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# QUR'AN, LIBERATION & PLURALISM

*An Islamic Perspective of  
Interreligious Solidarity  
against Oppression*

**Farid Esack**



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hermeneutical keys within the context of a society characterized by injustice, division and exploitation: *taqwa* (integrity and awareness in relation to the presence of God); *tawhid* (divine unity); *al-nas* (the people); *al-mustad'afun fi'l-ard* (the oppressed on the earth); *'adl* and *qist* (balance and justice) and *jihad* (struggle and praxis).

## HERMENEUTICAL KEYS

### *The ENGAGED INTERPRETER & the SEARCH for LIBERATING MEANING*

I am the Prophet of mercy, I am the Prophet of battle.

(*Hadith*, cited in Ibn Taymiyyah 1974, p. 8)

You cannot separate Muhammad, the prayer leader, from Muhammad, the *jihad* leader; the hand that held the *miswak*<sup>1</sup> also held the sword.

(Call of Islam 1985, *Urite for Justice*, p. 1)

### A Hermeneutic of Liberation

In the first chapter we saw how Qur'anic texts pertaining to justice, oppression, resistance, the armed struggle and interfaith solidarity against oppression were frequently invoked by the progressive Islamists during the uprisings of the early 1980s. Standing within the struggle for justice was itself a good point from which to get a better view of the text. In other words, the location of the interpreter itself became a consciously chosen hermeneutical key.

The criteria which these engaged interpreters employed in their approaches to the Qur'an and their choice of one particular meaning over another were diffused in numerous tracts, discussion-cum-reflection circles and public speeches. These criteria and the methods used to get to them, however, were never systematically defined and justified, nor were they carefully examined in the light of Islamic theology. I now want to move on to weave the Qur'anic rhetoric of liberation used during the 1980s into a more coherent theological theory and hermeneutic of religious pluralism for liberation. In doing so, I shall be focusing on the theological and political nature and implications of each of the following

### A Qur'anic Theology of Liberation

Speaking about liberation during the apartheid years in South Africa has made the meaning of liberation obvious enough: liberation from all forms of racism and economic exploitation. A deeper awareness of the nature of injustice, the role of socio-political structures and the importance of a truly participatory process of liberation has led to a clearer definition of a theology of liberation. A theology of liberation, for me, is one that works towards freeing religion from social, political and religious structures and ideas based on uncritical obedience and the freedom of all people from all forms of injustice and exploitation including those of race, gender, class and religion. Liberation theology tries to achieve its objectives through a process that is participatory and liberatory. By this I mean that it is formulated by, and in solidarity with, those whose socio-political liberation it seeks and whose personal liberation becomes real through their participation in this process. Furthermore, an Islamic liberation theology derives its inspiration from the Qur'an and the struggles of all the prophets. It does so by engaging the Qur'an and the examples of the prophets in a process of shared and ongoing theological reflection for ever-increasing liberative praxis.

While the idea of the Qur'an as a revolutionary text was very much in vogue in Iran as well as among those South African Muslims in sympathy with that revolution (the MYM, al-Jihad and Qibla) during this period, there is little to suggest that the specifics of the hermeneutical perspectives emerging there were studied in any depth in the Cape. Several theological revolutionary notions, such as the socio-political implications of divine unity (*tawhid*) and the option for the oppressed (*mustad'afun fi'l-ard*), widely propagated in Iran, particularly by the Mujahidin-i-Khalq, did, however, find their way into the local Islamic liberation discourse. Here they were fleshed out and painted in South African colours. The notions of an Islamic theology of liberation and its hermeneutical keys emerged from the Qur'anic reflections engaged in by Islamists in the many groups where young Muslims gathered to reflect on the relevance of the Qur'an and *sunnah* (practice of the Prophet) to their lives and to the struggle

against apartheid. The affinity of these Islamists to Islam was thus expressed through seeking support from the earliest forms of theological legitimation, the Qur'an and *sunnah*, rather than to post-Muhammadan legal or theological tradition. 'The Review of Faith', a manual for Call of Islam activists, states this as follows:

Our reflections must at all times lead to a deepening of our understanding of faith. [These reflections] are one dimension of our journeying to Allah. We . . . need to develop the closest possible relationship with His message. He speaks to us through the Qur'an and the *Sunnah* of all the Prophets . . . If we are going to test our actions in the light of the Qur'an and *Sunnah*, then we must also have the determination to approach these two sources directly. (Call of Islam 1985, The Review of Faith, p. 53)

One of the consequences of resorting to the text while bypassing the clerics was that most of the Qur'anic concepts used during this period were free from the legal or 'orthodox' meanings which tradition had accorded them. Within the South African context, these concepts were never employed systematically. One needs to consider whether they were prioritized in any particular order, whether they come from the text or the context, and how authentic they are as hermeneutical concepts.

