from prayer.  
Will you not, then, desist?

[5:90-91]

According to all the lexicographers, the word *khamr* (derived from the verb *khamara*, “he concealed” or “obscured”) denotes every substance the use of which obscures the intellect, i.e., intoxicates. Hence, the prohibition of intoxicants laid down in this verse comprises not merely alcoholic drinks, but also drugs which have a similar effect. The only exception from this total prohibition arises in cases of “dire necessity” (in the strictest sense of these words), as stipulated in the last sentence of verse 5:3 (“As for him, however, who is driven to what is forbidden by dire necessity and not by an inclination to sinning—behold, God is much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace.”): that is to say, in cases where illness or a bodily accident makes the administration of intoxicating drugs or of alcohol imperative and unavoidable. As regards the expression “idolatrous practices”...this term has, I believe, been used here metaphorically and is meant to circumscribe all practices of an idolatrous nature like personality worship, the attribution of “magic” properties to certain inanimate objects, the observance of all manner of superstitious taboos, and so forth. (Asad, p. 162)

Gambling, *maisir*, means literally a means of getting something too easily, getting a profit without working for it. That is the principle on which gambling is prohibited. The form most familiar to the Arabs was gambling by casting lots by means of arrows, on the principle of a lottery: the arrows were marked and served the same purpose as a modern lottery ticket. Something, e.g., the carcass of a slaughtered animal, was divided into unequal parts. The marked arrows were drawn from a bag. Some were blank and those who drew them got nothing. Others indicated prizes, which were big or small. Whether you got a big share or a small share or nothing depended on pure luck, unless there was fraud also on the part of some persons concerned. The principle on which the objection is based is that, even if there is no fraud, you gain what you have not earned, or lose on a mere chance. Dice and wagering are rightly held to be within the definition of gambling. But insurance is not gambling when conducted on business principles. Here the basis for calculation is statistics on a large scale, from which mere chance is eliminated. The insurers themselves pay premia in proportion to risks, exactly and statistically calculated.

Gambling and intemperance are social as well as individual sins. They may ruin us in our ordinary everyday worldly life, as well as spiritual future. In case it is suggested that there is not harm in a little indulgence, we are asked to think over all its aspects, social and individual, worldly and spiritual.

The idolatrous practices referred to *anṣāb*, stone altars or stone columns on which oil was poured for consecration, or slabs on which meat was sacrificed to idols. These were objects of worship, and were common in Arabia before Islam. Any idolatrous or superstitious practices are here condemned.

Besides the arrows used for the division of meat by a sort of lottery, arrows were also used for divination, i.e., for ascertaining lucky or unlucky moments, or learning the wishes of the heathen gods, as to whether men should undertake certain actions or not. All superstitions are

condemned. We are asked to obey the commands of God, which are always reasonable, instead of following superstitions, which are irrational, or seeking undue stimulation in intoxicants or undue advantage in gambling. To some there may be temporary excitement or pleasure in these, but that is not the way either of prosperity or piety. (A. Yusuf Ali, pp. 86, 271)

## Signs of Nature

Truly, God is the One who splits the grain and the kernel apart,  
bringing forth the living from the dead,  
and He is the One who brings forth the dead  
out of that which is alive.

This then, is God: how then can you be so deluded?

He is the One who causes the dawn to break,  
and who has made the night to be a source of stillness,  
and the sun and the moon for reckoning  
by the order of the Almighty, the All-knowing.

And He it is who has made the stars for you  
so that you might be guided by them  
through the darkneses of land and sea:

clearly have We detailed Our signs for people of inner knowing.

And He it is who has brought you all into being  
out of a single soul,

and so designated for each of you a time-limit on earth  
and a resting-place after death:

clearly have We detailed Our signs for people who can grasp the truth.

It is He who sends down rain from the skies:  
with it We produce vegetation of all kinds.

From some We produce green crops,  
out of which We produce grain, heaped up.

Out of the date palm

and its sheaths clusters of dates hanging low and near.

