

Authority: Divine or Qur'anic?

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Any study of authority will need to consider the subject from a number of different perspectives, including an analysis of concepts and how these are formulated, and a study of the effects of these concepts at both the practical and theoretical levels. The study that ensues does not claim to be the last word on the subject. Rather, its purpose is to open the door to further examination and inquiry and to critically analyze the main concept, in addition to the network of concepts attached to and contingent upon it.

I shall not spend a great deal of time analyzing the lexical aspects of the concepts we are about to study, because terms and concepts are two different things. In a study of terminology, it might suffice to identify the lexical root and its particular meanings and then move on to a discussion of the usages appropriate to a particular field, subject, or science. Thereafter, one might attempt to define the term in a way that gives a clear idea of its intended meaning. A concept, however, may be described as a term connected to a network of philosophical and cultural roots. Furthermore, regardless of the diversity of its roots, a concept will always correlate with the epistemological paradigm in which it functions. Certainly this assumption holds true in regard to Islamic concepts or those concepts that are key to an understanding of the Islamic order.

Surrounding the Islamic concept of divine authority, for example, there is an entire network of related concepts. Unless these related concepts are understood, both on their own and within the larger context of the Islamic order itself, the concept of divine authority will remain unclear. This network includes, for example, the concepts of divinity, creation, worship, the world and the hereafter, the divine discourse, the lawful and the unlawful, the classification of texts as relative or unqualified or

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as general or specific, the religious laws of earlier communities, the unity of religion, and so many others. Then, regardless of the nature or importance of these ancillary concepts, it is impossible to gain a full understanding of a concept without an understanding of the concepts related to it.

It sometimes happens that people arrive at mistaken notions of concepts when they attempt to understand them on the basis of no more than their lexical meanings or usages. Over the past few decades, the concept of divine authority has been misunderstood in this way by several different schools of thought within contemporary Islamic reform movements. The present study seeks to clarify this concept and to rid it of the ambiguities and confusion that have grown up around it. I shall begin by indicating briefly a few points that are essential to an understanding of the discussion that is to follow.

Let us consider God's call to the patriarch Abraham:

Behold! I will make you a leader of people. Ibrāhīm asked: "And my offspring as well (will You make them imams too)?" Allah replied: "My covenant does not extend to those who are unjust." (2:124)

Here, then, there is *imāmah*, or a sort of leadership made possible by God: There is justice and injustice, as values that need to be acknowledged, there are those who are unjust (to themselves and to others), those who are just, and those who outdo others in justice and good deeds. Leadership, in this verse, takes the form of a covenant between God and humanity—a covenant that may not be extended to those who are unjust or who in any way draw close to injustice. The value of justice is highlighted in this verse as the opposite of injustice and is shown to be the second (after *tawhīd*) of the higher purposes behind the missions of the prophets and those reformers who would later assume the place of the prophets.

A second point to be kept in mind is that the idea of the divinely appointed leadership, which is inherent in this concept of *imāmah*, is one that leads naturally to the notion of election (*iṣṭifā'*).

Allah chooses message bearers from among the angels as well as from among men. (22:75)

This concept, moreover, is connected by means of certain characteristics to the process of the divine election of peoples and nations.

Behold, Allah chose Adam, and Nūh, and the family of Ibrāhīm, and the family of 'Imrān over all of humankind. (3:33)

Indeed, the divine election of individuals as prophets and messengers to peoples chosen to be the focus of their efforts, leadership, and guidance

is a process that must be kept in mind throughout our discussion of divine authority.

Looking back in time, into the history of legal and political systems in the civilizations of ancient peoples, we find that several of these were based, in one way or another, on the idea of divine sovereignty or rule. The Sumerians, for example, and the Akkadians, as well as some of the Babylonians are known to have had such systems.

Among the most important peoples mentioned in any discussion of divine authority are the ancient Hebrews, known later as the Children of Israel. In fact, the form of divine authority understood by the Children of Israel was fairly well defined: There was revealed scripture, there were tablets inscribed by God with commandments they were required to follow, and there were prophets and messengers charged with the mission of communicating the will of God to the people.

