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CHALLENGES IN UNDERSTANDING ISLAM: LITERALISM AND WRONG INTERPRETATION

Abstract: *Islamic Sharia was revealed with a certain purpose. It is obvious that without understanding the original purpose one will lead to negative consequences. Unfortunately, some literalist approach to religious issues, attempt to implement in life taking the Qur'an and Hadiths directly is becoming a reason of the multitude of problems. Deep understanding of the nature and content of religious provisions requires knowledge and responsibility. In this article author tries to examine core essence and development of early thoughts of maqasid al-sharia.*

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Introduction

Troubling events taking place in a number of Muslim countries in recent years are leading to irreparable consequences. The situation in countries such as Libya, Iraq, and Syria, as well as the instability ongoing for several decades in our region on the example of Afghanistan leaves people in disarray. Consequently, no progress can be observed in any area in belligerent countries, as they cannot participate fully in the political processes taking place in the world, in many cases, they cannot decide in their own favor, and become a puppet in political games. Unfortunately, the evil forces staging these tragic events employ the religious factor very skillfully.

In fact, Islam is directed at ensuring a humane, progressive, highly just and moral life. After all, peace is both Islam's literal and terminological meaning and goal. Peace is the main factor of the growth index of the human progress. Every action carried out in the name of Islam should be aimed at maintaining peace or preserving it. Scholars from the Muslim East are giving their refutations to the literalist ideas in the name of Islam based on blind fanaticism. Many prominent scholars of the Muslim world have noted with sadness from a number of tribunes of international scientific conferences that such fanaticism is leading to instability, conflict, war and

destruction, discord and most heart-rending to bloodshed.

Islamic Sharia was revealed with a certain purpose. It is obvious that without understanding the original purpose one will lead to negative consequences. Companions of the Prophet (peace be upon him) have also sometimes avoided literal understanding of the narrated words on worldly matters. They would even ask the Prophet "Is this revealed from Allah or is it your own opinion?", and if he answered "my opinion", the companions would utter their own views. If the Prophet (pbuh) agreed with their views, he would accept them and change his own opinion. For example, when the Companion named Hubab ibn al-Munzir proposed to change the residence of the troops to a strategically better place inconvenient for the enemies during the battle of Badr, the Prophet (pbuh) accepted his opinion and changed the residence of the troops [1, p.50]. There were many such situations at the times of the Prophet (pbuh). The Prophet (pbuh) himself had prevented from understanding some religious issues in the literal sense. For example, when the verse 187 of the Surah al-Baqara:

"...And eat and drink until the white thread (of dawn) becomes distinct to you from the black thread (of night). Then complete the fast until the

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sunset...”¹ was revealed, some Sahabas did as it was evident in the verse, the Prophet (pbuh) said: “If you think it is thread, you are mistaken!”, then he added “Absolutely not, it is the darkness of a night and the light of the day” [2, p.335-336].

Among the Rashidun Caliphs, especially, Umar (r.a.) had realized a lot of deeds taking into account the environment of his time. For instance, in the time of Umar, the Companions requested to divide the territories in newly occupied Egypt and Iraq among the warriors as booty. Their demands were clearly supported with the verses of the Holy Quran [3, p. 110]. But Umar (r.a.) in pursuit of general welfare rejected the distribution of towns and villages among the warriors, and referred to other verse of the Qur’an: **“And what Allah restored to His Messenger from the people of the towns, it is for Allah and for the Messenger and for (his) near relatives and orphans and (stranded) traveler – so that it will not be a perpetual distribution among the rich from among you. And whatever the Messenger has given you – take, and what he has forbidden you – refrain from. And fear Allah, indeed, Allah is severe in penalty”** (Hashr, 7).

In another example, in the year of the famine in Madina, Umar (r.a.) has abolished the fixed penalty of cutting hand against those who steal [4, p. 190]. During the lack of opportunities for primary needs of the people, such as feeding oneself, the principle of justice in Islamic law was of greater significance than application of the penalty.

Umar (r.a.), like other Rashidun Caliphs used to make decisions after having understood the core essence of religious guidelines. For example, despite clear instructions from the Prophet (pbuh) of not including horses into the obligatory alms-giving (*zakat*) on the livestock, Umar (r.a.) collected taxes on horses as well. The fact is that during the governing period of Umar (r.a.) the prices for horses got even higher than that of camels for which alms-giving was mandatory [5, p.291]. In other words, Umar (r.a.) paid attention to the aim and meaning of the alms-giving. In spite of the fact that certain types of property mandatory to alms-giving are listed in the hadiths of the Prophet (pbuh), alms-giving above all embodies helping the destitute from a certain amount of wealth. All other mazhabs of Sunni Islam except for Hanafi school did not support this idea at first [6, p.12]. This condition does not give attention to the goal, but to the form available in the classic schools of Islamic law.