And gardens of grapes, and olives, and pomegranates,  
each similar in kind yet different in variety: when they begin to bear fruit,  
feast your eye with the fruit, and the ripeness thereof.

Behold! In these things there are signs for people who keep the faith.

[6:95-99]

Another beautiful nature passage, referring to God's wonderful artistry in His creation. In how few and how simple words the whole pageant of creation is placed before us! Beginning from our humble animal needs and dependence on the vegetable world, we are asked to contemplate the interaction of the living and the dead. Here is the mystic teaching, referring not only to physical life but to the higher life above the physical plane, not only to individual life but to the collective life of nations. Then we take a peep into the daily miracle of morning, noon, and night, and pass on to the stars that guide the distant mariner. We rise still higher to the mystery of the countless individuals from one human soul, their sojourn and their destiny. So we get back to the heaven: the description of the luscious fruits, which the "gentle rain from heaven" produces, leaves us to contemplate the spiritual truths which faith will provide for us, with the aid of the showers of God's mercy.

The seed grain and the date kernel are selected as types in the vegetable kingdom, showing how our physical life depends on it. The fruits mentioned later start another allegory which we shall notice later. Botanists will notice that the seed grain includes the cereals (such as wheat, barley, rice, millet, etc.) which are monocotyledons, as well as the pulses (such as beans, peas, gram, etc.) and other seeds which are dicotyledons. These two represent the most important classes of good grains, which the date palm, a monocotyledon, represents for Arabia both food, fruit, confectionary, thatch, and pillars for houses, shady groves in oases, and a standard measure of wealth and well-being.

"God is the one who causes the grain and date kernel to split and sprout": the ideas of both "split" and "sprout" are included in the root *falqa*, and third is expressed by the word "cleave" in the next verse: "He it is that cleaves the daybreak" (or "causes the dawn to break"), for the action of evolving daybreak from the dark. For vegetables, "split and

sprout” represents a double process: (1) the seed divides, and (2) one part shoots up, seeking the light and forming leaves and the visible parts of the future tree and the other part digs down into the dark, forming the roots and seeking just that sustenance from the soil which is adapted for the particular plant. This is just one small instance of the judgment and ordering of God, referred to in 6:96.

“He is the One who brings forth the dead out of that which is alive.” This does not mean that in physical nature there are no limits between life and non-life, between the organic and the non-organic. In fact, physicists are baffled at the barrier between them and frankly confess that they cannot solve the mystery of Life. If there is such a barrier in physical nature, is it not all the more wonderful that God can create Life out of nothing? He has but to say “Be” and it is. He can bring Life from non-life and annihilate life. But there are two other senses in which we can contemplate the contrast between the living and the dead. (1) We have just been speaking of the botanical world. Take it as a whole, and see the contrast between the winter of death, the spring of revivification, the summer of growth, and the autumn of decay, leading back to the death of winter. Here is a cycle of living from dead, and dead from living. (2) Take our spiritual life, individual or collective. We rise from the darkness of spiritual nothingness to the light of spiritual life. And if we do not follow the spiritual laws, God will take away that life and we shall be again as dead. We may die many deaths. The keys of life and death are in God’s hands. Neither life nor death are fortuitous things. Behind them both is the cause of causes, and only He.

“He is the One who causes the dawn to break, and who has made the night to be a source of stillness, and the sun and the moon for reckoning by the order of the Almighty, the All-Knowing. And He it is who has made the stars for you....” The night, the day, the sun, the moon, the great astronomical universe of God. How far, and yet how near to us! God’s universe is boundless, and we can barely comprehend even its relations to us. But this last we must try to do if we want to be numbered with the “people of inner knowing.”

“He it is who has made the stars for you so that you might be guided by them through the darkneses of land and sea.” At sea, or in deserts or forests, whenever we sweep over wide spaces, it is the stars that act as our guides, just as the sun and moon have already been mentioned as our measures of time.