Among the most important elements in the Hebrew understanding of divine authority were the notions that the Children of Israel were God's "chosen people," that God Himself ruled over them directly, that He chose His messengers from among them, and ordered them to enforce His rule and carry His teachings to the people. Perhaps no less in importance to these elements was the understanding that, as a result of all this, the Children of Israel were the closest of all people to God, that they were therefore "God's people," and that the land in which they lived was therefore a sacred or "holy land." The concept of divine authority, as understood by the Jews, left clear imprints on every aspect of their lives, including the way they viewed the world, their character as a people, and their concepts of law, worship, life, and the universe.

The mission of the Prophet Jesus may be seen as an attempt to correct many of the concepts that had influenced the Jewish mind in its dealings or relationship with God, the universe, its prophets, and with itself and its neighbors.

And I have come to confirm the truth of whatever there still remains of the Torah,¹ and to make lawful unto you some of the things which [aforetime] were forbidden to you. (3:50)

Jesus, the son of Mary, said: "O Children of Israel! Behold, I am an apostle of God unto you, [sent] to confirm the truth of whatever there still remains of the Torah, and to give [you] the glad tiding of an apostle who shall come after me, whose name shall be Ahmad." (61:6)

Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. (Matthew 5:17)

And it is easier for heaven and earth to pass, than one tittle of the law to fail. (Luke 16:17)

All of these texts from the scriptures indicate clearly that Jesus was sent to support the Torah, to call people to its teachings, and, perhaps most importantly, to explain to them how they might implement those teachings in their daily lives. Christian thought, however, differed from Jewish thought on many matters, even if both traditions derived their concepts from the same source. The reason for these differences might well have been the emphasis placed by Jesus on reform in general, particularly on the undue attention given by the rabbis to the letter rather than the spirit of the scriptures. This was the reason Jesus addressed the people so often in the language of parables. Thus, he attempted to bring his people to an understanding of the Torah that engaged both the hearts and minds of the believers.

In regard to the issue of divine sovereignty, however, the Christian understanding was based on the teachings of the Torah and the law derived therefrom. This is reflected in the reply of Jesus to Pilate, when Pilate asked him:

“Speakest thou not unto me? Knowest thou not that I have power to crucify thee, and have power to release thee?” Jesus answered, “Thou couldest have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above.” (John 19:10-11)

The concept was further emphasized in Paul's letter to the Romans.

For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. (Romans 13:1)

In regard to the concept of divine authority in the Qur'an, let us begin by considering the relevant Qur'anic verses on the subject.

Not in my power is that which you so hastily demand. Rule rests with none but Allah (6:57)

For those who do not rule by what Allah has revealed it is they who are truly iniquitous (5:47)

And on whatever you may differ, the ruling thereon rests with Allah (42:10)

But no, by your Lord, they are not truly believers unless they make you [O Prophet] a judge of all on which they disagree, and then find in their hearts no bar to an acceptance of your decision and give themselves up to it in utter self-surrender (4:65)

At the heart of Muhammad's mission, however, was what Abraham specified in his prayer to God:

O Lord! Raise up from the midst of our offspring a prophet from among themselves who will convey to them Your messages, and impart to them revelation, and practical wisdom, and purify them. (2:129)

And then Allah answered:

Indeed, Allah bestowed a favor upon the believers when He raised up in their midst a prophet from among themselves to convey His messages unto them, and to purify them, and to impart to them the Book and practical wisdom—whereas before they were clearly lost in error! (3:164)

The Prophet Muhammad was commanded to summarize his mission in the following terms:

[Say, O Muhammad]: I have been commanded to worship the Lord of this City, Him who has made it sacred, and unto whom all things belong: and I have been commanded to be of those who commit themselves to Him, and to recite the Qur'an to the world (27:91).

When we consider the life of the Prophet, we find that he acted on different occasions as a leader, a judge, a ruler, an advisor, and a teacher, and that all of these roles were taken on as a part of his prophethood, rather than as the result of his having attained power. Thus, his was an instructional prophethood, a nurturing prophethood, a purifying prophethood; he was not sent with the sword of domination or command.

