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The Quranic Scripture and Renewal of Religious Discourse

النَّصِ الْقُرْآنِي وَتَجْدِيدُ الْخِطَابِ الدِّينِيِّ

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Abstract:

This analysis of religious discourse across its historical continuum highlights both overt actions, such as articulating the hopes of the faithful and delineating faith's essence, and covert maneuvers that prioritize certain theological views, thereby infusing the discourse with an authoritative flair. The genesis of religious discourse has been marked by a tension between rigidity and certainty in theological debates, often resulting in the sidelining of opposing views. This dynamic has led to the emergence of notions like religious critique, exegesis, and modern scholastic theology (Kalam). For over two decades, thinkers from a broad spectrum of theological and ideological backgrounds have been critiquing dominant forms of religious discourse. This sustained critique has spurred calls for a re-examination of traditional religious texts and a renewal of Islamic thought and jurisprudence, challenging the long-standing religious authority that has been shrouded in a mantle of sanctity, thereby facilitating pathways for reasoned and enlightened dialogue.

Keywords: Scripture, Religious Discourse, Tradition, Interpretation, Islamic Philosophy

الملخص:

يلاحظ المتأمل للخطاب الديني عبر محطاته التاريخية المحاولات المعلن عنها كالإعلان عن تطلعات الناس، وحقيقة الدين، وغير المعلن عنها كتمير خطاب ديني لفرقة عقديّة على حساب فرقة أخرى، وهنا يأخذ الخطاب بعدا سلطويا. لهذا تنوعت خلفيات الخطاب الديني منذ نشأته بين الحزم والجزم في قضايا عقديّة لدرجة إقصاء الطرف الآخر، فظهرت مصطلحات تركت بصماتها ولا زالت، وستبقى لارتباطها بالغاية التي من أجلها وجدت كفكرة النقد الديني والتأويل، وعلم الكلام الجديد. لهذا نذكر كل قارئ بأنّ العشرات وعلى اختلاف مشاربهم العقديّة والإيديولوجية لم يتوقفوا منذ أكثر من عقدين من الزمن عن نقد صور الخطاب الديني السائد، لهذا ظهرت مؤلفات تدعو صراحة، أو ضمنا إلى مراجعة الكتب الدينيّة للسلف، كما نادت بتجديد الفكر الإسلامي والفقه الإسلامي بحكم أنها شكلت ولمدة زمنية طويلة سلطة دينية امتزجت بهالة من التقديس يصعب على العقل اختراقها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: النص ، الخطاب الديني ، التراث ، القراءة ، الفكر الإسلامي.

1. INTRODUCTION

In His Exalted Scripture, Allah proclaims: "And We have revealed unto thee the Remembrance that thou mayst explain to mankind that which hath been revealed for them, and that haply they may reflect¹. This verse extends a definitive divine invitation for deep reflection and introspection, a call that transcends the constraints of time and place to achieve universality. It encourages a continuous engagement with the Quranic text, promoting a dynamic renewal of our understanding—a renewal that is contingent on repeated study. While the core message of the sacred text remains constant, an individual's interpretation can evolve with each reading, highlighting the importance of an intellectual rather than a rote approach to the scripture².

This imperative for a modern reinterpretation of the Quranic text drives us towards the renewal of Islamic discourse. This is not merely an academic endeavor but addresses a critical societal need, pivotal for reorienting consciousness in the face of emerging Arab democracies and associated complexities in contemporary Islamic political jurisprudence. These complexities often arise from a lack of thorough engagement with jurisprudence texts and a predominant reliance on historical precedents in *ijtihad* (independent reasoning). Significantly, the exploration of the Quran's political dimensions has been historically underexplored, amidst the

prevailing belief that it provides minimal political guidance³. Amid the intellectual and epistemological pursuits of contemporary Muslim scholars regarding civilizational potential and resurgence, this discourse—marked by intellectual unease, methodological challenges, and socio-economic fragmentation—consistently seeks to align with aspirations for social stability and prosperity. Within the discourse on civilization, it is recognized that all human civilizations experience cycles of ascendancy and decline, a concept affirmed by the Quranic principle of cyclicity and trial: "If ye have received a blow, the (disbelieving) people have received a blow the like thereof. These are (only) the vicissitudes which We cause to follow one another for mankind, to the end that Allah may know those who believe and may choose witnesses from among you; and Allah loveth not wrong-doers."⁴

