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Lesson Seventeen: Unity and Multiplicity in the Themes of the Qur'an

Every scientist and researcher is liable to change his attitude to scientific topics under investigation and the opinions he bases on them. Relying on the knowledge and conclusions he has accumulated, he may express a certain opinion on a given topic at one time and later repudiate that opinion in the light of continuing and more extensive research and the solution of certain problems. His new insights take the place of his previous thinking, and his opinion changes. This process of change is an important reason for the variations and contradictions we find within the views of a single individual.

Furthermore, in the course of twenty-three years, a person will inevitably change some of his ideas and opinions as a result of natural bodily changes which also entail changes in his psychology and nervous system.

It has always been the custom of thinkers, lawgivers and writers to correct their errors and revise their opinions and their writings.

Moreover, when the human being is caught up in a current of great events, in a succession of differing circumstances, his view of matters cannot possibly remain uniform. However firm be his will and however balanced his thoughts, the stormy vicissitudes of existence will inevitably destroy the stability of his mind and his will and divert their operation to new courses.

When the human being is weak and impotent, he looks at the world in a certain way, but as soon as he attains a position of power, his view of the world changes and he confronts the same questions that faced him before in an entirely new way. This change in outlook can easily be seen reflected in his manner of speech and behavior.

This is another factor giving rise to contradiction and variation within the views and modes of thought of a single individual.

In addition, intelligent and perspicacious persons are well aware that those who deviate from the path of honesty always end up by unconsciously contradicting themselves, however cunningly they make their calculations. This is particularly true if they live in the same society for a number of years and express opinions on a whole variety of issues. It is the direct result of their deviation from the path of honesty.

The Noble Qur'an contains profound and exact statements on a wide variety of subjects. It establishes and legislates principles and regulations for the practical and ethical duties of the human being and for the ordering and administration of society. However, the slightest variation or contradiction is not to be seen in this great mass of material. Considering the fact that the Qur'an was revealed over a period of twenty-three years, it is important to note that this gradualness did not cause the verses to lose their harmony and inner unity.

It is true, of course, that certain verses containing regulations were abrogated by others, so that the period of their applicability came to an end. But the meaning of this abrogation is that the benefit envisioned by the regulation proclaimed in the earlier verse was temporally limited, so that the corresponding regulation also was necessarily limited. Once the new regulation is proclaimed, the validity of the first regulation is terminated. It is plain that the proclamation of a temporary regulation cannot be objected to if the benefit intended by a permanent regulation is not yet apparent.

This is something quite different from what happens as a result of human error and ignorance. The human being promulgates a certain regulation with a view to a certain benefit, and then, after a time, he realizes he has made a mistake. He then abolishes the first regulation and substitutes another one for it.

One cannot in any way attribute to God such an abrogation, arising from ignorance and error. Concerning the question of abrogation, the Noble Qur'an has this to say:

***"Whenever We abrogate a certain benefit and send down another in its place and God knows best what He sends down – the unbelievers say, 'You are always a forger.' It is not so, but most of them do not understand. Say, 'The Spirit of Sanctity has brought down these verses from my Lord, in truth and veracity, to make firm the footsteps of the believers on the path of God and to serve as guidance and good tidings for the Muslims.'"* (16: 101–102)**

Here, it is possible to evaluate the Qur'an from two different points of view: first, the individual nature of the verses, viewed in isolation from each other and possessing an unparalleled brilliance; and second, the verses taken together as a whole, exhibiting utter harmony and mutual compatibility and lacking all contradiction with respect to style and content. Precisely this lack of contradiction represents another aspect of the miraculousness of the Qur'an.

When the Qur'an wishes to establish its own heavenly nature, it draws attention to the fact that although it was revealed over a period of twenty-three years, it is completely uniform and lacking in contradiction. It says:

"Do they not reflect on the Qur'an? if this book were from other than God, they would certainly find much variation and contradiction in it." (4:82)

This verse reminds us that those who deviate from the path of honesty and veracity will naturally fall prey to contradiction in their statements and sayings. The fact that not the slightest trace of contradictoriness can be found in the contents of the Qur'an or unevenness in its style is a shining proof of its truth and veracity.