“He it is who has brought you all into being out of a single soul...” Produced, *ansha’a*, made you grow, increase, develop, reach maturity: another of the processes of creation. It is one of the wonders of God’s creation, that from one person we have grown to be so many, and each individual has so many faculties and capacities, and yet we are all one. In the next verse we have the allegory of grapes and other fruits; all grapes may be similar to look at, yet each variety has a distinctive flavor and other distinctive qualities, and each individual grape may have its own special qualities. So for man.

“...and so designated for each of you a time-limit on earth and a resting-place after death.” In the sojourn of this life, we must respond to God’s hand in fashioning us by making full use of all our faculties, and we just get ready for our departure into the life that will be eternal.

Our allegory now brings us to maturity, the fruit, the harvest, the vintage. Through the seed we came up from nothingness to life; we lived our daily life of rest and work and passed the milestones of time; we had the spiritual experience of traveling through vast spaces in the spiritual world, guiding our course through the star of faith; we grew; and now for the harvest or the vintage! How satisfied the grower must be when the golden grain is harvested in heaps or the vintage gathered! So will man if he has produced the fruits of faith!

“Each similar, yet different.” Each fruit, whether it is grapes, or olives, or pomegranates, looks alike in its species, and yet each variety may be different in flavor, consistency, shape, size, color, juice or oil contents, proportion of seed to fruit, etc. In each variety individuals may be different. Apply the allegory to man, whose varied spiritual fruit may be equally different and yet equally valuable!

“When they begin to bear fruit, feast your eye with the fruit and the ripeness thereof.” And so we finish this wonderful allegory. Search through the world’s literature, and see if you can find another such song or hymn, so fruity in its literary flavor, so profound in its spiritual meaning!

“There are signs for people who believe.” There is a refrain in this song, which is subtly varied. In verse 97 it is “clearly have We detailed Our signs for people of inner knowing.” So far we were speaking of the things we see around us every day. Knowledge is the appropriate instrument for these things. In verse 98 we read: “clearly have We detailed Our signs for people who can grasp the truth (understand).” Understanding is a higher faculty than knowledge, and is necessary for seeing the mystery and meaning of this life. At the end of verse 99 we have “in these things there are signs for people who believe.” Here we are speaking of the real fruits of spiritual life. For them faith is necessary, as bringing us nearer to God. (A. Yusuf Ali, pp. 316-318)



## God is Subtle

No vision can encompass Him,  
but He encompasses all human vision:  
for He alone is Subtle Beyond Comprehension, All-Aware.  
Means of insight have now come to you  
from your Sustainer through this divine Message.  
Whoever, then, chooses to see,  
does so for the benefit of His own soul;  
and whoever chooses to remain blind,  
does so to His own harm.

[6:102--104]

Here is an example of the deep and subtle metaphysics of the Holy Qur'an. "No vision can encompass Him, but He encompasses all human vision" might be paraphrased as no seeing, no human mode of perception can fully grasp God, but God surrounds, encompasses, and enables human beings to perceive. We derive our seeing from His Seeing, but He is never the object of our perception, because He is not a thing.

This may seem to contradict the notion in Bakara 2:115 that "wheresoever you look is the Face of God." But this ayah tells us that God's essence can be witnessed in every particle of existence and not as an object or entity distinct from everything that exists.

This is made clear in the part of the ayah that says "He is the Subtle, the Aware." It could be said that He is the subtlest state of everything and the final and most complete Awareness operating in the universes.

The practical meaning of this for us is that the human being as God's *khalifah* may share in this power of subtle awareness. Through *taqwa*, mindfulness of God, through *dhikrallah*, remembrance of God, we are

developing the spiritual side of our being, which is our capacity to bring God's subtle awareness into every detail of our lives. Elsewhere it is said, "God is the light of the heavens and the earth." In other words, Allah enables perception in both the material world through the experience of our senses, and in the inner world through the heart and all our subtle faculties: self-awareness, insight, inspiration. (Helminski)