Despite the perceived decline and vulnerability of Islamic civilization, characterized by centuries of stagnation and the aftermath of colonial subjugation, Islamic civilization possesses inherent virtues that can contribute to its revival, encapsulated in what Malek Bennabi termed the 'religious idea.' He suggests that the lifecycle of a civilization begins with the introduction of a specific religious concept, ending when spiritual influence diminishes over primal instincts. At the start of such a cycle, humanity exists in a pre-civilizational state, evolving into a phase of civilizational

¹ Surah An-Nahl, verse 44

² Noor Al-Saadi, "Athar al-Nass al-Qur'ani fi al-Ta'addudiya al-Diniya" (The Impact of the Quranic Text on Religious Pluralism), Dar al-Rafidain, Beirut, Lebanon, 2007, p. 259.

³ Abdul Rahman Al-Haj, "The Political Discourse in the Quran," Arab Network for Research, Production and Publishing, Beirut, Lebanon, 2002, p. 11.

⁴ Surah Al-Imran, verse 14

decay or transitioning into a post-civilizational era upon the cycle's completion. The pre-civilizational individual remains poised for civilizational engagement upon adopting a specific idea, whereas the post-civilizational individual can only participate in a new civilizational endeavor through significant transformation, making the reconstruction of civilization a feasible endeavor⁵.

Concurrently, Abdelkader Bouarfa advocates for a shift from colonizability to civilizationality. Initially, he addresses the concept of colonizability, pointing out a linguistic and conceptual misinterpretation. Colonization in Arabic is *Isti'mar*, derived from *ista'mara* 'to settle,' implies a positive action, as exemplified by the divine command: "And to the people of Thamûd We sent their brother Şâlih. He said, "O my people! Worship Allah. You have no god other than Him. He 'is the One Who' produced you from the earth and settled you on it. So, seek His forgiveness and turn to Him in repentance. Surely my Lord is Ever Near, All-Responsive [to prayers].⁶", reinforcing the notion of stewardship⁷. Having clarified this concept, Bouarfa moves beyond its post-liberation relevance, affirming that contemporary Arab societies have undergone significant positive transformations since the 1990s. These developments, challenging existing conditions, invite a reevaluation towards cultivating a mindset capable of civilization, aligned with the spiritual vitality of Muslims

and their holistic embrace of Islam⁸.

The response of the Islamic ummah to the imperatives of civilization is complex and gradual, necessitating a concerted intellectual and scientific effort to enhance Muslims' consciousness. This involves cultivating a renewed appreciation of Islamic values, principles, and both spiritual and material foundational tenets.

The widespread lack of engagement with essential civilizational values and principles among the majority of the ummah's populace is unmistakable. Additionally, there's a marked confusion and fragility in the broader community's assimilation of these values and principles, highlighting an urgent need for a paradigm shift in the ummah's comprehension. This shift is aimed at reorienting the Muslim intellect to play an effective role in driving a movement towards the civilizational renewal of the entire community in the foreseeable future⁹.

Core Islamic tenets such as faith, justice, and tolerance not only enrich the fabric of civilization with diversity, intellectual, and scientific richness but also serve as bulwarks against extremism, isolationism, discord, and dissonance. Imam Tahar Ben Achour emphasizes the seminal role of tolerance, identified as a hallmark of Islam, distinctly manifest in Quranic teachings and the Prophetic tradition. He asserts, "Tolerance is characteristically Islamic, distinguishing itself as one of Islam's most celebrated attributes. It represents a divine grace extended even to

⁵Muhammad Abdul Salam Al-Jefairi, "Problems of Civilization in Malek Bennabi's Thought" – Arab Book House, Libya, 1984, p. 210.

