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What is Topical Exegesis? 2

Need of the Expansion of juristic Studies

We have already pointed out that since long juristic discussions have usually been arranged on topical basis, but in exegetic discussions the commentators have followed split style and expounded the Qur'an verse by verse from the beginning to the end. We do not mean to say that topical style being the usual practice in jurisprudence there is no longer any need of further topical investigations and studies in that field.

Our juristic discussions also must be expanded now. As regards topical discussions we require new research both horizontally and vertically, for as we have said topical method begins from the realities of life and ends at the rules of Islamic law.^{[1](#)}

It has always been the practice of our scholars and jurists to take their subjects of discussion from the realities of daily life and submit them to the judgement of Islamic law. Such daily transactions as offer of agreement, limited partnership, share-cropping of field and gardens have induced our jurists to deduce rules regarding them from the sources of Islamic law and state the provisions of law from divine point of view.

In fact, it must be recognized that topical style of jurisprudence also needs expansion. Over many centuries our scholars have continuously carried out their researches on the basis of topical style, and have deduced rules of law concerning every human need, but with the passage of time and complexity of civilization new dimensions have been added to human life.

Hence it has become necessary that with the expansion of the needs of life, the topical juristic investigations should also expand. This shows that although the investigation into juristic rules begins with concrete realities, yet it is to a large extent confined to the realities of the period of the late Shaykh Tusi or the late Muhaqqiq Hilli, while the realities of their lifetime could meet the needs of their time only, and not the needs of our time.

For example, the transactions, such as leasing, sharecropping and partnership as mentioned in their books represent the market conditions of 800 or 1000 years ago, while the market conditions and the nature of transactions have changed today and economic relations have become complex.

Therefore jurisprudence today must follow the same course that it did follow during the time of the past scholars, when it showed reaction to every event and every condition of life. As rules relating to every situation that existed at that time were deduced from religion, the scholars of our time also must study the problems of today topically and deduce rules relating to them from the general principles of Islam so that jurisprudence may expand horizontally to the required degree.

Vertically also the same topical style of jurisprudence should be pursued so that juristic research may effectively expand. In other words it is essential that juristic questions are deeply studied vertically and basic principles of jurisprudence are discovered. Tall buildings must be erected on juristic foundations.

Elaborate laws should be framed reflecting the Islamic point of view, for as we know, every set of Islamic laws concerning every field of life is linked with basic principles ensuring human development in the field of Islamic legislation. We find this principle clearly reflected in Islamic economy and the Islamic laws concerning marriage and divorce.

For example, see the rules of Islamic law in respect of marriage and conjugal relations. They are linked with the role of man and woman in life as determined by Islam. Islamic views in this respect are basis and fundamental.

On them the whole structure of the relevant law is based. It will be wrong to suppose that the rules of law are incoherent ideas of jurisprudence. They are not a literary miscellany. They should be regarded as a natural need and as far as humanly possible effort should be made to unravel their underlying idea and their rationale.

Need of Topical Exegesis

Now we revert to the points of difference between topical exegesis and split exegesis. We have already given some reasons why topical exegesis is preferable. As we have pointed out, the field of topical exegesis is vaster and more fruitful. It is more advanced than split exegesis. It can continuously make progress and make new discoveries, for this type of exegesis is based on human experience and as human experience advances, it becomes more fruitful.

In topical exegesis the accuracy of the data provided by human experience is checked against the Qur'an. That is the only way that enables us to find out the basic views of the Qur'an and Islam in regard to different subjects of life.

It may be said: What is the need of finding out these basic views of Islam? For example, what is the need of knowing the general theory of Islam about Prophethood? Is there any need of knowing what the

Qur'an says about the trends of history? Or why would we interpret the social changes in the light of what the Qur'an says? Why should we know the Islamic law of economy?

Is there any reason why should we know what the Qur'an means by the words of sky and earth? What is the need of knowing the significance of these words and deducing theories relating to them. We know that the Holy Prophet himself refrained from describing any such theory in exact and definite terms.

Generally speaking he has not mentioned any such theories. He only presented the Qur'an to the Muslims in its present form. Then why should we trouble ourselves to derive from it any separate theories?