*Latīf* as a name of God is as difficult to define in words as the idea it seeks to represent is difficult to grasp in our minds. It implies: (1) fine, subtle (the basic meaning); (2) so fine and subtle as to be imperceptible to human sight, so fine as to be imperceptible to the senses; (3) so pure as to be incomprehensible, above the mental or spiritual vision of ordinary men; (4) with sight so perfect as to see and understand the finest subtleties and mysteries; (5) so kind and gracious as to bestow gifts of the most refined kind; extraordinarily gracious and understanding. The active meaning (4) is expressed in 22:63: "Allah is He who understands the finest mysteries, and is well-acquainted with them." (A. Yusuf Ali, pp. 868, 320)

"He alone is Subtle Beyond Comprehension, All-Aware": the term *latīf* denotes something that is extremely subtle in quality, and therefore intangible and unfathomable. Whenever this term occurs in the Qur'ān with reference to God in conjunction with the adjective *khabīr* ("all-aware"), it is invariably used to express the idea of His inaccessibility to human perception, imagination, or comprehension, as contrasted with His Own all-awareness (see also 22:63, 31:16, 33:34, and 67:14). In the two instances where the combination of *latīf* and *khabīr* carries the definite article *al* (6:103 and 67:14), the expression *huwa'l-latīf* has the meaning of "He *alone* is unfathomable" – implying that this quality of His is unique and absolute. (Asad, p. 188)

## Respect for Other Beliefs

Do not speak ill of those whom others invoke instead of God,  
that they might not speak ill of God out of spite and ignorance:  
for, We have made their own activities  
appear alluring to each community.  
In time, to their Sustainer they must return;  
and then He will make them understand  
the truth of all that they were doing.

[6:108]

A man's actual personal religion depends upon many things: his personal psychology, the background of his life, his hidden or repressed feelings, tendencies, or history (which psychoanalysis tries to unravel), his hereditary dispositions or antipathies, and all the subtle influences of his education and his environment. The task before the man of God is (1) to use any of these which can subserve the higher ends, (2) to purify such as have been misused, (3) to introduce new ideas and modes of looking at things, and (4) to combat what is wrong and cannot be mended: all for the purpose of leading to the truth and gradually letting in spiritual light where there was darkness before. If that is not done with discretion and the skill of a spiritual teacher, there may be not only a reaction of obstinacy, but an unseemly show of a dishonor to the true God and His truth, and doubts would spread among the weaker brethren whose faith is shallow and infirm. What happens to individuals is true collectively of nations or groups of people. They think in their self-obsession that their own ideas are right. God in His infinite compassion bears with them, and asks those who have purer ideas of faith not to vilify the weaknesses of their neighbors, lest the neighbors in their turn vilify the real truth and

make matters even worse than before. In so far as there are mistakes, God will forgive and send His grace for helping ignorance and folly. In so far as there is active evil, He will deal with it in His own way. Of course the righteous man must not hide his light under a bushel, or compromise with evil, or refuse to establish right living where he has the power to do so. (A. Yusuf Ali, p. 321)

## Waste

And do not be wasteful:  
truly, He does not love those who are wasteful!

[6:141]

“Waste not, want not,” says the English proverb. Here the same wisdom is preached from a higher motive. See what magnificent means God provides in nature for the sustenance of all His creatures, because He loves them all. Enjoy them in moderation and be grateful. But commit no excess and commit no waste: the two things are the same from different angles of vision. If you do, you take away something from other creatures and God would not like your selfishness. (A. Yusuf Ali, p. 331)

## Beauty in Worship

O children of Adam!  
Indeed, We have given you garments to cover your nakedness,  
and as a thing of beauty;  
but the garment of God-consciousness is the best of all.  
This is one of God's messages—  
that human beings might take it to heart....  
Say: "My Sustainer has but urged the doing of what is right;  
and He wants you to put your whole being  
into every act of worship,  
and to call Him, sincere in your faith in Him alone.  
As it was He who brought you into being in the first instance,  
so also you will return.  
Some He will have graced with His guidance,  
whereas for some a straying from the right path  
will have become unavoidable:  
for, behold, they will have taken evil impulses  
for their masters in preference to God,  
thinking all the while that they have found the right path!

