

# Expanding our horizons for new discourses about 'Islām and Islamic living

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This article echoes the calls for systemically revisiting the theo-ontology and epistemology from which discourses on 'Islām and Islamic living are construed. It highlights some Qur'ānic ideas that could contribute to founding this endeavour and approaches revelation from the Qur'ānic semiotics of divine revelation. Despite referring to the Qur'ānic Text, this contribution is not exegetical.

**Contribution:** This article represents a reflection on Islamic fundamental theology. Although the revelation of the Qur'ān has ended, the process of reading, interpreting, and living continues.

**Keywords:** Anthropocene; European Islam; interreligious dialogue; Islamic reform; Prophet Muḥammad; Qur'ānic semiotic theo-ontology; spiritual ecosystems.

Communication is always understood in the context and experience of the receiver – no matter what was intended. (E. de Bono 1990, *Simplicity*)

## Introduction

As we hear of the advances in bioengineering, neurotechnologies, and artificial intelligence (AI) (Farahany 2023), we ought to reflect on our methodologies for producing religious discourses. We urgently need balanced, collaborative, and dynamic spiritual ecosystems (Scatolini 2022) with greater eco-social justice, and this requires new theo-ontologies, epistemologies, and semantics.

## Social and scientific value

Sunni and Ibādī Muslims have traditionally recognised two *inspired* sources of religious reflection: the Qur'ānic Text and Prophet Muḥammad's precedent. Based on both, scholars have filled the gaps (Brown 2014), mostly by relying on *qiyās* [analogical reasoning] and '*ijmā'*' [consensus]. The Shia have relied also on the traditions of their recognised *imāms* [leaders]. As Abou El Fadl (2014) pointed out:

Although Islamic law grew out of the normative teachings of the Prophet Muhammad and his disciples, the first generations of Muslim jurists borrowed and integrated legal practices from several sources including Persia, Mesopotamia, Egypt and other Roman provinces, Yemen and Arabia, and Jewish law. (p. XXXIII)

Here, I shall plead for revisiting the *sources* of Islamic discourses, mostly because the Qur'ānic Text presents a much broader theo-ontology and because the traditional role assigned to the Prophet fails to reckon with the fact that he died and has ceased personally to interact with his community.

This contribution is a reflection in the area of Islamic fundamental theology based on the use of a few scriptural fragments culled wholly or almost wholly, literally from Qarai (2006) and insights from scholars whose work offers constructive insights towards the reconstruction of Islamic discourses.

## Conceptual framework

In the Qur'ānic Text, we can find verses to justify different construals of 'Islām (الإسلام), and this applies to the *Ḥadīth* literature, too. When the available knowledge leads to radical changes in self-perception and agency, societies need to revisit their belief systems and the epistemologies behind them. For that, they can seek interpretive clues both inside and outside the same authoritative corpora that need revisiting.

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According to Hassan Hanafi (2000), societies can be traditional, non-traditional, or a combination of both (e.g., Japan and India). The hallmark of non-traditional societies is that they have already revisited tradition. In them, 'there are substitute sources of knowledge and substitute norms of activity such as Reason and Nature. In this regard, historical criticism has become a hallmark activity' (Hanafi 2000:120). Western societies are generally of this kind. Besides, as Ali Engineer remarked, '[i]n a dynamic society, there are much greater possibilities of rethinking the thought system. In a stagnant or a closed society such possibilities are smothered' (Ali Engineer 1999b:n.p.). Hanafi's (2000) recommendation was that traditional societies should use tradition to reconstruct their historical consciousness (Hanafi 2000:122).

At the beginning of the Muḥammadan Islamic community, the Qur'ānic verses deconstructed Muḥammad's tribal society as well as the polytheistic and Judeo-Christian beliefs by redefining societal relationships, the known religious systems, and nature mythically, poetically, and homiletically. This is reflected in the fact that Muslims opted to compile the Qur'ānic verses into a text that resembles more a collection of juxtaposed poetic and rhetorical material rather than Gospel-like narratives made up of the Prophet's revealed utterances interconnected by means of geo-historical comments or pointers. The process resulted in four different kinds of text, that is, the *Muṣḥaf al-Qur'ān* [the Qur'ānic Code] and three types of literature: the *Ḥadīth* (narrations about the Prophet's words and conduct), the *Sīrat-an-Nabī* (the Prophet's biography), and the *'Asbāb an-nuzūl* (the reasons for the descent of the Revealed Verses).

