

Why Keep Going?

Given all of the “bulls of inequity” I was facing, you might be wondering what it was that kept me reading the Quran. I’ve just been thinking about that very question, and I guess that is why I am writing this chapter. I have realized that there were a number of things that just “felt right” about the Quran. Things that made it impossible for me to just put down the book and walk away.

Probably the first thing that struck a chord for me was the clear recognition that there are many paths to God. Unlike other religious writings I had encountered, the Quran does not say that there is only one right organized religion. Rather, it makes it clear that anyone who believes in God and the Last Day and works righteousness will be rewarded. This concept was clear right away, in the first several pages I read:

*Those who believe (in the Qur-an),
And those who follow the Jewish (scriptures),
And the Christians and the Sabians, –
Any who believe in God
And the Last Day,
And work righteousness,
Shall have their reward
With their Lord: on them
Shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve.
(The Holy Quran II:62 [2:62])*

This verse is repeated almost word for word in Chapter 5, Verse 69. (Note that there are a few places where Yusuf Ali breaks his verses differently from the original Arabic. Because of this, his verse number for this repeating verse is 5:72, though in other translations it is 5:69.)

There were a couple of things in these repeating verses that I was not certain about. First of all, who were the Sabians? Yusuf Ali has a long footnote discussing who they might be. Rashad Khalifa translates the word as “converts.” (Please see his *Quran: The Final Testament*, 5:69.)

Then what does the Quran mean by “righteousness”? In the West, this word has taken on a negative connotation. Fortunately, the Quran specifically defines it:

*Righteousness is not turning your faces
towards the east or the west.
Righteous are those who believe in God,
the Last Day, the angels, the scripture, and the prophets;
and they give the money, cheerfully,
to the relatives, the orphans, the needy,
the traveling alien, the beggars, and to free the slaves;
and they observe the Contact Prayers (Salat)
and give the obligatory charity (Zakat);
and they keep their word whenever they make a promise;
and they steadfastly persevere
in the face of persecution, hardship, and war.
These are the truthful; these are the righteous.
(Quran: The Final Testament 2:177)*

The only other references in the Quran to turning one’s face in a specific direction are talking about the *qiblah*, or the direction that Muslims face when they pray. In telling us that righteousness is not turning to the east or west, I believe that God is telling us that righteousness does not depend on ritual. It depends on the belief in one’s heart. It also has to do with the way one treats others. And it has to do with obeying God’s commands to pray and give charity.

Righteousness is not confined to the followers of one religion. This next verse tells us that God has given different rites and revelations to different congregations. He tests us through these differences and tells us to “*compete in righteousness*”:

*Then we revealed to you this scripture,
truthfully, confirming previous scriptures,
and superseding them.
You shall rule among them in accordance
with God's revelations,
and do not follow their wishes if they differ
from the truth that came to you.
For each of you, we have decreed
laws and different rites.
Had God willed, He could have
made you one congregation.
But He thus puts you to the test
through the revelations
He has given each of you.
You shall compete in righteousness.
To God is your final destiny – all of you –
then He will inform you
of everything you had disputed.
(Quran: The Final Testament 5:48)*

So, God has given different congregations different rites and revelations, and we should be competing, not in the worldly sense, but in righteousness. We could have all been one congregation, if that were God's will, but He chose to test us with each other. To me that says we should not be attacking one another, and blaming one another, but we should be striving to be righteous and urging each other on to greater righteousness!

Sadly, some Muslims do not have that understanding. Rather they believe that only the organized religion called Islam is correct. Perhaps some of this is because of two very interesting verses that I believe are totally misunderstood by these Muslims. If read incorrectly, they can be understood to mean exactly the opposite of what we have just seen in the previously quoted verses. Here is the first verse:

*The only religion approved by God is "Submission."
Ironically, those who have received the scripture
are the ones who dispute this fact,*

*despite the knowledge they have received,
due to jealousy.
For such rejectors of God's revelations,
God is most strict in reckoning.
(Quran: The Final Testament 3:19)*

If one does not translate the word "Submission" from the Arabic, and rather leaves it as "Islam," you get the understanding that Islam is the only religion acceptable to God. This implies that the organized religion known as Islam is the only correct religion, and totally masks the actual teaching. This teaching, as I understand it, is that your religion is only approved if you are truly submitting to God. As 2:62 (quoted above) and 5:69 say, anyone who believes in God and the Last Day and works righteousness, thus submitting to God, is acceptable to Him. They will reap their reward.

