

## The Message of The Quran Translated and Explained by Muhammad Asad

### SYMBOLISM AND ALLEGORY IN THE QUR'AN

When studying the Quran, one frequently encounters what may be described as "key- phrases" - that is to say, statements which provide a clear, concise indication of the idea underlying a particular passage or passages: for instance, the many references to the creation of man "out of dust" and "out of a drop of sperm", pointing to the lowly biological origin of the human species; or the statement in the ninety-ninth surah (Az-Zalzalah) that on Resurrection Day "he who shall have done an atom's weight of good, shall behold it; and he who shall have done an atom's weight of evil, shall behold it" - indicating the ineluctible afterlife consequences of, and the responsibility for, all that man consciously does in this world; or the divine declaration (in 38:27), "We have not created heaven and earth and all that is between them without meaning and purpose (baatilan), as is the surmise of those who are bent on denying the truth."

Instances of such Quranic key-phrases can be quoted almost ad infinitum, and in many varying formulations. But there is one fundamental statement in the Quran which occurs only once, and which may be qualified as "the key-phrase of all its key-phrases": the statement in verse 3:7 to the effect that the Quran "contains messages that are clear in and by themselves (ayat-e-muhkamaat) as well as others that are allegorical (mutashabihaat)". It is this verse which represents, in an absolute sense, a key to the understanding of the Qur'anic message and makes the whole of it accessible to "people who think" (li-qawmin yatafakkarUn).

In my notes on the above-mentioned verse I have tried to elucidate the meaning of the expression ayaat muhkimaat as well as the general purport of what is termed mutashabih ("allegorical" or "symbolic"). Without a proper grasp of what is implied by this latter term, much of the Qur'an is liable to be - and, in fact, has often been - grossly misunderstood both by believers and by such as refuse to believe in its divinely-inspired origin. However, an appreciation of what is meant by "allegory" or "symbolism" in the context of the Quran is, by itself, not enough to make one fully understand its world-view: in order to achieve this we must relate the Quranic use of these terms to a concept touched upon almost at the very beginning of the divine writ - namely, the existence of "a realm which is beyond the reach of human perception" (al-ghayb). It is this concept that constitutes the basic premise for an understanding of the call of the Quran, and, indeed, of the principle of religion - every religion - as such: for all truly religious cognition arises from and is based on the fact that only a small segment of reality is open to man's perception and imagination, and that by far the larger part of it escapes his comprehension altogether.

However, side by side with this clear-cut metaphysical concept we have a not less clear-cut finding of a psychological nature: namely, the finding that the human mind (in which term we comprise conscious thinking, imagination, dream-life, intuition, memory, etc.) can operate only on the basis of perceptions previously experienced by that very mind either in their entirety or in some of their constituent elements: that is to say, it cannot visualize, or form an idea of, something that lies entirely outside the realm of previously realized experiences. Hence, whenever we arrive at a seemingly "new" mental image or idea, we find, on closer examination, that even if it is new as a composite entity, it is not really new as regards its component elements, for these are invariably derived from previous - and sometimes quite disparate - mental experiences which are now but brought together in a new combination or series of new combinations.

Now as soon as we realize that the human mind cannot operate otherwise than on the basis of previous experiences - that is to say, on the basis of apperceptions and cognitions already recorded in that mind - we are faced by a weighty question: Since the metaphysical ideas of religion relate, by virtue of their nature, to a realm beyond the reach of human perception or experience - how can they be successfully conveyed to us?

How can we be expected to grasp ideas which have no counterpart, not even a fractional one, in any of the perceptions which we have arrived at empirically?

The answer is self-evident: By means of loan-images derived from our actual - physical or mental - experiences; or, as Zamakhshari phrases it in his commentary on 13:35, "through a parabolic illustration, by means of something which we know from our experience, of something that is beyond the reach of our perception" (tamtheelan li-ma ghaaba anna bi-ma nushaahid). And this is the innermost purport of the term and concept of al-mutashaabihaat as used in the Quran.

Thus, the Quran tells us clearly that many of its passages and expressions must be understood in an allegorical sense for the simple reason that, being intended for human understanding, they could not have been conveyed to us in any other way. It follows, therefore, that if we were to take every Quranic passage, statement or expression in its outward, literal sense and disregard the possibility of its being an allegory, a metaphor or a parable, we would be offending against the very spirit of the divine writ.

Consider, for instance, some of the Quranic references to God's Being - Being indefinable, infinite in time and space, and utterly beyond any creature's comprehension. Far from being able to imagine Him, we can only realize what He is not: namely, not limited in either time or space, not definable in terms of comparison, and not to be comprised within any category of human thought. Hence, only very generalized metaphors can convey to us, though most inadequately, the idea of His existence and activity.

And so, when the Quran speaks of Him as being "in the heavens" or "established on His throne (al-arsh)", we cannot possibly take these phrases in their literal senses, since then they would imply, however vaguely, that God is limited in space: and since such a limitation would contradict the concept of an Infinite Being, we know immediately, without the least doubt that the "heavens" and the "throne" and God's being "established" on it are but linguistic vehicles meant to convey an idea which is outside all human experience, namely, the idea of God's almightiness and absolute sway over all that exists. Similarly, whenever He is described as "all-seeing", "all-hearing" or "all-aware", we know that these descriptions have nothing to do with the phenomena of physical seeing or hearing but simply circumscribe, in terms understandable to man, the fact of God's eternal Presence in all that is or happens. And since "no human vision can encompass Him" (Quran 6:103), man is not expected to realize His existence otherwise than through observing the effects of His unceasing activity within and upon the universe created by Him.