In the following centuries, the *Ḥadīth*, *Sīra*, and jurisprudential literature filled the gap left by the Prophet's death. However, like the Qur'ān, the *Ḥadīth* literature lacked contextualisation, even despite mentioning the *'isnād* (chain of transmitters), and Muslims had to fill the gaps. Gradually, schools of thought (*madāhib*) emerged. Their scholars did magnificent work and created a reflective tradition that was and felt both universal and legitimately diverse (Ahmed 2016; Brown 2014).

In the 19th and 20th centuries, critical reflection on Islam among Muslims rekindled (e.g., Refaa al-Tahtawi [1801–1873], Ahmad Khan [1817–1898], Jamal al-Din al-Afghani [1838–1897], Muhammad Abduh [1848–1905], and Muhammad Iqbal [1877–1938]), often triggered by European scientific and societal developments. For example, in 1955, Muhammad Iqbal (2006) wrote:

Since the Middle Ages, when the schools of Muslim theology were completed, infinite advance has taken place in the domain of human thought and experience. [...] It seems as if the intellect of man is outgrowing its own most fundamental categories [...]. Surely, it is high time to look to the essentials of Islam. (p. 8)

Since then, a number of male and female Muslim thinkers have continued to work on critical Islamic reform (e.g., Muhammed Arkoun [1928–2010], Hassan Hanafi [1935–2021], Muhammad Shahrour [1938–2019], Asghar Ali Engineer

[1939–2013], Nasr Abū Zayd [1943–2010], Riffat Hassan [1943–], Abdullah An-Naim [1946–], Amina Wadood [1952–], Tariq Ramadan [1962–], Khaled Abou el Fadl [1963–], and Abdennur Prado [1967–]) (cf. Abū Zayd [2004], [2006]; Ramadan [2001], [2010 [1999]]; Abou El Fadl [2001], [2014]).

Arkoun (2003) believed that '[t]o control the epistemological validity of any discourse, it is necessary to discover and analyse the implicit postulates' (Arkoun 2003:20). For him, foundational questions had not been asked (the *unthinkable* and the *unthought*, e.g., regarding epistemology and the Qur'ān as a *closed corpus*) and '[t]radition, orthodoxy, myth, authority, and historicity... [did] not yet have relevant conceptualizations in Arabic' (Arkoun 2003). This lack of fundamental critique of the tradition led to situations in which even people who embraced the scientific method for all non-religious disciplines failed to draw long overdue conclusions for the religious discourse. For Ali Engineer (1999a), this stagnation had to do with religion's having become:

[A]n instrument and not a goal, [...] used and misused [which] led many rationalists to believe that religion is not only unnecessary for human beings but also a great block in the way to progress. (n.p.)

Religion's loss of vitality was not because of its nature, but to those 'who controlled religious establishment [and] opposed any change as change threatened their interests' (Ali Engineer 1999a:n.p.).

Islamic revivalism sought refuge in the *sharī'a* as a means to hold the community together (Abū Zayd 2006), and the juridical aspect of the Islamic experience took centre stage. In some communities, Sufi insights complemented this intellectual thrust (e.g., India, Pakistan, Turkey, and Malaysia). At present, Europe, a continent with considerable freedom of expression and from persecution, constitutes a likely soil for the renewal of the Islamic discourse. To this end, we Muslims need a new intellectual framework and language that suit this new historical phase, especially '[a]t a time when the West has begun to "play" with its own religious symbols' and 'it appears to have lost the ability to understand the cultural importance of religion in other societies' (Hafez 2000:11).

### Traditional belief system

According to Hanafi (2000), the 'examination of the Traditional belief system begins with the analysis of the conceptual framework on which the belief-system is built' (Hanafi 2000:122). This is necessary because the repackaging of devotional literature will not suffice, no matter how human rights-compliant it may sound. We cannot deny that women have more rights in the secular West than they did in the Prophet's own community, nor that some Muslim-majority communities had slaves until relatively recently, and this was all religiously permitted. Therefore, the examination that I advocate cannot be merely exegetical. It needs to start with the epistemology from which religious discourses stem. Furthermore, it cannot limit itself to the text, not even to

going behind the texts. It must also look into the mindsets and presuppositions with which the texts were articulated and are read.