We might do well to ponder at this juncture how the Prophet ordered, on the night before his liberation of Makkah, that bonfires be lit on all of the surrounding hills as a show of strength designed to quell all thoughts of resistance among the city's inhabitants. On that night, Abū Sufyān, the long-time opponent of the Prophet among the pagan Quraysh, sought out the Prophet in the company of his uncle (ʿAbbās) in order to announce his conversion to Islam and seek from the Prophet some gesture of honor. When Abū Sufyān saw the fires on the hills around Makkah and realized how many followers the Prophet had won over to his message, he said to ʿAbbās: "Well, your nephew's kingdom has certainly grown vast!" ʿAbbās replied: "This is prophethood, O Abū Sufyān, not kingship."

Clearly, ʿAbbās had understood the difference. To those around him, the Prophet emphasized repeatedly that he was not a potentate or a sultan. Once, for example, when a man began shaking with apprehension before

him, he said: "Take it easy! I'm not a king. I'm only the son of a Qurayshī woman who used to eat dried meat [*qadīd*] (like you do)." In the same vein, the Prophet's prayer is well known: "O Allah! Let me live as a poor man and let me die as a poor man!"

Thus, the prophethood of Muhammad was predicated upon instruction, edification, the recitation of the Qur'an and its teachings, and the amelioration of the human condition. Under such circumstances, if he engaged in what seemed to be political matters, he did so out of considerations of an instructional nature. And, clearly, this is the difference between prophetic rule and all other forms of rule. Moreover, this was carried out after him by his political successors (*khulafā'*), each of whom understood his fundamental role to include reciting the verses of the Qur'an to the people, teaching them the meaning of its verses, instructing them in the practical application of Qur'anic teachings (wisdom), and assisting them in purifying themselves. Clearly, none of these aspects is in any way related to the sort of authority that is derived solely from power.

In view of the foregoing, it is extremely difficult to propose that authority in Islam is a matter of power vested directly in God or that it is wielded in His name, or in the name of the Shari'ah, by the Prophet or his political successors. Rather, authority in Islam is bound irrevocably to education, edification, recitation, and purification; these, in turn, influence the exercise of authority. It is interesting, in this connection, to consider the Prophet's words when he looked ahead to the future of the *ummah*: "*Khilāfah* will reign for thirty years. Thereafter, there will follow a period of gnashing monarchy." In this way, he differentiated between *khilāfah* that followed the way of prophethood and authority based on power and exercised under a certain name, slogan, or ideology.

In the Islamic understanding of the matter, then, there is prophethood and there is *khilāfah* that follows in the way of prophethood. Authority, however, resides in the Qur'an, which is characterized by attributes not found in any of the earlier scriptures. For example, its text is guaranteed by God to remain intact throughout history, it confirms the earlier scriptures, it came as guidance for all of humanity, its Shari'ah is merciful and accommodating, and so much more. The important thing, however, is that it is to be understood and interpreted by means of a human reading, for Qur'anic discourse is directed toward human beings. From this point, the entire matter of reading and interpretation comes into the picture, along with the idea of the "two readings" or a reading of the texts in conjunction with a reading of the real-existential.²

Thus, whereas the concept of divine authority was understood by the earlier monotheistic traditions to be something that involved God directly in human affairs, the Islamic understanding is that divine authority resides in the Word of God, the Qur'an, which is His eternal message.

And upon you have We bestowed this reminder, so that you might make clear unto humankind all that has been revealed to them, so that they might take thought. (16:44)

A Book We have revealed to you in order that you might bring forth all of mankind, by the leave of their Lord, out of the depths of darkness into the light, and onto the way that leads to the Almighty, the One to whom all praise is due (14:1)

We have revealed to you this Book to make everything clear, and to provide guidance, and mercy, and glad tidings for all those who have committed themselves to Allah (16:89).

Authority in Islam, then, is the authority of God's book (the Qur'an); it is to be understood and interpreted and then applied with wisdom by those who have committed themselves to it and to purifying themselves by means of it, each in accordance with their own cultural, geographical, economic, social, and historical circumstances.

With divine authority vested in the Qur'an, the believers become responsible for providing all the guarantees demanded by the values shared by humanity in general, such values as justice, truth, guardianship, and guidance. Moreover, this sort of authority is enhanced by many different dimensions, including the universal and comprehensive nature of the Shari'ah and its basis in the texts of the Qur'an, which are open to all. Thus, the Qur'an may never become the exclusive domain of one group or another in the name of divine authority, owing solely to their being the only ones capable of accessing and understanding it. Similarly, too, the authority of the Qur'an is a liberating concept and one that empowers successive generations believers to renew constantly their understanding of God's will for them and to order their affairs in a tractable manner.