⁶ Surah Hud, verse 61

⁷ AbdulKader Bouarfa et al, "Reflections on the Thought of Malik Bennabi," Dar Al-Quds Al-Arabi for Publishing and Distribution, Algeria, 2014, p. 38.

⁸ Ibid, P. 39

⁹ Mustafa Kotb Sano, "The Project of Islamic Civilization: The Concept, Objectives, and Foundations," Islamic Knowledge Magazine, Year 14, Issue 55, 2009, p. 14.

those opposed to or in enmity with Islam, epitomizing the mercy inherent in the Islamic message, as Allah declares: 'And We have not sent you, [O Muhammad], except as a mercy to the worlds.'¹⁰¹¹

Ben Achour ties the virtue of tolerance to psychological well-being, addressing the anxieties prevalent in contemporary society by noting, "Tolerance is the most accurate reflection of mental serenity and significantly aids in embracing guidance and counsel... Thus, Islam emerges as the most comprehensive among religions, encapsulating verities acknowledged by authentic wisdom. This concept is further illuminated in the Hadith: 'He is not of us who does not show mercy to our young and honor to our elders,' highlighting deviation from our ethical framework and the moral teachings of Islam."¹²

The interplay between Islamic thought and the notion of intellectual renewal has been significantly influenced by the advent of a new cadre of Islamic scholars and intellectuals. This cohort, which emerged during the transitional period spanning the 1970s and 1980s, has established a formidable presence in the realms of thought and culture. Over these decades, they embarked on a journey of intellectual exchange and contribution, with their insights and cultural output beginning to coalesce, mature, and emerge prominently in the 1990s. This intellectual evolution continued to gain momentum and depth in the early twenty-first century, maintaining its trajectory and influence to the present

day¹³.

Religious renewal, within this context, is conceptualized as a vibrant, interactive endeavor within the established corpus of Islamic thought. It seeks to rediscover and refine this body of knowledge in alignment with the temporal realities and exigencies of the age, encompassing the multifaceted needs of contemporary humanity. This ongoing process aims to articulate and advance the Islamic civilizational project, a comprehensive initiative that seeks to integrate the full spectrum of life's demands within the framework of Islamic jurisprudence and philosophy.¹⁴

Renewal, within the ambit of modern Quranic exegesis, heralds a call for a re-engagement with the foundational texts and principles. This endeavor is inherently reformative, striking a balance between adherence to tradition and an informed anticipation of future challenges. Nevertheless, this movement towards renewal has encountered significant intellectual and epistemological hurdles, notable among them are:

An exhaustive fixation on scriptural texts, with a particular emphasis on deriving subsidiary juridical rulings, esteemed as laudable emulation in opposition to the frowned-upon innovation. This approach often overlooks the essential pursuit of understanding the divine wisdom behind Taklif (lit.obligations), the overarching Maqasid (lit.objectives of Sharia), and the prioritization of the religious needs of individuals and the ummah.

¹⁰ Surah Al-Anbiya, verse 107

¹¹ Tahar Ben Achour, "Foundations of the Social System in Islam," Tunisian Distribution Company and the National Book Institution, Tunis, Algeria, 2nd edition, 1985, p. 229.

¹² Ibid, P.27

¹³ Zaki, Milad "The New Generation of Islamic Intellectuals and the Concern for Religious Renewal," Islamic Knowledge Magazine, Year 13, Issue 52, 2008, p. 146.

¹⁴ Ibid, P.148

A pervasive mistrust of any madhahb (lit.school of thought), opinion, or ijihad that promotes the employment of rational thought in the extrapolation of legal rulings and the resolution of religious affairs, perceiving such rational engagement as a potential sacrilege to the inviolability of Sharia and a gateway to subjective inclinations.

An overzealous sanctification of the viewpoints of early Islamic scholars, placing their interpretations on an unassailable pedestal.