### Balance between the *shahāda*'s components

Probably the most fundamental challenge facing the traditional Islamic discourse regards the relationship between the two components of the profession of faith (*shahāda*): *there is no deity but God and Muḥammad is God's messenger*. The dynamic between these two halves has occasionally been conceptualized as a Truth-Law (*ḥaqīqa-ṣarī'a*) binary relationship: the eternal, absolute God element is the Truth and the historical, prophetic element is the Law. Whoever denies the Truth is an infidel, and whoever rejects the Law is a heretic (Al-Hujwiri 1959:383–384; Schimmel 2011 [1975]:99).

*There is no deity but God*: This first part is a deconstructive principle. It radically relativises any entity that is not God. As soon as we predicate divine attributes on something other than Allāh, we stop being *Islamic* believers.

*Muḥammad is God's messenger*: This second part is a contextualising principle. It confesses that God has actively sought to communicate with human beings. Through Prophet Muḥammad, God's divine message became an Arabic oral text addressed primarily to a geo-historical, Arabic-speaking audience.

If we lay more emphasis on the relativising principle of God's complete otherness, the prophetic testimony will continue to occupy a key place in our discourses, but it could not be absolute. Muḥammad's words about a godly life could never be *the last word* because God, unlike the Prophet, is not circumscribed by any given past or present moment. However, if we stress that we can *only* know of God what the Prophet taught us, our religious reflection would then forever unfold within the known parameters of the prophetic testimony. In this case, the Prophet would not have given us only the language and grammar for our God-talk but also its boundaries.

### Balance between Prophet Muḥammad's modes of existence

Hence, the second greatest challenge for our Islamic discourses concerns our understanding of Prophet Muḥammad's role in them. Qur'ānic verses such as the following two are then of paramount importance:

A faithful man or woman may not, **when Allāh and His Apostle have decided on a matter**, have any option in their matter, and whoever disobeys Allāh and His Apostle has certainly strayed into manifest error. (Q. 33:36)

Indeed those who are faithless and bar from the way of Allāh and defy the Apostle after guidance has become clear to them, will not hurt Allāh in the least, and He shall make their work fail. O you who have faith! **Obey Allāh and obey the Apostle**, and do not render your works void. Indeed those who are faithless and

bar from the way of Allāh and then die faithless, Allāh will never forgive them. (Q. 47:32–34)

## My proposal

I shall focus on a few concepts that could help us to reappraise the relevancy and potential of the Islamic tradition to contribute to the construction of meaningful, balanced, and fairer spiritual ecosystems as we enter the Anthropocene.

### The Qur'ānic Text within the Semiotics of divine revelation

There is a popular saying attributed to Prophet Muḥammad whose gist goes as follows: 'I [God] was a Hidden Treasure and I wanted to be known, so I created creatures in order to be known by them'. It crystallises the idea that existence is a gift whose aim is the knowledge of God and self-knowledge through contemplation and reflection. The created realm is *'āyātu-llāh*, God's signs. This deconstructs the belief that the *textual* witness is the *only* sign of God.

For the Qur'ān, our intellectual vocation is to read God's manifold signs all around and inside us. The universe is an encoded and/or symbolic realm that Allāh has been forever writing and/or creating. Entities, forces, and events are neither immanent nor opaque. They transcend themselves and are pregnant with messages for those who can read them. This semiotic theo-ontology essentially bespeaks transcendence and rationality. God's most magnificent book is not the Qur'ānic Text but creation, within which the Qur'ānic utterances emerged in Arabic. The created order is, to the rational self, a myriad of hermeneutic paths leading to the One. Let me exemplify this with a few Qur'ānic passages:

#### The universe

And it is He who gives life and brings death and due to Him is the alternation of day and night. Do you not apply reason? (Q. 23:80)

And of His Signs is that He shows you the lightning, arousing fear and of hope, and He sends down water from the sky, and with it revives the earth after it is dead. There are indeed signs in that for people who apply reason. (Q. 30:24)