Any discussion of the theological and legal validity of these concepts would have meant taking on the traditional clerics in debates in areas with which the Islamists were largely unfamiliar. The clerics had, furthermore, generally been on the sidelines during this period. The Islamists did not perceive any need to resort to traditional theology and it was widely felt that the categories developed by traditional scholarship, such as the abode of enmity (*dar al-harb*), the abode of Islam (*dar al-Islam*), etc., were irrelevant to, or insufficiently developed for, the context of both modernity and liberation. Furthermore, those most active in the struggle were simply not interested in scholarly analysis of the categories they invoked. Often this was because of the intensity and immediacy of the demands of the struggle. A more significant reason, however, was the notion that praxis was a legitimate basis for theory. Addressing the leadership of the MYM, Mawiana Ebrahim Moosa, their then national director, emphasized the relationship between liberating praxis and theory as follows:

Liberating praxis, as opposed to practice, should be our major watchword. By praxis we mean doing and reflecting. The *halqaat* should be active circles of knowledge and practice (praxis) which

integrate organic intellectuals (*'aiml 'ulama'*) with activists (*mujaahids*) to fulfil the description of the early Muslim community. Gallant warriors by day and monks by night. (Moosa 1987a, p. 4)

The question of the order or priorities of these hermeneutical concepts or keys is a significant one. For the Islamist, while they may be prioritized theoretically, all of them are equally significant practically. An unwillingness to prioritize them is based on the idea that the theological cannot be separated from the ideological, the spiritual from the mundane, nor the text from its context. The way these keys are intertwined, i.e., their dialectical nature, is also seen in the question of the origins of these hermeneutical keys. During the 1980s, they were certainly presented as coming from the text. Indeed, the Islamists who used liberation rhetoric from a fundamentalist perspective will probably insist that their theological insights have been worked out prior to and outside the historical process. In fact, they may even deny that they have been 'worked out' and insist that they are an eternal given for anyone who looks into the text. The reality, though, is more complex. These keys emerged from an ongoing engagement between the South African struggle and theological reflections in which the text undoubtedly played a significant role. It is more appropriate to say that truths experienced in the struggle were affirmed and challenged by these theological reflections and the text.

Dogma may precede praxis, but not in the case of a theology that is committed to liberation. Theology, for the marginalized, is the product of reflection which follows on praxis for liberation. The Qur'anic statement 'and to those who struggle in Our way, to them We shall show Our ways' (29:29) affirms this view of 'doing' theology. The history of all forms of theological thought in Islam, as elsewhere, confirms what Friedrich Hegel (d. 1831) said about philosophy: 'it rises only at sundown' (cited in Gutierrez 1973, p. 11).

### How Genuine is this Product?

Questions pertaining to authenticity are probably the most significant ones here. How authentic was this idea of Islam now being advertised on the market? What is authenticity? Who determines it? What should be authentic for whom? All theological categories, no matter how authentic an air has been afforded them by the passing of time, are always the product of ideology, history and seemingly apolitical reflections. Studies in the emergence and development of supposedly pure theological concepts such as the eternity of the Qur'an, *bila kayf*, *qada* and *qadr*, all

conclusively prove that, while the text was the weapon with which the battles to affirm or deny them were fought, they were inevitably shaped by history (Madelung 1985; Watt 1991; Bell 1970). To the extent that history is the story of the victors, these concepts are equally those of the victors. This is not to comment on their correctness or incorrectness. I rather wish to emphasize that the process that led to the elaboration of doctrines and that fixed their final status and form was as human as that which gave rise to concepts such as the preferential option for the marginalized.

Looking at life from the underside of history, liberation theology is in some ways an attempt to retrieve authenticity from the victors, to free it from the notion that it is irrevocably tied to the powerful. It also questions the notion of a final authenticity that can be wrapped up neatly in a creed, but argues that liberating praxis leads to greater authenticity. To the marginalized — the essential subjects of the kind of theology that emerged in South Africa during the 1980s — the question of authenticity was never a crisis or even a focal point. Given that the focus of liberation theology is the 'non-subjects' of history, the marginalized, they were the determiners of authenticity based on their interests.