A vehement rejection of foreign concepts and an extreme wariness of incorporating any elements associated with other civilizations, thereby confining discourse to the realms of historical and geographical Islam.¹⁵

Beyond these identified hurdles, there lies an overlooked yet pivotal concept that holds paramount significance in the West, endowed with a civilizational virtue foundational to advancement and elevation: the concept of systemic order and disciplined commitment, encompassing the necessary cognitive, psychological, religious, and economic frameworks. It is through the prism of systemic order that nations assert dominance, strategize for their futures, articulate clear visions and missions, and foster methodical approaches to thought, action, and execution. This perspective transforms time into a valuable asset, crucial for the optimal deployment of resources and potential.

¹⁵ Raouf Ahmed Mohammed Al-Shammari, "Religious Discourse between the Negativity of Stagnation and the Necessity of Renewal" (Research published on the Internet), website www.fqh.vokvfa.edu.iq, date accessed 03/10/2017, at 16:00h 32:00.

A critical observation within the Arab world, viewed through its Islamic lens, is the palpable deficit in genuine appreciation for systemic order and a robust, reverent compliance with it. This shortfall in valuing and upholding order stands as a principal contributor to the recession of Islamic civilization and its subsequent retreat. Furthermore, the marginalized and regressive state in which numerous countries, labeled as developing, find themselves today is largely attributable to the pervasive disorder that blankets their social, cultural, economic, and political spheres. Disregard for laws and non-compliance with systems and regulations have become an atypical conduct, allowing administrative, financial, political, social, and economic corruption to flourish undeniably across the board.¹⁶

2. The Importance of Renewal in Religious Discourse

The imperative for renewal within Islamic discourse is an intrinsic demand of the faith's essence, propelled by foundational qualities whose preservation and evolution hinge upon continuous renewal. This necessity encompasses:

A scholarly review of religious evolution conclusively shows that within Islam, subsequent divine injunctions supersede their predecessors. Prophets, tasked with or without a new divine message, revitalized the dimmed tenets of the antecedent faith, correcting humanity's misalignments through divine intervention. Given Muhammad, peace be upon him, as the seal of the prophets with the final revelation, it was God's intent for Islam's Sharia to conclude the succession of divine

¹⁶ Ibid, Kotb Mustaffa Sano, P. 41

laws. The Quran articulates, "Muhammad is not the father of any man among you, but the messenger of Allah and the Seal of the prophets; and Allah is ever Aware of all things"¹⁷ and, " This day have I perfected your religion for you and completed My favor unto you, and have chosen for you as religion al-Islam."¹⁸ Thus, Islam's Sharia stands as the timeless decree until the end of days. This finality of Sharia underscores the criticality of renewal for two primary reasons:

The first is the finite nature of Sharia texts juxtaposed against the boundless spectrum of real-world events they are meant to address¹⁹. This discrepancy underscores an urgent necessity for *ijtihad* and renewal, enabling jurists of each era to interpret texts through the lens of contemporary reality rather than from anachronistic contexts with wholly different challenges. Al-Shatibi, in "Al-Muwafaqat," elucidates: "Given the inexhaustibility of real-world occurrences, they cannot be fully encompassed by finite divine evidences, thereby necessitating the door of *ijtihad* to remain ajar, utilizing *qiyas* (lit. analogy) among other methods. It's inevitable that situations arise, not explicitly covered by scriptural texts or precedent jurisprudence. Faced with such scenarios, the alternatives are to abandon individuals to their caprices or to adjudicate without legitimate Islamic juristic efforts, effectively following desires—a scenario that by necessity invalidates religious obligations, leading to impracticable burdens. Hence, *ijtihad* remains imperative across all epochs, as

occurrences do not confine themselves to any singular period."²⁰

The second rationale compelling the necessity of renewal lies in the inexorable passage of time and the resultant estrangement of the faithful from the original source of divine revelation. This temporal chasm often culminates in the gradual erosion of religious landmarks, a surge in moral decay, an expansion of deviant practices, and the rampant spread of heterodox beliefs and misguidance. Against this backdrop, the exigency for the rise of rejuvenators becomes palpable. Tasked with a sacred mission, these revitalizers aim to restore and represent the faith precisely as Allah intended, cleansing it of any alien elements and particulars that have encroached upon its purity²¹.