#### The human self

It is He who created you from dust, then from a drop of [seminal] fluid, then from a clinging mass, then He brings you forth as infants, then [He nourishes you] so you may come of age – though there are some who die earlier – and that you may complete a specified term, and so that you may apply reason. (Q. 40:67)

#### Lived experience

Does it not dawn upon them how many of the generations We have destroyed before them amid [the ruins] whose dwellings they walk? There are indeed signs in this for those who have reason. (Q. 20:128)

### Textual Revelations

Allāh – there is no god except Him – is Living One, the All-sustainer. He has sent down to *you* the Book with the truth, confirming what was [revealed] before it, and He sent down the Torah and the Evangel before as guidance for mankind and He has sent down the Criterion [...]. (Q. 3:2–4)

Do not dispute with the people of the Book except in a manner which is best, barring such of them as are wrongdoers, and say, 'We believe in that which has been sent down to us and has been sent down to you; our God and your God is One [and the same], and to Him do we submit'. (Q. 29:46)

The Qur'ānic Text is an appeal to read the signs and reflect on them. Notwithstanding this, the Qur'ān reveals and hides. Complete clarity is denied not only to unbelievers but also to believers. All alike must accept that God's Book is both open and closed, transparent and opaque. 'It is He Who has sent down to *you* the Book. Parts of it are definitive verses, which are the mother of the Book, while others are metaphorical ...' (Q. 3:7).

We Muslims cannot exclusively read the Qur'ānic Canon (*Muṣḥaf al-Qur'ān*) because this very text invites us to read everything, including ourselves. Consequently, we need to develop ways to base our Islamic discourses not only on the **Qur'ānic Text** but also on the collective **human experience**, the personal and collective contemplation and study of **nature**, and the methodical research and critical reflection on **history** (Iqbal 2006:148). Ibn Ṭufayl, from Al Andalus, already hinted at this idea in his book titled *Ḥayy bin Yaqzān* [The Living Son of the Wakeful].

A prophetic tradition cited by al-Qortobi depicts the whole of creation as the unfolding of God's semiotic activity (Abu Mubarak 2005):

The first that God created was the pen, and He said: "Write!" And it wrote all that will be up to the Day of Judgement. And this is next to Him in the Remembrance above His throne. (p. 239)

From this perspective, Mohammad Zia Ullah (1984:55) could exclaim: 'The exegesis of the Nourisher of the World is evolution. Would that Muslims learned this meaning'.

In this process of signification that the Qur'ānic Text presents as God-willed and revelatory, the 'textualized' signs (Scriptures) play a primary interpretive role because, as texts, they emerge at the semiotic and semantic level. They lend us a heuristic perspective from which we now not only *may* see the cosmos as God's Hypertext but *must* also do so. We are not invited to enter the Qur'ānic verses and become incarcerated in them but to consider them a gate onto God's Cosmic Book. The Qur'ānic Text is not the peak but the foot

of the mountain that we are invited to climb and our discourses about *'Islām* and Islamic living should reflect this.

Besides, to speak of the Qur'ānic Text as a 'book' can be misleading (Madigan 2001) because it conceals the historical fact that the Revealed Verses did not descend to Prophet Muḥammad in the form of a written codex, but as living, oral discourse. The Qur'ānic Text and the *Ḥadīth* and *asbāb al-nuzūl* literature have always implicitly shown that the descent of the Revealed Text was manifold: firstly into the consciousness of the Prophet (and his mental schemata, including the Arabic language), secondly into historical communicative acts between Prophet Muḥammad and his audience, and finally into the canonised Qur'ānic Codex/Corpus (*Muṣḥaf al-Qur'ān*). This process presupposed various *re-appropriations* of the Qur'ānic verses and transformations of its mode of being epistemologically and historically speaking (cf. Arkoun 1994:38).

Ibn Rushd (Averroes) understood God's semiotic dispensation and could thus state that philosophy was the study of existing beings and the reflection on them as indications of the Artisan. For a believer, philosophy is *sign decoding and/or reading*. To those who rejected philosophy as a heretical innovation because the first Muslims had never philosophised, Ibn Rushd replied that the companions and followers of the Prophet had also never studied Islamic jurisprudence. If all is but a sign from God, then there can be no opposition between God's textual and non-textual signs, because, as Ibn Rushd stated, *truth does not oppose the truth*. In fact, our knowledge of God and God's Message comes second to that of the created universe because as 'an object of knowledge, the world precedes God' (Hanafi 2000:131). Moreover, the agency of our consciousness is always necessary, regardless of whether we are observing linguistic or cosmic signs. Revelation can only happen *for us* in the symbolic realm. We exist in a semiotic and semantic world.