## The Keys to Understanding

In reflecting on the hermeneutical keys that have emerged from the South African engagement with the struggle for liberation and with the Qur'an, I shall try to show how a qur'anic hermeneutic of liberation would work, with its continuous shift between text and context and the ongoing reflections on their implications for each other. I shall also underline the significance of these keys as indispensable tools for understanding the Qur'an in a society characterized by oppression and an interreligious struggle for justice and freedom.

The first two keys, *taqwa* (an awareness of the presence of God) and *tawhid* (the unity of God), are aimed at developing the moral and 'doctrinal' criteria with which to examine the other keys and the 'theological glasses' with which to read the Qur'an in general and, more specifically, the texts dealing with the religious Other. Despite the seemingly theological nature of these two keys, they, like all theological precepts, are also formulated and understood within a specific historico-political context, and are presented as such. The second two keys, *al-nas* (the people) and the marginalized (*al-mustad'afun fi'l-ard*) define the location of our interpretative activity. While all contexts wherein the interpreter is located must necessarily bear upon the outcome of her or his interpretation,

interpreters also have the freedom to position themselves differently in relation to any situation in order to arrive at a specific kind of interpretation. The last two, justice (*adl* and *qist*) and struggle (*jihad*), reflect the method and the ethos that produce and shape a contextual understanding of the word of God in an unjust society.

## Taqwa: Protecting the Interpreter from Him or Herself

*Taqwa*, from the Arabic root *w-q-y*, literally means 'to ward off', 'to guard against', 'to heed' or 'to preserve' (Lane 1980, 'i-q-y') and has been used in all these senses in the Qur'an (e.g., 3:25, 120). In the qur'anic sense it may be defined as 'heeding the voice of one's conscience in the awareness that one is accountable to God'. Jafri has shown how, among all the ethical terms adopted by the Qur'an, 'the most widely applicable and most inclusive of all is the term *taqwa*' (1980, p. 127). Its comprehensive sense of embracing both responsibility to God and to humankind is evident from the following texts:

Thus as for him [or her] who gives to others and is conscious of God [ititaq] and believes in the ultimate good, We shall facilitate his [or her] path towards ease; as for him [or her] who is stingy and thinks himself [or herself] self-sufficient and calls ultimate good a lie, we facilitate for him [or her] the way to distress. (Qur'an 92:4-10)

O humankind! We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes so that you might come to know one another. Verily the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most deeply conscious of God [atqakum]. (Qur'an 49:13)

The Qur'an links *taqwa* to belief in God (10:63; 27:53; 41:18) and regards its attainment as one of the objectives of serving God (2:21). Those who prefer the short-term advantages of this world are often contrasted with those who have *taqwa* (4:77; 6:32; 12:57). What is significant, though, is the way the Qur'an links *taqwa* to social interaction and concern for others, such as sharing (92:5; 7:152-3), fulfilling covenants (3:76; 7:52) and, especially, kindness (3:172; 4:126; 5:93; 16:127).

The Qur'an emphasizes the need for a community and individuals deeply imbued with *taqwa* who will carry on the prophets' task of transformation and liberation (3:102-5, 125; 8:29). According to the Qur'an, a commitment to God's people is an inseparable part of a commitment to God. However, this does not imply that the two dimensions of this commitment are identical; a *muslim* is, in the first instance, someone who has

submitted to God in both a social and personal sense. *Taqwa*, as the South African Islamists have argued, is the struggle to remain true to this commitment in all its dimensions.

In a message on the occasion of the Festival of Charity (*Id al-Fitr*) at the end of *Ramadan*, the Call said:

Our involvement [in the liberation struggle] after Ramadan will show whether we have learnt *taqwa*, whether we really became aware of the plight of the oppressed. The hallmark of a Muslim who has truly fasted is his preparedness to throw in his lot with the rest of the oppressed in the struggle for the liberation of all the people in this country. (Call of Islam 1985, *Eid Mubarak*, p. 1)

The progressive Islamists, however, also saw the need to protect themselves, to exercise *taqwa*, with regard to the many challenges thrown up by a struggle where the main concerns were often the immediate and the mundane. How to remain true to one's self and one's commitment to God was an ongoing and deep concern. The notion of *taqwa*, arguably, represented the most formidable challenge to the progressive Islamist who sought to actualize his or her Islam in contemporary terms. Several internal documents of the Call and the MYM testify to the serious grappling with the question of *taqwa* in the midst of a socio-economic struggle (MYM 1978, 1983; Call of Islam 1987). *Taqwa* was also seen as the key to understanding the Qur'an: '*Taqwa*', said Ebrahim Rasool, then national secretary of the Call, 'is the basic pre-requisite for understanding and reading the Qur'an and is the protective measurement against the use of the Qur'an and the random appropriation of texts for legitimating ideology which is alien to the Islamic world view' (Rasool 1987).