On the other hand, if one does not submit to God, it is not acceptable to Him:

*If anyone desires
A religion other than
Islam (submission to God),
Never will it be accepted
Of him; and in the Hereafter
He will be in the ranks
Of those who have lost
(All spiritual good).
(The Holy Quran III:85 [3:85])*

Again, if you choose not to fully translate this verse (in the quoted translation you would have to ignore Yusuf Ali's explanation in parenthesis), you get the erroneous meaning that Islam is the only religion acceptable to God. This goes totally against the rest of the Quran! The Quran makes it very clear that anyone can be a Submitter ("Muslim" in Arabic), no matter what they call themselves or their religion. Jesus and his followers are called Muslims as are Moses and his followers (see verses 3:52 and 10:84 for examples).

Not only that, the previous scriptures are honored in the Quran:

*We have sent down the Torah,
containing guidance and light.
Ruling in accordance with it were
the Jewish prophets,
as well as the rabbis and the priests,
as dictated to them in God's scripture,
and as witnessed by them.
Therefore, do not reverence human beings;
you shall reverence Me instead.
And do not trade away My revelations for a cheap price.
Those who do not rule in accordance
with God's revelations are the disbelievers.
(Quran: The Final Testament 5:44)*

We see here that the Torah contains “*guidance and light.*” Clearly, one can gain guidance and light from reading and following it. The same phrase is used to describe the Gospels in the following verse:

*And in their footsteps
We sent Jesus the son
of Mary, confirming
The Law that had come
Before him: We sent him
The Gospel: therein
Was guidance and light,
And confirmation of the Law
That had come before him:
A guidance and an admonition
To those who fear God.
(The Holy Quran V:49 [normally 5:46])*

(Note, that again Yusuf Ali has changed the numbering of his verses. This is normally numbered 5:46, but he has changed the numbering in that section, so it is 5:49 in his translation.)

So the Gospels also contain “*guidance and light.*” Thus, the Quran is not the only scripture that Muslims accept. Of course, there are some areas where human distortion has entered into the earlier scriptures. This is evident to anyone who has done even a cursory study of their history. Given that they were oral documents for many, many years before being written down, this distortion is expected. However, the truth still shines clearly in both documents.

Not only are the previous scriptures honored in the Quran, Muslims are commanded to believe in the revelations given to earlier prophets:

*Say ye: “We believe
In God, and the revelation
Given to us, and to Abraham,
Ismail, Isaac, Jacob,
And the Tribes, and that given
To Moses and Jesus, and that given
To (all) Prophets from their Lord:
We make no difference
Between one and another of them:
And we bow to God (in Islam).”
(The Holy Quran II:136 [2:136])*

Thus, the previous scriptures contain guidance and light, and Muslims are commanded to accept them (excepting, of course, the few places where human distortions contradict what is revealed in the Quran).



The next thing that drew me to the Quran was the beautiful verses on nature. When I read these verses, tears came to my eyes and emotion swelled my heart. Though I have read them again and again, I still find they touch me to the core.