My mercy overspreads everything; and so I shall confer it on those who are conscious of Me and spend in charity, and who believe in Our messages—those who follow the Prophet, the unlettered one whom they find described in the Torah that is with them, and in the Injil; who will enjoin upon them the doing of what is right and forbid them the doing of what is wrong, and make lawful to them the good things in life and forbid them the bad things, and lift from them the burdens and the shackles that were upon them. (7:156-57)

In this *ummah*, the one intended by God to be the "middlemost" *ummah* and whose message is intended to be the final message to humanity, the Qur'an is the final authority. Let me quote here from Imām al-Shāṭibī:

Thus, the Shari'ah [by which he means the Qur'an] is the absolute authority, over all, and over the Prophet, upon him be peace, and over all the believers. So the Book is the guide, and revelation (*wahy*) instructs in and clarifies that guidance, while all of creation are the ones for whom that guidance is intended. So when the Prophet's heart and limbs, or his inner and outer being were illumined by the light of the Truth, he became the *ummah*'s first and greatest guide; for Allah singled him out, to the exception of all others, to receive that clear light, having chosen him from among all of His creation. So Allah chose him, first of all, to receive the revelation that lit up his inner and outer being, so that his character became, as it were, the Qur'an. This came about because the Prophet, upon him be peace, gave revelation authority over himself, until his character was brought into accord with that revelation, into accord with the Qur'an. Thus, revelation was the authority and the standing speaker, while the Prophet, upon him be peace, submitted to that, answering its call, and standing by its authority. Then, if the matter was so, if the Shari'ah was the authority over the Prophet, upon him be peace, or if the Qur'an was the authority, then all of humankind deserve to be subjects to the authority of the Qur'an.³

How then, one may ask, did so many of our contemporary Islamic movements come to have such mistaken notions of the concept of divine authority? Why did they attempt, in its name, to vault into positions of political power and insist that Islam is based on this notion?

To begin with, the majority of these movements represent extensions of freedom movements that began as attempted jihads against foreign colonialist powers. At the time, those liberation movements brought everything in their power, including the entire intellectual and cultural heritage of the *ummah*, to bear against the enemy, calling Muslims to the glory of the past. Even though very few of those movements actually accomplished what they set out to do, the colonialists left, new faces appeared, and national governments were established. At the time of their formation, however, the influence of Western concepts was overwhelming, including ideas regarding nationalism, national governments, and the exercise of power. As a result, the new governments often bore little resemblance to the models of the Muslim past.

In such an atmosphere, then, the contemporary Islamic movements began their internal struggles with the goal of achieving that for which so many of their predecessors, in Algeria, Egypt, India, Iraq, and many other Islamic lands, had given their lives. Moreover, the feeling among most participants in such movements was that the *ummah* had fallen victim once again, but this time to their own people! Confronted with a state of dependency in economics, politics, thought, institutions, and even cul-

ture, the leaders of the Islamic movements turned again to the heritage of Islam in order to find the right sort of religious ideas and slogans with which to fire the imaginations of the masses and to oppose the ideologies and practices of their new rulers who, despite their Islamic names and the nominal Islamic trappings of their governments, differed little from their colonialist predecessors. Thus, the Islamists branded their opponents *jāhili*, a designation for pre-Islamic pagans, and charged them with usurping the reins of power on the grounds, they insisted, that authority and sovereignty belonged only to God.

This is approximately what happened in Pakistan, where the Islamist leadership, especially Abū al 'Alā' al Mawdūdī, were quite vocal in their espousal of the dualist "*jāhili*" versus "divine authority" equation. As a state that was formed in the name of Islam, and as a homeland for India's Muslim minority of millions, the popular vision of Pakistan was that it would be an Islamic state. It was, therefore, only natural that when the debate over the form and legitimacy of its government began, the heavily-loaded terms "*jāhili*" and "God's sovereignty" quickly gained wide circulation.