The attribute of comprehensiveness stands as a pivotal driver for the necessity of renewal. The civilization underpinned by the Quranic text embodies a holistic influence, spanning compulsory aspects and a breadth of domains covered by Islamic Sharia: life ethics, transactions, penal codes, governance, spirituality, refinement, peace, and warfare. This vast scope renders Islamic civilization inherently comprehensive, encapsulating a culture that addresses every conceivable aspect. The universality characteristic of Islamic Sharia extends across time, space, and humanity, underlining its global mission. Islam, indifferent to distinctions of race, lineage, or nationality, offers a universal ethos applicable to all humankind. It is designed for humanity at large, unconstrained by

¹⁷ Surah Al-Ahzab, verse 40.

¹⁸ Surah Al-Ma'idah, verse 3.

¹⁹ Adnan Muhammad Oumama, "Renewal in Islamic Thought," Dar Ibn Al-Jawzi for Publishing and Distribution, Saudi Arabia, 2003, p. 22.

²⁰ Ibrahim bin Musa Al-Shatibi, "Al-Muwafaqat fi Usul Al-Shari'ah," Volume 4, p. 104.

²¹ Adnan Muhammad Oumama, "Renewal in Islamic Thought," Dar Ibn Al-Jawzi for Publishing and Distribution, Saudi Arabia, 2003, p. 22.

ethnic, geographic, or temporal boundaries. The Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, emphasized this inclusivity, stating, "He who calls for asabiyyah (tribalism) is not one of us," and "Every prophet was sent to his own people, whereas I was sent to all mankind." The Quranic text describes the Prophet as a messenger for all humanity. Allah SWT says: "And (bethink you of) the day when We raise in every nation a witness against them of their own folk, and We bring thee (Muhammad) as a witness against these. And We reveal the Scripture unto thee as an exposition of all things, and a guidance and a mercy and good tidings for those who have surrendered (to Allah).²²" Allah SWT affirms this universality in another verse, stating: "And when they said: O Allah! If this be indeed the truth from Thee, then rain down stones on us or bring on us some painful doom! But Allah would not punish them while thou wast with them, nor will He punish them while they seek forgiveness."²³ Moreover, Muhammad's PBUH role as a messenger for all is definitively stated with: "Say (O Muhammad): O mankind! Lo! I am the messenger of Allah to you all²⁴". These verses consolidate the message of universality and inclusivity, making clear that the Prophet's teachings are intended for every individual, transcending geographical, racial, and temporal boundaries, thereby establishing a faith that embraces all humanity.

This expansive reach underscores the critical need for reformers and scholars to guide individuals towards the contemporary applications of Sharia in newly arising matters among Muslims and to elucidate their relations with others. Renewal becomes

particularly pertinent as scientific and scholarly outputs accumulate, grounding its significance in addressing value-laden, intellectual, and broadly humanistic issues entangled with a myriad of concepts.

Discussions on renewal have veered between two directions: self-renewal and re-engagement with foundational principles (re-rooting), and westernization, fluctuating between total replacement and attempts to reconcile or amalgamate Islamic and Western viewpoints. Yet, these discussions often further obscure the concept, lacking a reliance on a genuine methodology that addresses the realities of the Arab-Islamic context²⁵.

The contemporary intellectual movement introduced a novel perspective aimed at rejuvenating the Islamic movement and breaking free from intellectual constraints. This called for a fresh engagement with the religion, championed by figures like Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abdou, and Muhammad Iqbal. Their efforts varied in intensity based on their convictions, boldness, and resilience to challenges. In summary, the achievements of this movement were modest, possibly due to the novelty and lack of maturity of the renewal concept and a general public hesitance to accept it, especially against prevalent views favoring isolation as a defense against change in behaviors, ideas, and values.

Religious reform is predicated on two elements found within Islamic literature and reality. The first is the dominance of the principle of taqlid (blind imitation), which

²² Surah An-Nahl, verse 89.

²³ Surah Al-Anfal, verses 32 and 33.