Although all of God's signs can mediate religious knowledge, the linguistic ones (e.g. the Qur'ānic Text) have special advantages and disadvantages. As Hanafi indicated, a 'text is an argument of authority, not an argument of reason' (2000:130). The Text does the decoding of God's signs for us. The Big Bang affords us religious knowledge less explicitly than a Qur'ānic passage. The universe gives us affordances for religious knowledge, and our minds do the unpacking.

For Muslims, the starting point shall always be the critical exegetical study of the Qur'ān and the *Ḥadīth* and *Sīra* literature, from which we have inherited the native vocabulary and grammar for our religious discourses. Still, we cannot stop there. We must also base our reflection on data from the cosmological and life sciences, the human and social sciences, and spirituality. To reduce our religious discussions to the study of religious *texts* and the accepted testimonies of our forerunners would not do justice to the Qur'ānic semiotic theo-ontology.

## The *tawhīd* as the criterion for 'Islām and Islamic living

If all entities are signs, what do they signify? Firstly, they redefine the human subject as capable of reflection: seeing and/or reading and extracting lessons.

Secondly, the Qur'ānic Text models the reading of the universe as harmonious (self-regulating) but not self-referential. The cosmic signs should arouse awe and demystify and/or demythologise creation. All entities, forces, and events were re-read as referring to something other than themselves. The signs whisper *Tawhīd*: 'He [Allāh] is the First and the Last, the Manifest and the Hidden, and He has knowledge of all things' (Q. 57:3).

Thirdly, the signs place us within a semiotic theo-ontology. If God is the First and the Last, he possesses himself completely, utterly, and instantaneously. There is no extension or serial development. God's being is an act of absolute duration: 'God is time (*dahr*)' (a saying attributed to Prophet Muḥammad). We exist, but God is: 'Say: "He is Allāh, the One. Allāh is the All-embracing. He neither begat, nor was begotten, nor has He any equal"' (Q. 112). Immanent beings are essentially transcendent:

In the words of Iqbal (2006):

The creative energy of the Ultimate Ego, in whom deed and thought are identical, functions as ego-unities. The world, in all its details, from the mechanical movement of what we call the atom of matter to the free movement of thought in the human ego, is the self-revelation of the 'Great I am'. (p. 71)

Fourthly, the signs immerse the individual within the revelatory élan. The universe understands itself in and through its conscious members. I myself am God's most immediate message to me. To ignore, neglect, or contradict my calling is comparable to ignoring, neglecting, and contradicting the Torah, the Gospels, or the Qur'ānic verses as signifiers.

Fifthly, reflecting on the cosmic signs highlights that self-knowledge is the result of an *interactive* enterprise that is complete only when it has passed from individualism to wholesome mutual affirmation and from individual thought to collective reflective action. It is a personal and collective operative mindset fuelled by the desire to surrender to reality. 'Islām is a dispensation, not an organised religion, let alone a juridical system.

Sixthly, we could say that although our forerunners thought that the signs were propositions, we are gradually realising that God has provided us with an alphabet and humans can rearrange those letters and re-write parts of the world. In the Anthropocene, it will become clearer than ever that thinking beings like us (and AI) can re-write biology and physical and cultural ecosystems.

Seventhly, the signs suggest that the *tawhīd* is the determining criterion for ever-new Islamic discourses. All the rest is relative, including prophets and Holy Scriptures. Of course,

*relative* does not mean *irrelevant*. The Qur'ānic event remains foundational for Muslims.

Eighthly, having realised that reality is evolutionary and true spirituality is revolutionary, the Qur'ānic Text articulates for us some general principles and values and some models of how God applied them in Prophet Muḥammad's time. As we awake to this new phase of our vocation as co-writers (created co-agents) with God, we Muslims must still commit to the same principles and values and learn from – not copy and paste – the historical models in the Qur'ān. Our study of our own circumstances should reveal to us that *the Qur'ānic verses provide an ethical minimum, not the limit*.