O children of Adam! Beautify yourselves for every act of worship,  
and eat and drink, but do not waste:  
for truly, He does not love the wasteful!  
Say: "Who is there to forbid the beauty  
which God has brought forth for His creatures  
and the good things from among the means of sustenance?"

[7:26, 29-32]

Spiritually, God created man “bare and alone” (6:94); the soul in its naked purity and beauty knew no shame because it knew no guilt. After it was touched by guilt and soiled by evil, its thoughts and deeds became its clothing and adornments, good or bad, honest or meretricious, according to the inner motives which gave them color. So in the case of the body: it is pure and beautiful as long as it is not defiled by misuse. Its clothing and ornaments may be good or meretricious, according to the motives in the mind and character. If good, they are the symbols of purity and beauty; but the best clothing and ornament we could have come from righteousness, which covers the nakedness of sin and adorns us with virtues.

“He wants you to put your whole being (*wajih*) into every act of worship, and to call Him, sincere in your faith in Him alone.” Our devotion should be sincere, not as in other men’s sight, but by presenting our whole selves, heart and soul, to God. Even so, it may not be enough; for the sight of our heart and soul may be faulty. We should call upon God to give us the light, by which our sincerity may commend itself to Him as true sincerity as in His sight (with faith in Him alone). When we return to Him, we shall be stripped of all pretense, even such self-deception as may satisfy us in this life.

“Some of you He will have graced with His guidance, whereas for some a straying from the right path will have become unavoidable: for, behold, they will have taken their own evil impulses for their masters in preference to God.” Guidance is for all. But in some it takes effect; in others the doors are closed against it, because they have taken evil for their friend. If they have lost their way, they have richly deserved it, for they deliberately took their choice, even though, in their self-righteousness, they may think that their sin is their virtue, and that their evil is their good.

“Beautify yourselves for every act of worship”: *zinat* is beautiful apparel, adornments or apparel for beautiful living. This is construed to

mean not only clothes that add grace to the wearer, but toilet and cleanliness, attention to hair, and other small personal details which no self-respecting man or woman ought to neglect when going solemnly even before a great human dignitary, if only out of respect for the dignity of the occasion. How much more important it is to attend to these details when we solemnly apply our minds to the Presence of God, though He is always present everywhere! But the caution against excess applies: men must not go to prayer in silks or ornaments appropriate to women. Similarly sober food, good and wholesome, is not to be divorced from offices of religion; only the caution against excess applies strictly. Asceticism often means the negation of art and beauty. It has no necessary sanctity attached to it.

“Who is there to forbid the beauty which God has brought forth for His creatures and the good things from among the means of sustenance?” The beautiful and good things of life are really meant for, and should be the privilege of, those with faith in God. If they do not always have them in this life, and if there is sometimes the semblance of others having them who do not deserve them, let us at least consider the matter in another light. Our faith in God’s wisdom is unshaken and we know that these are but fleeting and mixed types of the things in the spiritual world. Their pure counterparts in the spiritual world will be only for those who proved, in all the trials of this world, that they had faith. (A. Yusuf Ali, pp. 346-348)

“Garments...as a thing of beauty,” lit., “as plumage”—a metaphorical expression derived from the beauty of bird’s plumage.

“Put your whole being into every act of worship.” The term *wajh* (lit., “face”) occurring here is often used, in the abstract sense, to denote a person’s entire being or entire attention—as, for instance, in the phrase *aslamtu wajhī li’llāhī*, “I have surrendered my whole being to God” (3:20). The word *masjid*, which usually signifies the time or place of prostration in prayer (*sujūd*), evidently stands in this context for any act of worship. It is used as well in verse 7:31 (“Beautify yourselves for every act



of worship”). “Beautify yourselves” is lit., “take to your adornment (*zīnah*).” According to Rāghib, the proper meaning of *zīnah* is “a [beautifying] thing that does not disgrace or render unseemly...either in the present world or in that which is to come”: thus, it signifies anything of beauty in both the physical and moral connotations of the word.