In its first self-description, the Qur'an refers to itself as 'a guidance for those who are on the path of *taqwa*' (2:2). Not only is *taqwa* presented here as the first hermeneutical key, but also as a quality towards which believers have to aspire, outside and beyond the immediate task of interpretation. There is an insistence too on a relationship between discovering truth and living it. The acceptance of *taqwa* as a hermeneutical key has significant implications for both the engaged interpreter and the act of interpretation.

The Qur'an often presents conjecture and personal whim as the two elements which distort its meaning. These are frequently contrasted with revelation (10:36; 53:3); guidance (2:120; 6:56, 116; 26:50; 50:3); understanding and knowledge (2:78, 145; 4:157; 45:17, 23, 53:27); and truth (5:47; 10:36), all of which are central elements in the hermeneutical

task. (Traditional theology has regularly accused theological or ideological adversaries of *zann* and *hawa* [baseless speculation and personal fancy] in order to dismiss their exegetical opinions. These accusations are invariably arbitrary and usually mask the ideological predilections of traditional theology.) A Qur'anic hermeneutic of liberation, with *taqwa* as a key, ensures that interpretation remains free from both theological obscurantism and political reaction, as well as from the purely subjective speculation of individuals, even though they may be from the ranks of the oppressed and the marginalized.

The second significant consequence of *taqwa* as a hermeneutical key is that it facilitates an aesthetic and spiritual balance in the life of the engaged interpreter. A hermeneutic of liberation is forged in the midst of a socio-political struggle, a struggle which often confines its perspective to the immediate and the politically expedient. *Taqwa* forces the engaged interpreter to embark on a process of introspection, a process for which there is often neither the time nor the inclination. In South Africa, as elsewhere, activists stumbled from crisis to crisis, and the obvious way of responding was with the immediate and the concrete in mind. The logical consequence of this was that immediate political exigencies dominated Qur'anic interpretation entirely and the struggle was deprived of the more profound and universal sense of history and broader vision that a comprehensive reading of a scripture such as the Qur'an offers.

A third consequence is that it commits the engaged interpreter to a dialectical process of personal and socio-political transfiguration. The guidance the Qur'an claims to offer is an active guidance to those who are not mere observers or 'objective' students but who have entrusted themselves to it for such guidance. This 'engaging the Qur'an' in the process of revolutionary struggle also means an engagement of the self with it. This, in turn, ensures a balance between active participation in social and self-transformation. 'Change, according to the Qur'an', says a Call document, 'is a dialectical process of simultaneous conversion of hearts and [socio-economic] structures' (Call of Islam 1988, p. 13).

The search for a hermeneutic of liberation assumes that there is a group of people who are serious about the reconstruction of society alongside principles of justice, freedom, honesty and integrity. Only those struggling to concretize these qualities in their own lives during a liberation struggle aimed at constructing a new society, can be entrusted with the moral and ethical responsibility of managing such a society. In addition to the significance of *taqwa* for the activist as interpreter, *taqwa* has implications for him or her as an activist and may prevent the activist

from becoming a mirror image of the very tyrant being fought. There is some truth in the perception of many people that 'politics is a dirty game'. Some of the finest individuals participating in the struggle against apartheid have been motivated by an intense and noble hatred for the suffering resulting from it. It is, however, not infrequently that one observes the same individuals being transformed into cold and calculating Machiavellian political entities who, as a matter of course, violate democracy and common human decency.

While *taqwa* is also an essential source of support for the engaged interpreter struggling to understand the Qur'an, there is still no guarantee of absolute meaning. However, *taqwa* ensures that the Muslim walks in the grace of God, a grace that allows him or her to remain on the path even while struggling to find it. 'And whosoever observes *taqwa* in respect of God, for him [or her] He will create an opening' (Qur'an 15:2). Furthermore, in the face of a discredited and quietist clergy on the one hand, and a morally bankrupt tyranny on the other, *taqwa* serves as a shield against revolutionary deception and activist arrogance. We have witnessed the way in which revolutionary regimes in Eastern Europe, China, Zimbabwe, Iran and elsewhere have come to power on the basis of a commitment to freedom, equality and justice, and how these rights were subsequently only available to the ruling clique and their supporters. *Taqwa* is the antithesis of the self-deception that leads individuals, movements and governments to believe that they are still for people when the reverse has, in fact, become the case. From my reading of the Qur'an, it would seem as if *taqwa*, rather than 'objective scholarship', is the most significant hermeneutical key to minimize the extent to which the text can be manipulated for narrow personal or ideological advantage.