I could quote verse after verse. Here are a few of my favorites:

*God is the One who causes the grains
and the seeds to crack and germinate.*

*He produces the living from the dead,
and the dead from the living.
Such is God; how could you deviate!
At the crack of dawn, He causes
the morning to emerge.
He made the night still,
and He rendered the sun and the moon
to serve as calculation devices.
Such is the design of the Almighty,
the Omniscient.
And He is the One who made the stars
to guide you during the darkness, on land and on sea.
We thus clarify the revelations
for people who know.
He initiated you from one person,
and decided your path,
as well as your final destiny.
We thus clarify the revelations
for people who understand.
He is the One who sends down
from the sky water,
whereby we produce all kinds of plants.
We produce from the green material
multitudes of complex grains,
palm trees with hanging clusters,
and gardens of grapes, olives and pomegranate;
fruits that are similar, yet dissimilar.
Note their fruits as they grow and ripen.
These are signs for people who believe.
(Quran: The Final Testament 6:95-99)*

I love these verses. The thought of the morning emerging “at the crack of dawn” and all the beautiful fruits and the heavenly bodies makes me so aware of all of the great blessings God has bestowed upon us.

*It is He Who doth show you
The lightning, by way
Both of fear and of hope:*

*It is He Who doth raise up
The clouds, heavy
With (fertilising) rain!
Nay, thunder repeateth His praises,
And so do the angels, with awe:
He flingeth the loud-voiced
Thunder-bolts, and therewith
He striketh whomsoever He will...
Yet these (are the men)
Who (dare to) dispute
About God, with the strength
Of His power (supreme)!
(The Holy Quran XIII:12-13 [13:12-13])*

How beautiful it is to remember the lightning and think of it as something that gives both fear and hope. And the thunder praising God, as do the angels in awe! The thought makes me shiver.

*One sign for them is the dead land:
we revive it and produce from it grains for their food.
We grow in it gardens of date palms, and grapes,
and we cause springs to gush out therein.
This is to provide them with fruits,
and to let them manufacture
with their own hands
whatever they need. Would they be thankful?
Glory be to the One who created
all kinds of plants
from the earth, as well as themselves,
and other creations that they do not even know.
Another sign for them is the night:
we remove the daylight therefrom,
whereupon they are in darkness.
The sun sets into a specific location,
according to the design of the Almighty,
the Omniscient.*

*The moon we designed to appear in stages,
until it becomes like an old curved sheath.
The sun is never to catch up with the moon –
the night and the day never deviate –
each of them is floating in its own orbit.
(Quran: The Final Testament 36:33-40)*

This is another wonderful description of the great blessings with which God showers us. I especially love the thought of the moon “*like an old curved sheath*” and the sun never catching up with the moon, but each “*floating in its own orbit.*”

Nature has always provided a refuge for me. As a child I only felt close to God when I was outside with the birds and the wildflowers, feeling the breeze in my hair and the warmth of the sun. I still find that there is nothing more centering for me than a walk in God’s beautiful creation.

While nature was a refuge for me, I was perhaps an overly sensitive child. Seeing a dead animal caused me great grief. If I had known the animal, it was almost unbearable. Just thinking about my departed dogs and cats brought gushing tears for years and years after their deaths.

It was the greatest relief to find the following verse:

*There is not an animal
(That lives) on the earth,
Nor a being that flies
On its wings, but (forms
Part of) communities like you.
Nothing have we omitted
From the Book, and they (all)
Shall be gathered to their Lord
In the end.
(The Holy Quran VI:38 [6:38])*

This verse makes it clear that all creatures will return to God. The animals are not left out of heaven. Not only that, the animals worship God, as this next verse tells us:

*Seest thou not that it is
God Whose praises all beings
In the heavens and on earth
Do celebrate, and the birds
(Of the air) with wings
Outspread? Each one knows
Its own (mode of) prayer
And praise. And God
Knows well all that they do.
(The Holy Quran XXIV:41 [24:41])*

Moreover, it is not just animals that worship and return to God. Even what we think of as inanimate objects willingly submit:

*Moreover He comprehended
In His design the sky,
And it had been (as) smoke:
He said to it
And to the earth:
"Come ye together,
Willingly or unwillingly."
They said: "We do come
(Together), in willing obedience."
(The Holy Quran XLI:11 [41:11])*

This verse describes how the heaven and the earth willingly submitted to God. Normally we think of these as being lifeless things, but this verse makes them sound as if they have a consciousness and the ability to decide whether to submit or not.