²⁴ Surah Al-A'raf, verse 158.

²⁵ Abdul Nasser Zaki Al-Assasi, "Summaries of the Institute's Intellectual Books," Vol. 1, Center for Cognitive Studies, Egypt, 2011, p. 46.

adheres to the rulings of the third Hijri century and its various schools at the expense of independent research based on traditional Islamic sources. The second principle emerges through the centuries-long closure of the door to *ijtihad* (independent reasoning), thus precluding any new form of *ijtihad*²⁶. The writings of philosophers and Muslim reformers clearly indicate that *taqlid* has constrained many Islamic concepts, assigning them negative connotations that have profoundly impacted thought and behavior among many, in both rural and urban settings. This was especially evident in the deterministic view of fate that dominated religious thought in the early 20th century, hindering Muslim innovation and creativity and promoting a defensive posture against external influences, particularly those affecting theological aspects or interpretations propagated through exegesis or Sufi literature, which became almost axiomatic. Reformers' focus on the issue of fate in accessible language illustrates their efforts to redefine and reformulate Islamic concepts, including the reform of educational and traditional exegesis methodologies, advocating for an approach based on a holistic, integrative, and objective understanding of Islam, mindful of contemporary developments, challenges, and dilemmas facing the *ummah*, while adhering to principles of moderation and balance. Islam is presented as a cohesive, indivisible whole, unique in its features, described by continuity, connectivity, and vitality, embracing global cultural resources, and eschewing conflict theories, highlighting major challenges facing humanity and summarizing Islamic

rulings on them, favoring peaceful advocacy over contentious methods²⁷.

With the dawn of the current century and amid the media revolution, the intellectual movement has adopted a more renewing stance, allowing numerous thinkers to advocate openly for intellectual freedom, rationality, *ijtihad*, and renewal. These concepts, once regarded with skepticism or outright prohibition, began to resonate even among scholars of Islamic jurisprudence, as the evolving dynamics within the social and ethical fabric underscored the urgent need for juridic evolution within the framework of Sharia. The notion that societal norms and jurisprudence can function in isolation from one another is fundamentally misguided; norms suitable for 7th-century societal organization may not apply to 21st-century communities. While human nature remains consistent, cultural differences necessitate varied responses to environmental and eventful stimuli²⁸.

3. CONCLUSION

The In conclusion, the landscape of religious discourse has significantly evolved from its origins, traversing a spectrum from rigor and determinism in Aqeedah issues to the extent of marginalizing alternative viewpoints. This evolution has introduced terminologies that have made enduring impacts, attributable to their foundational objectives, such as religious criticism, hermeneutics, and the advent of

²⁶ Ismail Abdullah, "The Impact of Reformist School Opinions," *Islamic Knowledge Magazine*, Year 12, Issues 46, 47, 2007, p. 123.

²⁷ Irfan Abdul Hamid Fattah, "Religious Educational Curricula in the Islamic World: Contemporary Challenges and Future Expectations," Publications of the Global Institute for the Unity of the Islamic Ummah, Malaysia, 2005, p. 190.

²⁸ Razika Adnani, "The Suspension of Reason in Islamic Thought," *Afrique Orient*, Casablanca, Morocco, 2nd edition, 2015.

contemporary theological discourse. It is imperative to acknowledge that individuals from diverse Aqeedah and ideological backgrounds have sustained a critique of the dominant religious narratives for over two decades. This critique has catalyzed the publication of works advocating either explicitly or implicitly for a critical reassessment of our predecessors' religious texts and a call for the renewal of Islamic thought and jurisprudence. The call for renewal is driven by the recognition that Islamic thought and jurisprudence, having long served as pillars of religious authority, are imbued with a sanctity that necessitates thoughtful and rigorous intellectual engagement. This paper concludes that the path towards a vibrant and inclusive religious discourse requires a commitment to openness, critical examination, and the continuous reinterpretation of sacred texts in light of contemporary challenges and understandings, thereby ensuring that Islamic thought remains relevant and responsive to the needs of the ummah.

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