The Qur'an therefore leaves it to the sound disposition of human beings, untrammelled by all prejudices and pre-existing notions, to recognize this fact and to distinguish truth from falsehood.

When we leaf through the history of the Prophet of Islam, we see clearly that his life passed through many different stages.

At one time he belonged to a deprived and impoverished minority; at another time, great material facilities and abundant wealth were at his disposal. At one time, his weakness and isolation and the social boycott imposed upon him were of an intensity sufficient to defeat the most powerful of human beings; at another time, he enjoyed such honor and fame that he counted as the leader of one of the strongest nations of the age. Sometimes he was confronted by the crises of war and all the disorders attending on war; at other times, he lived in an atmosphere of peace and tranquility.

We know that the changing conditions of life have a great effect on the way human beings think and relate to each other and to nature. They represent such a dominant factor that they are able to bring about fundamental changes in their attitudes, to the extent that both their inner and outer lives are directly related to the changing nature of the circumstances that surround them. The changing circumstances specific to each stage in the human being's life create within him a certain way of viewing the world and a certain network of relationships. Among other things, this makes it possible for him to benefit from exceptional circumstances.

The positions human beings adopt with respect to all these changing circumstances is by no means uniform. Sometimes they are able to make use of them as a means for development and growth and the creation of values, and at other times those circumstances become transformed into ideals. By adopting a particular attitude to the external phenomena surrounding them, and choosing a certain approach with regard to the purpose of their existence within the overall scheme of creation, human beings give shape and form to their own existential nature.

In short, the life of this world, with its vast dimensions and variegated manifestations, determines the values of human beings, and clarifies their choice of direction.

If the Qur'an which took shape under a variety of different circumstances and was revealed in fragments over a period of twenty-three years, in Mecca and Medina, was the record of the thoughts of Muhammad (upon whom be peace and blessings), it would inevitably have been subject to the general

rule that development implies change and contradiction; it would not possess the uniformity that it manifestly does.

Furthermore, through the adoption of an attitude conformable to the prevailing conditions of the day, considerable differences would have appeared within the world view expounded in the Qur'an. Contradiction and incongruity would have become evident in it, and it would have lost, in the course of time, the evenness and harmony that characterize its style.

In contrast with the method followed by conventional books that devote themselves to explaining or researching a single legal, historical, philosophical, social or literary topic, the Qur'an discusses numerous and varied subjects, such as law and politics, the knowledge of God, civil and penal law, ethics and customs of behavior, history and the details of Divine regulations, together with tens of other subjects. Despite this, it is absolutely uniform with respect to the coherence of its subject matter and of its style.

There is no difference between the first surah revealed to the Prophet (Sarah Alaq) and the last surah of the Qur'an (Sarah Nasr).

Throughout the Qur'an, unique eloquence and power of expression are fully apparent, to the point of constituting a firm and brilliant proof in their own right.

The Qur'an represents a seamless and harmonious entity: none of its laws and principles can be viewed in isolation from all of its other laws and principles, and the examination of one principle may furnish a key for the understanding of other principles.

The inter-relatedness of the philosophical and moral foundations of the Qur'an, its laws and regulations for the life of the individual and society, its prescriptions for worship and the training of human beings, and the principles and moral purposes it sets out for administering society this inter-relatedness is another clear proof of the miraculous nature of the Qur'an.

In none of the ordinances and principles expounded in the Qur'an do we see any contradiction with the creedal, philosophical, educational or ethical bases of the Qur'an. Despite all their varied aspects, none of the ordinances of the Qur'an are incompatible with its fundamental teachings.

These exceptional qualities and properties of the Qur'an form an indisputable proof of its superiority to all the products of human thought. They establish clearly that this inimitable compendium has its source in God, the eternal and immutable reality, Whose infinite essence is utterly beyond the factors that induce change, variation and contradiction.

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