This knowledge gave me a totally different view of the world. Now the lovely creatures around me were as much in God's care as I was, and when they died they went back to Him. Their deaths were no longer a greater sorrow than that of people. Indeed my understanding now is that since they are unques-

tioning submitters, they are in a much better position with God than I am.



The next thing that drew me to the Quran was the clarification of God's power I found there. I had grown up hearing that God was Omnipotent, but He seemed unable to do things like stop wars and feed hungry children. This had always confused me. The following verse began to explain:

*Fighting may be imposed on you,
even though you dislike it.
But you may dislike something
which is good for you,
and you may like something
which is bad for you.
God knows while you do not know.
(Quran: The Final Testament 2:216)*

So, sometimes things that look bad are actually good. I still did not understand completely, but this was much better than thinking that God could not stop the bad things happening. Quite a bit later I read the story of Moses' teacher in Chapter 18 of the Quran. That story tells of how Moses asks to follow his teacher. The teacher says that he will not be able to stand being with him, but Moses promises not to question anything, and they go along. His teacher then proceeds to do some outrageous things: he drills a hole in a ship, kills a young boy, and repairs a fence for people who have refused to help them. After each incident Moses breaks his promise not to ask questions, and finally has questioned enough. The teacher then tells him:

*He said, "Now we have to part company.
But I will explain to you everything you could not stand.
"As for the ship, it belonged to poor fishermen,
and I wanted to render it defective.
There was a king coming after them,*

who was confiscating every ship, forcibly.

*"As for the boy, his parents were good believers,
and we saw that he was going to burden them
with his transgression and disbelief.*

*"We willed that your Lord substitute in his place
another son; one who is better
in righteousness and kindness.*

*"As for the wall, it belonged to two orphan boys
in the city. Under it, there was a treasure
that belonged to them.*

*Because their father was a righteous man,
your Lord wanted them to grow up and
attain full strength, then extract their treasure.*

Such is mercy from your Lord.

I did none of that of my own volition.

This is the explanation of the things you could not stand."

(Quran: The Final Testament 18:78-81)

This story made it clear to me that we often do not have all the information we need to judge if something is good or bad. God may be doing something very good in something that looks very bad.

To explain the things going on in my own life I found the following verse:

Whatever good, (O man!)

Happens to thee, is from God;

But whatever evil happens

To thee, is from thy (own) soul....

(The Holy Quran IV:79 [4:79])

As time went on I began to realize that the bad things that happened in my life happened mostly when I had broken one of God's commandments or was beginning to stray from His guidance. The bad things were like warnings to me that I was doing the wrong thing.

Finally, I began to realize that indeed, God is Omnipotent. He is in control of everything that happens. Humans just think that they are controlling their lives. God gives us free will, so it appears that we are doing what we want, but in truth:

*Whatever you will is in accordance
with God's will. God is Omniscient, Wise.
(Quran: The Final Testament 76:30)*

This means that we are really not making the decision. However, we can consciously decide that we want to accept God's will for us. This is, I believe, the essence of Submission. In turning our will over to God, we are recognizing that He truly is the One in charge of everything, not us.

I found that following the commandment in this next verse was extremely helpful to remind myself of this important fact:

*You shall not say that you will do
anything in the future,
without saying, "God willing."
If you forget to do this,
you must immediately remember
your Lord and say,
"May my Lord guide me to do better next time."
(Quran: The Final Testament 18:23-24)*



There is another area that really touched a chord for me. The Quran tells us very clearly how we should treat each other, and it is always in the best possible manner:

*Tell My servants to treat each other
in the best possible manner,
for the devil will always try
to drive a wedge among them.*

*Surely, the devil is man's most ardent enemy.
(Quran: The Final Testament 17:53)*

We are to treat each other well. It does not matter what our relationship is to each other, or our station in society. We must treat all people well, as this next verse makes clear:

*Serve God, and join not
Any partners with Him;
And do good –
To parents, kinsfolk,
Orphans, those in need,
Neighbours who are near,
Neighbours who are strangers,
The Companion by your side,
The way-farer (ye meet),
And what your right hands possess:
For God loveth not
The arrogant, the vainglorious; –
(The Holy Quran IV:36 [4:36])*

Here God tells us to treat everyone well, those who are related and those who are strangers, the free and the slave. He also makes it clear that we should not be too proud of ourselves.