By declaring all good and beautiful things of life—i.e., those which are not expressly prohibited—are lawful to the believers, the Qur’ān condemns, by implication, all forms of life-denying asceticism, world-renunciation and self-mortification. (Asad, pp. 206-207)

## The Effects of Sin

Has it, then, not become obvious  
to those who have inherited the earth  
in the wake of former generations  
that, if We so willed, We could punish them by means of their sins,  
sealing their hearts so that they cannot hear?  
Unto those communities--  
some of whose stories We relate to you--  
there had indeed come apostles of their own  
with all evidence of the truth;  
but they would not believe in anything  
to which they had once given the lie:  
thus it is that God seals the hearts of those who deny the truth.”

[7:100-101]

Here, again, we have an affirmation that what the Qur’ān describes as “God’s punishment” (as well as “God’s reward”) is, in reality, *a consequence of man’s own doings*, and not an arbitrary act of God: it is “by means of their sins” (*bi-dhunūbihim*) that God “sets a seal” upon the hearts of men. (See “Free Will” in the Book of Language.) “But they would not believe in anything to which they had once given the lie,” lit., “to which they had given the life aforesaid”; an allusion to the instinctive unwillingness of most people to give up the notions, positive or negative, to which they are accustomed.

## Stringency and Mercy

“Establish for us what is good in this world  
as well as in the life to come:  
see how we have turned to You in repentance!”  
God answered: “With My stringency I try whom I will—  
but My mercy overspreads everything,  
and so I shall confer it upon those who are conscious of Me  
and spend in charity, and who have faith in Our signs.”

[7:156]

God’s mercy is in and for all things. All nature subserves a common purpose, which is for the good of all His creatures. Our faculties and our understanding are all instances of His grace and mercy. Each unit or factor among His creatures benefits from the others and receives them as God’s mercy to itself; and in its turn, each contributes to the benefit of the others and is thus an instance of God’s mercy to them. His mercy is universal and all-pervasive; while His justice and punishment are reserved for those who swerve from His plan and go out of His Peace.

The personal grace and mercy – and their opposite – are referred to in the singular pronoun “I,” while the impersonal Law, by which God’s signs operate in His universe, is referred to in the plural pronoun of authority and dignity, “We” (“Our” signs). (A. Yusuf Ali)

## The Heedless

He whom God guides, he alone is truly guided:  
whereas those whom He lets go astray—it is they, they who are the losers!

And most certainly have We destined for **hell**  
many of the invisible beings and men  
who have hearts with which they fail to grasp the truth,  
and eyes with which they fail to see,  
and ears with which they fail to hear.

**They are like cattle—nay, they are even less conscious of the right way:**

it is they, they who are the truly heedless!  
And God's [alone] are the attributes of perfection;  
invoke Him, then, by these,  
stand aloof from all who distort the meaning of His attributes.

[7:178-180]

**Comment:** Check Yusuf Ali

“They are even less conscious of the right way” lit., “they are farther astray”—inasmuch as animals follow only their instincts and natural needs and are not conscious of the possibility or necessity of a moral choice. [The last verse] connects with the mention of “the heedless ones” who do not use their faculty of discernment in the way intended for it by God, and remain heedless of Him who comprises within Himself all the attributes of perfection and represents, therefore, the Ultimate Reality. As regards the expression *al-asmā’ al-ḥusnā* (lit., “the most perfect [or most goodly] names”), which occurs in the Qurʾān four times—i.e., in the above verse as well as in 17:110, 20:8, and 59:24—it is to be borne in mind that the term *ism* is, primarily, a word applied to denote the

substance or the intrinsic attributes of an object under consideration, while the term *al-ḥusnā* is the plural form of *al-aḥsan* (“that which is best” or “most goodly”). Thus the combination of *al-asmā’ al-ḥusnā* may be appropriately rendered as “the attributes of perfection”—a term reserved in the Qur’ān for God alone. (Asad, p. 231)