However, Umar (r.a.) has not supported the idea of giving attention only to the essence of provisions in Islamic law at all times. The hadith narrated from Imam al-Bukhari said the following: “Umar (r.a.) was

asked: Why are we supposed to circumambulate Kaaba with open shoulders despite Islam having been introduced in Makkah?” The main reason for the question was that before the conquest of Makka in the 7th century AH as Muslims were heading for umrah pilgrimage a rumor had spread among the people of Makka that the Prophet (pbuh) and His Companions lost their health in Madina fever. In order to show that these are unjustified words the Prophet (pbuh) ordered his Companions to circumambulate the Kaaba with rapid steps to manifest to the apostates of Makka that their bodies are full of strength and health by opening their shoulders. But Umar (r.a.) during his own governing did not pay attention to the aim of circumambulating the Kaaba in such form and said: “We will not cancel any of the habits common during the times of the Prophet (pbuh)” [6, p.13]. With this answer Umar had also confirmed the existence of unchanging principles of applying Sharia goals in practice. Later on, this principle was adopted by all law schools. One of the biggest scholars who studied Sharia goals in detail, Imam Shatibi, had noted in this regard: “It is required to consider worship related provisions literally, but on the guidelines related to secular issues the original objective is to be considered. But despite this, the scholars of Islamic law assert that objective based approach should not be contrary to the provisions of the sources” [7, p.6].

Dr. Muhammad Hussein Haykal writes in his famous book, “Umar al-Farooq”: “Owing to Umar having great faith and being consistent in following the way of the Prophet, he sometimes even if it was in apparent opposition with sources, would bravely rely on *ijtihad*². If there was no place remaining in the life of the society to implement the provisions, he would not implement it. When there was necessity in the life of society to interpret³ the sources he would interpret it. He had always had great interest to keep the judgements in harmony with the spirit of Islam and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and in balance with the life of society” [8, p.37].

During the reign of the third Caliph Uthman (r.a.) a large amount of work had been done relying on the reality: all Muslims united over one copy (*mushaf*) of the Qur’an, and burnt others to prevent conflicts; due to large numbers of people at mosques the second call for prayer was introduced in Friday prayer services; and in some years collecting of zakat was limited only to animals and crop, whereas zakat on commercial and financial operations was handed over to alms-givers themselves, that is they calculated the dues themselves and paid to the entitled. The reason was that the conquests were expanding and there was

¹ This article cites verses of the Qur’an in English as per

www.quran.com.

² A method used in qiyas (*analogy*) and ijma (*consensus of scholars*). Using of all capacity by a jurist to derive Sharia

judgments through qiyas from the main sources of Islamic law – the Qur’an and Sunnah.

³ Explaining a word different from its superficial meaning, illustrating internal meaning of the word and interpreting it.

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prosperity, thus there was no need for excess goods [9, p.48].

Caliph Ali (r.a.) introduced the requirement of paying *diyya*⁴ from bayt ul-mal (*budget*) to a criminal in case he died during the implementation of *hadd* or *ta'zir* punishments. This practice was not observed in the times of the Messenger of Allah (pbuh).

As we have seen, Rashidun Caliphs had also had the freedom of *ijtihad* without prejudice to the basic principles of the Islamic religion. They saw the core essence of Islam. Doing so they showed on their own examples that it is necessary to lead a life in a manner not contradicting with core essence of Islam taking into consideration the requirements of time and developing through moving forward based not on the return of the descendants to previous times in all matters, but based on the previous conclusions.

In fact, every innovation in our daily life in the spirit of Islam and if it is in harmony with the life of society by maintaining the balance with the teachings of the Prophet (pbuh), then it serves the real purpose. Changes not contradicting the provisions of Islam, progress and development are not prohibited in any of the sources.

Intellectual stagnation is a condition which had worried scholars of all times. Categories of people who dismiss the reality, support the literalist approach in every issue had been criticized in the book of Abu Muqatil al-Samarqandi named "*Al-A'lim wal-Muta'alim*" exemplified on the question and answer between Imam Abu Hanifa and his student. For instance, the student of Imam Abu Hanifa asked:

- I interact with people of different levels. God willing, I will start with those who in my opinion of the lowest level. Tell me the arguments to be used for them. I have encountered those who said "*Do not involve in this deed. For even Companions did not involve in any of these deeds. Do what they did*". These people can be likened to those standing in the torrid river and drowning because of not knowing its shallow places, and as if saying to stay where they are, and not look for shallow places.