But whereas our belief in God's existence does not - and, indeed, could not - depend on our grasping the unfathomable "how" of His Being, the same is not the case with problems connected with man's own existence, and, in particular, with the idea of a life in the hereafter: for, man's psyche is so constituted that it cannot accept any proposition relating to himself without being given a clear exposition of its purport.

The Quran tells us that man's life in this world is but the first stage - a very short stage - of a life that continues beyond the hiatus called "death"; and the same Quran stresses again and again the principle of man's moral responsibility for all his conscious actions and his behaviour, and of the continuation of this responsibility, in the shape of inescapable consequences, good or bad, in a person's life in the hereafter. But how could man be made to understand the nature of these consequences and, thus, of the quality of the life that awaits him? - for, obviously, inasmuch as man's resurrection will be the result of what the Quran describes as "a new act of creation", the life that will follow upon it must be entirely different from anything that man can and does experience in this world.

This being so, it is not enough for man to be told, "If you behave righteously in this world, you will attain to happiness in the life to come", or, alternatively, "If you do wrong in this world, you will suffer for it in the hereafter". Such statements would be far too general and abstract to appeal to man's imagination and, thus, to influence his behaviour. What is needed is a more direct appeal to the intellect, resulting in a kind of

"visualization" of the consequences of one's conscious acts and omissions: and such an appeal can be effectively produced by means of metaphors, allegories and parables, each of them stressing, on the one hand, the absolute dissimilarity of all that man will experience after resurrection from whatever he did or could experience in this world; and, on the other hand, establishing means of comparison between these two categories of experience.

Thus, explaining the reference to the bliss of paradise in 32:17, the Prophet indicated the essential difference between man's life in this world and in the hereafter in these words: "God says, 'I have readied for My righteous servants what no eye has ever seen, and no ear has ever heard, and no heart of man has ever conceived'" (Bukhāri, Muslim, Tirmidhi). On the other hand, in 2:25 the Quran speaks thus of the blessed in paradise: "Whenever they are granted fruits therefrom as their appointed sustenance, they will say, 'It is this that in days of yore was granted to us as our sustenance' - for they shall be given something which will recall that

[past]": and so we have the image of gardens through which running waters flow, blissful shade, spouses of indescribable beauty, and many other delights infinitely varied and unending, and yet somehow comparable to what may be conceived of as most delightful in this world.

However, this possibility of an intellectual comparison between the two stages of human existence is to a large extent limited by the fact that all our thinking and imagining is indissolubly connected with the concepts of finite time and finite space: in other words, we cannot imagine infinity in either time or space - and therefore cannot imagine a state of existence independent of time and space - or, as the Qur'ān phrases it with reference to a state of happiness in afterlife, "a paradise as vast as the heavens and the earth" (3:133): which expression is the Qur'anic synonym for the entire created universe. On the other hand, we know that every Qur'anic statement is directed to man's reason and must, therefore, be comprehensible either in its literal sense (as in the case of the *dyāt muhkamdt*) or allegorically (as in the *ayat-e-mutashaabihaat*); and since, owing to the constitution of the human mind, neither infinity nor eternity are comprehensible to us, it follows that the reference to the infinite "vastness" of paradise cannot relate to anything but the intensity of sensation which it will offer to the blest.

By obvious analogy, the principle of a "comparison through allegory" applied in the Qur'ān to all references to paradise - i.e., a state of unimaginable happiness in afterlife - must be extended to all descriptions of otherworldly suffering - i.e., hell - in respect of its utter dissimilarity from all earthly experiences as well as its unmeasurable intensity. In both cases the descriptive method of the Qur'ān is the same. We are told, as it were: "Imagine the most joyous sensations, bodily as well as emotional, accessible to man: indescribable beauty, love physical and spiritual, consciousness of fulfilment, perfect peace and harmony; and imagine these sensations intensified beyond anything imaginable in this world - and at the same time entirely different from anything imaginable: and you have an inkling, however vague, of what is meant by 'paradise'." And, on the other

hand: "Imagine the greatest suffering, bodily as well as spiritual, which man may experience: burning by fire, utter loneliness and bitter desolation, the torment of unceasing frustration, a condition of neither living nor dying; and imagine this pain, this darkness and this despair intensified beyond anything imaginable in this world - and at the same time entirely different from anything imaginable: and you will know, however vaguely, what is meant by 'hell'."

Side by side with these allegories relating to man's life after death we find in the Qur'ān many symbolical expressions referring to the evidence of God's activity. Owing to the limitations of human language - which, in their turn, arise from the inborn limitations of the human mind - this activity can only be circumscribed and never really described. Just as it is impossible for us to imagine or define God's Being, so the true nature of His creativeness - and, therefore, of His plan of creation - must remain beyond our grasp. But since the Quran aims at conveying to us an ethical teaching based, precisely, on the concept of God's purposeful creativeness, the latter must be, as it were, "translated" into categories of thought accessible to man. Hence the use of

expressions which at first sight have an almost anthropomorphic hue, for instance, God's "wrath" (ghadab) or "condemnation"; His "pleasure" at good deeds or "love" for His creatures; or His being "oblivious" of a sinner who was oblivious of Him; or "asking" a wrongdoer on Resurrection Day about his wrongdoing; and so forth. All such verbal "translations" of God's activity into human terminology are unavoidable as long as we are expected to conform to ethical principles revealed to us by means of a human language; but there can be no greater mistake than to think that these "translations" could ever enable us to define the Undefinable.

And, as the Quran makes it clear in the seventh verse 3:7, only "those whose hearts are given to swerving from the truth go after that part of the divine writ which has been expressed in allegory, seeking out [what is bound to create] confusion, and seeking [to arrive at] its final meaning [in an arbitrary manner]: but none save God knows its final meaning."

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