Looking at Egypt, we note that while its experience differed significantly from that of Pakistan, there are nonetheless many similarities between the two. For example, in both instances the Islamists were among the first to organize the populace against the colonialists. In Egypt, the Islamists played major roles in the 'Urabī Pasha uprising, in the revolution of 1919, and in every resistance movement thereafter, including the attempt to rid the Suez Canal of its seventy thousand British "protectors" and the attempt to liberate Palestine. With all of these in mind, the Islamists fully expected that their countrymen would clearly recognize their rights and acknowledge their long and arduous struggle. So when the army officers moved to abolish the monarchy, it was the Islamists who undertook to quell the populace. At the time, it was well known that without the support and assistance of the Islamists (the Muslim Brotherhood), the revolution would never have succeeded. Even so, within a few short months, the revolutionaries denounced their Islamist associates and broke their agreements with them. Yet, in order to appease the masses and appeal to their Islamic loyalties, the revolutionaries were careful to pay lip service to Islam. At the same time, however, they acted quickly to neutralize the influence of their former allies by subjecting them to the worst sort of persecution.

From their prison cells, their places of secure detention, and their places of exile, the Islamists retaliated in the only way they knew how: turning to the cultural and intellectual heritage of Islam and pointing out to the masses how their new leadership had not only betrayed the Islamists, but also Islam itself and the Muslim masses. This message was conveyed in the studies and writings of several of the movement's most prominent thinkers, among them 'Abd al-Qādir 'Awdah in his studies of the legal and political systems and Sayyid Quṭb, who used the emotive term *jāhili* in his

writings to refer to the revolutionary leadership, citing Qur'anic verses branding those who do not rule by the Shari'ah (as the ordered expression of divine revelation) as disbelievers.⁴

In fact, Sayyid Quṭb dealt at length in his works with the terms *jāhiliyya* (pre-Islamic paganism) and *ḥākimīyah* (authority). In Quṭb's later works, especially, his discussions of authority took on added importance due to his view that the people and parties that had come into power after independence throughout the Muslim world had assumed for themselves, wrongfully, the right of authority that belonged to God alone. In Quṭb's opinion, no human being had the right to claim legitimacy for his/her rule unless that rule was based on God's authority.⁵ Quṭb, however, did not elaborate on the details of how a government based on God's authority would actually function, probably because his purpose in writing on the matter was merely to bring it to the *ummah*'s attention and to demonstrate to it that the goals they had set for themselves at the time of independence had not been achieved by the present rulers.

In his political thought, Sayyid Quṭb developed the concept of authority (*ḥākimīyah*) to a level of high sophistication. Thus, according to him, the credal phrase "there is no god but God" included the meanings that God is the sole authority and that all power belongs to Him alone.⁶ Quṭb did not, however, differentiate between the meaning of Allah's authority as it pertained to the political sphere, for example, to the sphere of the natural universe, or to the legal sphere. Thus, both Quṭb and Mawdūdī attempted to show divine and human authority in opposition to one another. Moreover, just as Mawdūdī had negated any role for either individuals or groups in the matter of authority, other than "hearing and obeying," Sayyid Quṭb did so for the reason that the sole authority is God.

Owing to the influence of these two thinkers and activists, the concept of divine authority came to be understood in contemporary Islamist circles in almost the same way it had been understood in the days of Moses: God would establish a state of His own, with His own laws and procedures that, having originated with the divine, are sacred and inseparable from belief and the details of the articles of faith. In such a system, there is no difference between what belongs to this world and to me hereafter, and nothing to separate what is "civil" from what is "religious" or otherwise. Indeed, this popular perception of the thought of Quṭb and Mawdūdī persisted despite the attempts of others to explain, within the same general framework, the role of humans in understanding and interpreting through the process of *ijtihād*. In addition, many commentators as well as others attempted to deal with concepts like the state, government, legitimacy, and others by reading the Qur'an and the hadiths of the Prophet and studying history. They then sought to transpose these contemporary meanings onto the texts of the Qur'an and Sunnah, with the result that they so distorted these concepts that a great deal of analysis and reconstruction will be required before any clear understanding of these may be achieved.

In order to clarify the concept of divine authority, it will first be necessary to consider a few fundamental matters. From their beginnings, the message and the discourse of Islam have been universal.