Abu Hanifa:

- I noticed that you saw some of their flaws and seeking arguments against them. If they say to you "*isn't it sufficient for you, what was sufficient for Companions*", then answer them by saying "*If I were in place of the Companions, what was sufficient for them would be sufficient for me, but the Person who was with them, is not with me*". We encountered those who denigrate us and desire to shed our blood. Which one of us is guilty? It is impossible that we are not aware of this. We need to protect ourselves and our honor. Companions of the Prophet (pbuh) were like people who did not need weapons owing to the lack of those who struggled against them. But we encountered

those who denigrate us and find it right to shed our blood" [10, p.9]. Abu Hanifa criticized those who have superficial knowledge and do not comprehend the core essence, and pointed out that it is necessary to fight them with enlightenment and knowledge.

Scholars who emerged from our country had also faced similar problems in their own environments, understood the danger of literalist reading of religious guidelines and drew attention to the importance of the core essence. In particular, great attention given to the goals of the Islamic law – *maqasid ash-shari'a* – began to be reflected in the works of scholars belonging to 9-10th centuries AD. The first books written in this regard belong to the intellectuals of our country Al-Hakim al-Termidhi (d.932), Abu Mansur al-Maturidi (d.944), Al-Hakim al-Samarqandi (d.954) and Al-Qaffal al-Shashi (d.975).

Al-Hakim al-Termidhi's "*Kitab al-Salat va Maqasidiha*" elucidated the wisdoms of the pillars of prayer. For example, the purpose of praising Allah in the prayer is confirming the agreement of a person according to Al-Hakim. His book "*Kitab al-Hajj va Asrarihi*" is also a valuable book in this regard.

Abu Mansur al-Maturidi's "*Ma'akhith al-Sharai*" was also dedicated to the main purposes of Islamic Law. Al-Maturidi had also criticized some people who only pay attention to the literal reading without any consideration of the Qur'an's core significance. For instance, Abu Bakr al-Kasani (d. 1191) in the Chapter of Prayer (*Kitab al-Salat*) of his work "*Bada'i as-Sana'i*" quotes the verses 17 and 18 from the Qur'an's chapter "*The Romans*": "**So exalted is Allah when you reach the evening and when you reach the morning. And to Him is (due all) praise throughout the heavens and the earth. And (exalted is He) at night and when you are at noon**" and then goes on to narrate from Imam al-Maturidi: "*They (companions) have mentioned these verses as evidence for praying five times a day, if they were like some of the modern scholars, they would not understand anything else from this verse, but glorifying Allah*" [11, p.90]. So, Imam al-Maturidi also showed his disagreement with some radical literalist scholars who do not comprehend the core essence of the issues interpreting of the verses of the Qur'an on the basis of intellect and transmission (*naql*), and because Imam al-Maturidi worked out his system of theology based on these two foundations his views have not lost their power even today.

Al-Hakim al-Samarqandi expounded on deriving judgments viewing the literal verses of the Qur'an in his "*Kitab as-Sawad al-A'zam*" and said: "*It is not possible to give commentary by literal reading of everything in the Qur'an, because in many places of the Qur'an the literal meaning of the verses denotes different things compared to its concealed*

⁴ Blood money.

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meaning. *Fear Allah. Do not comment on the Qur'an based only on your own opinion*" [12, p. 133-194].

Al-Qaffal al-Shashi's "*Mahasin ash-Sharia*" is written in *fiqh* order, in which the significance and meaning of every *fiqh* instruction is expounded and illuminated. This book is also among the first jurisprudence works written on targeted approach. The prologue of the book reads:

"...I decided to write this book to manifest the beauty of the revealed law, its noble and spiritual meaning, and that it corresponds to healthy intellect. I have delivered my own opinions in form of answers to the questions of people who inquire about the wisdom of and reason for the judgements. Such questions may only be given by two kinds of people. The first group believes that the creation of the world belongs to the sole Creator and the truth of the prophet hood, they also believe that the wisdom of the judgement belongs to the Just and Omnipotent Allah, and He instruct only the good to his progenies.... The

second group of people gives such questions in attempt to prove the falsehood of the prophecy and to prove the lack of connection to the sole Creator or while recognizing the sole Creator, deny prophethood. This group of people, through proving the falsehood of the judgement lean on the logic consisting of producing belief in non-existence of the Creature that revealed the judgement..." [13, p.17].

Unfortunately, some literalist approach to religious issues, attempt to implement in life taking the Qur'an and Hadiths directly is becoming a reason of the multitude of problems. Deep understanding of the nature and content of religious provisions requires knowledge and responsibility. Those who do not possess over sufficient religious knowledge and expertise should not rush in this regard, they should inquire with recognized scholars, and avoid suspicious fatwas. After all, a person who follows ignorance, does wrong to himself and others.

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