In fact, today we feel a basic need of discovering these theories and cannot dispense with this need.

The Holy Prophet explained these theories in the context of the Qur'an in a way suited to his environment. He applied them on the whole to Islamic life. Now it is a duty of every Muslim to rediscover these theories within the ideological framework of that time. That framework was natural, though it might be a little primitive.

It is only the spiritual, social, intellectual and instructional framework prescribed by the Holy Prophet that can convey to us his ideas in a perfect form. It alone can evaluate every situation and every event of any time and can apply what it says to all situations.

If you compare between two common situations, this idea will be understood better:

Suppose a man is living among the people who speak a particular language. He wants to learn their language and its usage, and wants to know how their mind reaches from a word to its meaning and how they comprehend the exact meaning of a word. Now there are two ways of doing this.

One way is that he should mix up with the people of that society and fully participate in their activities. If he does that for some time, he will become familiar with the correct use of their language and as a result his mind will begin to move from the words to their meanings as required by that language and its usage.

As this man lives among those who speak the language as their mother tongue, a hidden stock of the meanings will soon be deposited in his mind. As a word will be uttered he will draw upon that stock and understand the word correctly. As a result of his contact with those who speak the language as their mother tongue, he will get an insight into the language like them.

In contrast a man who is not living in the society of those who speak the language –as their mother tongue, but wants to become conversant with its correct usages, has no alternative but to refer to its grammar and composition. He will have to acquire the ability of deriving its general rules.

Take the case of Arabic language. In the beginning the Arabs had to make no effort to learn it, for they lived in a predominantly Arab society. But later when their atmosphere changed and with the entry of

other languages into their life, their own language became weak and mixed with a large number of foreign words, need was felt for the development of Arabic grammar and the theories of philology.

As the atmosphere was no longer conducive to learning correct Arabic, it became necessary to study it in scientific lines. Theories were formed for consideration, discussion and criticism, so that the language may be moulded according to scientific rules and new theories. This was only an approximate example to explain our point.

The companions who lived along with the Holy Prophet might not have understood his views as general principles, but there is no doubt that they on the whole absorbed his ideas and were mentally impressed by them.

The general condition of the social, spiritual and mental framework in which they lived was helpful in understanding the Holy Prophet's teachings and creating an accurate standard for the purpose of evaluating the things. But such a helpful atmosphere and appropriate conditions do not exist today. At a time when a need is being felt for the study of the views of the Qur'an in respect of the science of Islam, how can the general and universal theories in this respect be ignored?

During contacts between the Muslim world and the Western world expression is given to many divergent theories and points of view. Although the Muslims have vast treasures of intellectual resources and the Qur'an has provided them with a rich and varied source of learning in all branches of human knowledge, when there is a contact between a Muslim and a Westerner, the Muslim finds himself faced with so many theories which have emerged in different fields of life. Therefore it is a duty of the Muslims to know Islamic view vis-à-vis other theories.

For this purpose they have no alternative but to go deep into the texts of Islam and find out Islam's stand in order to be able to understand how Islam has solved particular problems in a way commensurate with intelligent human experience in different fields of life.

Cooperation Between Topical and Split Styles

In this respect we have come to the conclusion that topical style is the best style of exegesis. But that does not mean that we are in favour of totally abandoning split style, for superiority of one style does not mean the abandonment or suppression of the other style. It only means that more attention should be paid to the better style, for topical exegesis is one step ahead of split exegesis.

Split exegesis being the foundation on which topical exegesis is based, there is no sense in superseding it. All that we mean is that instead of one two steps should be taken, the first step being split exegesis and the second step, which is more advanced, being topical exegesis.

¹. (Horizontal expansion in juristic discussion means the study of the questions and the rules of law which did not exist previously, but in modern life they have become a matter of daily requirement. The Shi'ah jurists call them 'current issues'.

They have compiled special treatises to cover these questions and have issued them as supplements to their main treatises. Such new questions include the questions of grafting limbs, plastic surgery, artificial insemination, prayers in polar regions and such transactions as insurance and dealings in value-bearing papers like cheques, drafts, bonds and company shares. Vertical expansion of topical method includes looking deep into the rules of Islamic law and discovering the values which the law-giver of Islam never consented to dispense with).

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