And we should not make fun of others, either as individuals or as groups:

*O you who believe, no people
shall ridicule other people,
for they may be better than they.
Nor shall any women ridicule other women,
for they may be better than they.
Nor shall you mock one another,
or make fun of your names.
Evil indeed is the reversion to wickedness
after attaining faith.*

*Anyone who does not repent after this,
these are the transgressors.
(Quran: The Final Testament 49:11)*

Ridicule and mocking are equated here to wickedness, and if you find yourself caught in this behavior and do not repent, then you are transgressing.

We must respect other peoples and recognize that it is righteousness that gives anyone worth in God's eyes:

*O people, we created you from
the same male and female,
and rendered you distinct peoples and tribes,
that you may recognize one another.
The best among you in the sight of God
is the most righteous.
God is Omniscient, Cognizant.
(Quran: The Final Testament 49:13)*

Thus, it is not one's tribe or nationality or race or religion that is important. Only one's righteousness is important. There is true equality for all people in the Quran.

Tyranny and oppression are condemned throughout the Quran. Here is one of the strongest condemnations:

*They ask you about the Sacred Months
and fighting therein: say, "Fighting therein
is a sacrilege. However, repelling
from the path of God
and disbelieving in Him
and in the sanctity of the Sacred Masjid,
and evicting its people,
are greater sacrileges
in the sight of God.
Oppression is worse than murder...."
(Quran: The Final Testament 2:217 – first portion)*

To describe oppression as “*worse than murder*” is a very strong statement. Clearly, the oppression that so often manifests in Muslim nations is not at all Quranic.

Aggression is also forbidden:

*You may fight in the cause of God
against those who attack you,
but do not aggress.
God does not love the aggressors.
(Quran: The Final Testament 2:190)*

So often in the West we associate Islam with aggression. Sadly, Muslims often are very aggressive, but the truth of the religion is not. In fact, one of God's names is the Peace:

*He is the One God;
there is no other god beside Him.
The King, the Most Sacred, **the Peace**,
the Most Faithful, the Supreme, the Almighty,
the Most Powerful, the Most Dignified.
God be glorified; far above having partners.
(Quran: The Final Testament 59:23 - emphasis added)*

Aggression is forbidden and we are to treat each other well. If we all lived according to these principles, what an amazing difference it would make for every person on this planet.



There was one final thing that really drew me to the Quran. As I mentioned in the Prologue, as a young person I was torn between my desire for a spiritual path and my dislike of organized religion. In the Quran it is clear that our connection with God is direct, with no intermediaries. Thus if you are following just the Quran, Islam is not an organized religion in the normal sense. The following verse shows that our connection with God is direct:

*Say, “All intercession belongs to God.”
To Him belongs all sovereignty*

*of the heavens and the earth,
then to Him you will be returned.
(Quran: The Final Testament 39:44)*

Not only is there no intercession by anyone with God, the only one we need to please is God alone. He is the only one we will answer to, and no one can help us but God:

*Say, "My Contact Prayers (Salat),
my worship practices, my life and my death,
are all devoted absolutely to God alone,
the Lord of the universe....
Say, "Shall I seek other than God as a lord,
when He is the Lord of all things?
No soul benefits except from its own works,
and none bears the burden of another.
Ultimately, you return to your Lord,
then He informs you regarding all your disputes."
(Quran: The Final Testament 6:162-4)*

Thus, our relationship with God is very direct, and very immediate. In fact He tells us that He is closer to us than our jugular vein (Chapter 50, Verse 16). What a gift that knowledge was to me!

There were many other things in the Quran that bound me to it from the very beginning. Yes, there were lots of things I did not understand, and much inequity I needed to resolve. But there was so much in the Quran that touched my soul that I could not just walk away from it, no matter what I thought I knew about Islam.