Ramadan (2001) stated that:

[T]he Qur'ānic text is, before anything else, a reminder to mankind so that they revert back to original faith in God and so that they assume an acceptable moral behaviour. (p. 12)

The idea of *original faith* is counterintuitive. The Qur'ānic Text presents all the prophets that it mentions as preaching the same message (God is god, and we are not). However, we know that the prophets preached about God's dispensation *in their own languages and in keeping with their own socio-cultural and geo-political contexts*. To see this or that dispensation as *singularly unique* freezes the revelation and/or prophetic flow. For example, the Jews excluded the pagans; Christians cancelled out the Jews, and Muḥammadan Muslims found their own reasons to write off all of the aforementioned. Besides, if *original* refers to a first moment, the historical data might suggest that the first humans may have been animists rather than monotheists.

If we wish to speak of an *original faith*, there is one way in which the term could be helpful. If it is used to highlight the first component of the *shahāda* as the generalisable cornerstone, whereas the second is partly relative to time and space (i.e., language, politics, culture, etc.).

Finally, our study of the signs suggests that the core of the *original* Islamic faith is *tawhīdic* for being ontological: the simultaneous realisation of or awakening to our being creatures whose ultimate explanation refers to a creative process and a Creative Force, not our initial agency. On the other hand, the prophetic dimension is essentially historical for being epistemological: some humans acted as prisms through which knowledge and wisdom reached us from beyond, mostly through language and exemplary behaviour. Therefore, interreligious dialogue becomes imperative: it is the shared recognition not only of the core of monotheism (*tawhīd*) but also of God's *modus operandi* (*sunnat Allāh*).

### Prophet Muḥammad within God's dispensation: past, present, and future

What are we to do with the prophetic testimony once prophecy is not absolute, because only God is, and other sources of religious discourses are accepted?

Firstly, we are to remember that the Qur'ānic verses did not break into history as a book, but as a series of *communicative events*. The revelation was encapsulated in a particular language, culture, and social contract. 'We did not send any apostle except with the language of his people, so that he might make [Our Messages] clear to them...' (Q. 14:4). The *Sīrat-un-Nabī* and the 'Asbāb an-nuzūl literature give many examples that Qur'ānic verses such as Q. 33:36 and Q. 47:32–34 were revealed in concrete dialogical contexts (Abū Zayd 2004). It would be unwarranted to claim that they had either the *Ḥadīth* literature or us in mind.

Secondly, we shall realise that the established Islamic discourses have paid only lip service to the prophetic:

He has sent down to you the Book with the truth, confirming what was [revealed] before it, and He sent down the Torah and the Evangel. (Q. 3:3; cf. Q. 42:13)

Say: 'We have faith in Allāh, and in what has been sent down to us, and what was sent down to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and that which Moses and Jesus were given, and the prophets, from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and to Him do we submit'. (Q. 3:84)

The Islamic theological reflection should not be carried out in isolation. Let us not separate what God has viewed as one process. Although Hūd (Q. 7:65ff.; 11:50ff.), Šālih (Q. 7:73ff.; 11:61ff.), and Shu'ayb (Q. 7:85ff.; 11:84ff.) preceded Muḥammad as prophets to the Arabs, he was the first Messenger to convey God's Textual Message to them *through an Arabic recitation (Qur'ān)*: 'Indeed, We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur'ān so that you may apply reason' (Q. 12:2).

Another unique attribute of Muḥammad, according to the Qur'ānic Text, is that he was the seal of the Prophets: 'Muḥammad is not the father of any man among you, but he is the Apostle of Allāh, and the Seal of the Prophets' (Q. 33:40). This attribute works in two directions. In light of the past, it means that Muḥammad's mission and message belonged within a prophetic chain. By confessing that he was *the seal* of the Prophets, all the previous prophets were implicitly recognised. In light of the future, it means the end of the descent of the Revealed Recitation to Prophet Muḥammad as the end of prophecy itself. The living prophetic voice fell silent.