We have not sent you [O Muhammad} otherwise than to human-kind at large, to be a herald of good tidings and a warner. (34:28)

The attribute of universality in the message carries with it the significance that it has the power to appeal to everyone, whether Asians, Africans, Europeans, or Americans, to answer their needs throughout history, and to guide them to success in this world and in the hereafter. Even though Muslims may find themselves in the most difficult of positions, they should never attempt to transform Islam or its concepts into weapons, or a means of overthrowing, because Islam the religion of God that is meant for humanity at large.

Furthermore, even though the Qur'an may have been revealed in Arabic, its meanings are universal and comprehensive. The relationship of the Qur'an to the circumstances in which it was first revealed, moreover, is of the nature of the relationship between the absolute and the relative or of the limited to the unlimited. Finally, while the texts of the Qur'an are limited, in a lexical sense, the meanings they bear are unlimited and discernible through an understanding of the Qur'an's structural integrity and its unique intellectual methodology.

As we move from these theological verities, insofar as they may be described as objective scientific postulates in support of the idea of Islam's eternal and universal message, we will notice further that a number of its special characteristics are so self-evident that we never paid much attention to their methodological consequences. Among these are the concepts of the finality of prophethood (*khātim al nubūwah*), the principles of legal facilitation and mercy, and the absolute authority of the Qur'an regardless of time or place.

Thus, while Qur'anic discourse begins by addressing the simplest family unit,

We said, "O Adam! Inhabit, you and your wife, the garden of Paradise." (2:35)

and then the expanded family,

... and warn your closest kinfolk (26:214),

it then goes on to address the tribe,

O Children of Israel! Remember those blessings of Mine with which I favored you. (2:40),

and

... and verily it [the Qur'an] shall be a reminder to you and to your tribe. (43:44),

and then an entity larger than just a single tribe;

... in order that you may warn the mother of all cities and those living around it. (42:7)

Thereafter, the discourse progresses to include those beyond the family and the tribe,

He it is who has sent unto the unlettered people an apostle from among themselves. (62:2)

in which the meaning of "unlettered people" is all those who had never received a translation before. Here, let us consider what Imām Shāfi'ī wrote in his *Risālah*:

He sent him (i.e., Allah sent the Prophet, upon him be peace) at a time when people were divided into two categories.

One of these groups was the People of the Book, who had altered its laws, disbelieved in God, engaged in lying, and mixed falsehood with the truth that God had revealed to them. After that,

Allah mentioned to His Prophet some of their disbelief, saying: "And indeed there are some among them who distort the scriptures with their tongues, so as to make you think that [what they say] is from the scriptures, the while it is not from the scriptures; and who say, 'This is from Allah,' the while it is not from Allah: and thus do they speak falsehoods about Allah, even when they know [otherwise]." (3:78)

Woe unto those who write down with their own hands, [something they claim to be] divine scripture, and then say: "This is from Allah," in order to acquire a trifling gain thereby; woe, then, unto them for what their hands have written, and woe unto them for all that they may have gained! (2:79)

And the Jews say: "Ezra is Allah's son," while the Christians say: "The Christ is Allah's son." Such are the sayings which they utter with their mouths, following in spirit assertions made in earlier times by people who denied the truth! (They deserve the imprecation) May Allah destroy them! How perverted are their minds! They have taken their rabbis and their monks—as well as the Christ, Son of Mary—for their lords beside Allah! (9:30-31)

Are you not aware of those who, having been granted their share of the divine scriptures, believe now in baseless mysteries and in the powers of evil, and maintain that those who deny the truth are more surely guided than those who believe? It is they whom Allah has rejected; and he whom Allah rejects shall find none to succor him (4:51-52).

The other category was the group that disbelieved in Allah and created that which Allah did not allow. They raised with their own hands stones and wood and images they found pleasing, gave them names that they made up themselves, called them gods, and worshipped them. When they something else that was more pleasing to them as an object of worship, they discarded what they had been worshipping, raised up the new objects of worship with their own hands, and began worshipping them! Those were the Arabs! A group of non-Arabs followed the same path, worshipping whatever they found pleasing, be it a whale, an animal, a star, fire, or whatever. God related to Muhammad one of the answers made by those who worshipped other than Him:

Behold, we found our forefathers agreed on what to believe—and, verily it is in their footsteps that we find our guidance (43:22)

And He quoted them;

Do not ever abandon your gods, neither Wadd nor Suwā', and neither Yaghūth nor Ya'ūq nor Nasr (71:23).⁷

The Prophet did not die until he was successful in extending the divine discourse beyond the family, the tribe, and the nation to encompass all humanity and until the following verses were revealed:

He it is who sent His Prophet with guidance and the religion of truth, with the end that He may cause it to prevail over all [false] religion. (9:33; 61:9)

He it is who sent His Prophet with guidance and the religion of truth, to the end that He make it to prevail over every [false] religion; and none can bear witness [to the truth] as Allah does. (48:28)

Thus, in a historical sense, the divine discourse was revealed gradually and within differing legislative circumstances, each of which possessed its own particular features. Likewise, each prophet of God had his own special circumstances. This is why God gave each one of them a different legal system and way of life.

Unto every one have We appointed from you a law and a way of life. (5:48)

This verse alerts us to the importance of studying religious legal systems in comparison with our own, as these pertain to the differing circumstances of those who believe. Finally, when we come to the Qur'an and its universal message, we discover that its legal system is one of facilitation and mercy for all humanity, and that it is designed to bring all people together within the framework of shared values and concepts.

Those who follow the Messenger, the unlettered Prophet whom they find described in the Torah that is with them, and in the Injil; the Prophet who will enjoin upon them the doing of what is right and forbid them the doing of what is wrong, and make lawful for them the good things of life and forbid them the bad things, and lift from them the burdens and the shackles that were upon them. Those, then, who believe in him, and honor him, and assist him, and follow the light bestowed through him—it is they that shall attain success. (7:157)

It is therefore very important that those of us within Islamic circles realize that we are face to face with a divine discourse that has progressed in stages until, at last, it is now directed toward humanity at large. Accordingly, it is no longer possible to understand the concept of divine authority in the ways it was understood in the previous religious traditions. The popular understanding of this concept among Muslims today is one that has been colored by attempts to counter Western concepts of authority, government, and legitimacy by taking Qur'anic concepts out of context and without considering the Qur'an's structural integrity, universality, or the true significance of the finality of prophethood.

Thus, in the concept of Qur'anic authority we may discern the responsibility of individuals to read and understand and then to interpret and apply. In the concept of divine authority, however, the individual is no more than a recipient whose only responsibility is to adhere to whatever he/she has been given. The authority of the Qur'an is like human authority in the sense that it functions through a human reading of the Qur'an and a subsequent human application of its teachings, regardless of the cultural, intellectual, or other circumstances that make up the context of that reading and application.

If contemporary Islamic thought is able to catch its own mistakes, then, God willing, it will not remain dormant or be destined to revolve endlessly within the confines of its own history, unable to offer solutions to the problems which beset it. Many of those problems are related in one way or another to concepts of legislation, the meanings of power and

society, the relationship of the revealed texts changing social and historical circumstances, and to concepts of deference to traditional authority (*taqlīd*), renewal, and reform. If contemporary Muslims become serious about their responsibility to deal with these issues in the name of God, Who created, and taught by means of the pen humanity that which it did not know, they will begin to contribute to the building of a new and better world, and thereby bring about the objectives of the truth for all of creation.

Endnotes

1. See Muhammad Asad's explanation of the meaning of the phrase 'li mā bayna yadayhi' at note 3 in Qur'an 3:3. *The Message of the Quran* (Gibraltar: Dār al-Andalus, 1984) pp. 65-66.
2. See the author's "The Islamization of Knowledge: Yesterday and Today," *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 12, vol. 1 (Spring 1995): 81-104.
3. Abū Ishāq al Shātibī, *Kitāb al I'tisām*, 2:328.
4. See Qur'an 5:47
5. See, in particular, Qūṭb's *Ma'ālim fī al Ṭarīq* and his *Muqawwimat al Mujtama' al Islāmī*.
6. By doing so, the further implication is that those who fail to give God His due in this matter are, in fact, guilty of a form of *shirk*, which is clearly disbelief—and the worst sort of disbelief at that.
7. See Imām al-Shāfi'ī, *al Risālah* (Cairo: Ḥalabī, 1940), 8.