Iqbal (2006) and Charfi (2004:95–105) drew attention to the hermeneutic consequences of the end of prophecy, and Hanafi (2000) stated that prophets were helpful agents, but not forever necessary:

Necessary prophecy [...] would also impose a permanent tutorship on man which would also contradict his freedom, since rational belief is the basis of textual belief. [...] Man is rational before and after the appearance of prophets. [...] Once the final cause is realized prophecy disappears. (p. 151)

We are entrusted to the use of our reason because '[i]n Islam prophecy reaches its perfection in discovering the need of its abolition' (Iqbal 2006:126).

The yearly pilgrimage and rituals in and around Mecca (the *Ḥajj*) transport all Muslim pilgrims to a symbolic, quasi-mythical realm where Prophet Ibrāhīm and Prophet Muḥammad converge. Mecca is a Judeo-Muḥammadan site. Prophet Muḥammad's grave in Medina signifies that all prophets are dead. Despite all the good done by the *Ḥadīth* collections, they have contributed to perpetuating the factually wrong idea that Prophet Muḥammad is *still with us* speaking to us and making decisions *about us* - which he is not.

## Conclusion

After Prophet Muḥammad's death, Muslim leaders and scholars developed admirable *rational frameworks and principles* to interpret and apply what the Prophet's companions had heard him say or seen him do. Muslims who need complex apologies for the use of reason in religion and theology have failed to accept the death of the Prophet and to recognise the gigantic intellectual labour of past scholars.

What exists is a tradition made up of a generally recognisable core and diverse traditions that, in most cases, recognise each other's right to differ provided they *rationaly defend* their stance. Muslims have generally considered this diversity a mercy from Allāh. The time has come for us, forever anchored on the testimony of the prophets, primarily Prophet Muḥammad, to broaden our sources for decoding the Message that Allāh has embedded in the whole universe and our existence. However (Arkoun 2003):

'[T]here is no possibility today of *rethinking* any religious tradition without making a careful distinction between the mythical dimension linked to oral cultures and the official ideological functions of the religion. (p. 21)

A sincere commitment to re-discovering the unwritten divine signs is necessary to avoid falling into the idolatrous cult of God's linguistic signs (the Qur'ānic Text or the *ḥadīth* literature). This should become 'a methodology, an epistemology, and a theory of history' (Arkoun 2003:23) comparable to the classical ones. People have never come to the faith with empty minds. Neither have they produced faith discourses that were not conditioned by their geo-cultural situation. This applies as much to Prophet Muḥammad and Imam Al-Shafī'ī as to us because '[d]iscourse as an ideological articulation of realities as they are perceived and used by different competing groups occurs *prior* to the faith' (Arkoun 2003:25).

The Qur'ānic acceptance of the existence of other prophets and their traditions (cf. Q. 11) should constitute an important hermeneutic key for the current Islamic discourse, especially in our European multi-religious context. Moreover, as Arkoun (1994) put it:

To this day, *no one* has studied revelation in its Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arab manifestations and as a function of the historical and anthropological conditions for the emergence of these three traditions. That constitutes a failure of the comparative history of religions, of social science, and of the human sciences, which have left the task of 'managing the goods of salvation' to the theologians of each community. That is to say that they have perpetuated theological discourse in its function of legitimating

the drive for power of each community. This fact condemns discourse to the confines of a cultural system that excludes all those others who have the sacrilegious pretension to draw upon the same symbolic capital. (p. 7)

The belief in *the prophets and the books* becomes even more interesting when we realise that the Qur'anic Text recognised the differences between the ministry and regulations of Moses, Jesus, and Muḥammad as *God-willed realities*. This makes it plain that the Islamic core can remain intact despite the changes in the traditions within which it subsists.

Now that bioengineering and AI have already begun to redefine us and our place and role on this planet and beyond, we must let the Qur'anic semiotic theo-ontology impact our discourses on *Islām* and Islamic living. However, reading God's macro-, micro-, and nano-signs in search of *hierophany* and *theophany* can only happen collaboratively. It requires the religious establishment to open up, listen, and relinquish part of its grip on power and authority. We could err if we revisit and broaden our discourses on *Islām* and Islamic living, but we could do too (and maybe, not less seriously so) if we faithfully and/or willfully follow formulas that were articulated based on bodies of knowledge that have been surpassed and, in some cases, proven wrong.

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