### Tawhid: An Undivided God for an Undivided Humanity

From the root *wa-h-d*, *tawhid* means 'to be alone', 'one', 'an integrated unity'. Although this form of the word does not appear in the Qur'an, *tawhid* has come to be synonymous with the unity of God. Belief in *tawhid*, 'faith in God, the Solitary without a partner, the Embodiment of Unity, the One whose Unity is unceasing and with whom there is none' (Ibn Manzur, 6, p. 4761), is the basis of the Qur'anic worldview: 'Say: He is the One God. God, the Eternal, The Uncaused Cause of all Being. He Begets not, and neither is He begotten. And there is nothing that could be compared with Him' (112:1-4).

There are numerous other verses in the Qur'an which directly or indirectly deal with the unity of God and *tawhid* has correctly been

described as 'the foundation, the centre and the end of the entire [Islamic] tradition' (Royster 1987, p. 28). Islam's comprehensiveness or holism is rooted in the principle of *tawhid*. The conviction that *tawhid* is at the heart of a comprehensive socio-political worldview, although not entirely novel, has grown enormously in the last few decades, particularly in some of the ideological currents in Iran that led to the 1979 revolution. Foremost among those who advocated *tawhid* as a worldview aimed at realizing the unity of God in human relations and socio-economic systems was 'Ali Shari'ati (1933-77) and the Mujahidin-I-Khalq of Iran. The following quote from Shari'ati gives an idea of the revolutionary appreciation of *tawhid*:

In our Islam, *tawhid* is a world view, living and meaningful, opposed to the avaricious tendency for hoarding and aims for eradicating the disease of money worship. It aims to efface the stigma of exploitation, consumerism, and aristocracy... Whenever the spirit of *tawhid* revives and its historical role is comprehended by a people, it embarks on its [uncompleted] mission for consciousness, justice, people's liberation and their development and growth. (Cited in Ifrani 1983, pp. 36-7)

The notion of *tawhid* as a way of looking at life was widely used by the engaged interpreters in South Africa, both against the traditional separation between religion and politics and against apartheid as an ideology. During this period, *tawhid* was increasingly viewed as both an ideological source and a sacred frame of reference. Concepts such as 'tawhidi society' and 'the sociological implications of *tawhid*' were often referred to. The following are a few examples of the way in which the term was used in South Africa. A Qibla pamphlet declared the aim of the Islamic movement to be the establishment of a system in South Africa which 'is compatible with the logic of *tawhid*' (Qibla n.d., *Neither Oppressed, Nor Oppressor Bel*, p. 1). 'Muslims are Muslims', stated *Worldview*, the newsletter of the MSA, 'because of their belief in the *tawhid* of God - a *tawhid* which goes beyond mere verbal acknowledgements and which necessarily demands that Muslims act in the face of injustice... This *tawhid*, which exhorts us to fight in Allah's way, must fully consume our consciousness on this road of toil and struggle [for liberation]'. (*Worldview* 1984, p. 6).

Muhammad Amra, then leader of the MYM, spelt out his understanding of the 'process of *tawhid*' in a message on the occasion of the 'Id al-Fitr celebrations:

He [Muhammad] spent 13 years in Makkah teaching . . . *tawhid* [to] the early Muslims. He organized individual Muslims into a group and after the *hijrah* . . . he organized them into . . . an *ummah*. He then extended the *tawhid* from the individual and the group to the state. This is the most important mission of our beloved *Nabi* Muhammad (SAW); to destroy all false gods, [and] establish a *tawhid* society on the earth. (1986, p. 14)

Linking orthodoxy to a peculiarly South African orthopraxis, the Call, in an appeal to boycott the sanction-busting New Zealand rugby tour in 1988, declared that. '*Tawhid* implies that . . . he is not a Muslim who goes to mosque on a Friday and to racial sport' on a Saturday . . . He is not a Muslim who buys his plane ticket for *Hajj* and his season ticket for racial sport' (Call of Islam 1985, *All Blacks Out!!!*, p. 1).

There were diverse opinions about the nature and vision of a *tawhid* society and little attempt was made to spell out its detailed implications for South Africa or how it related to *tawhid* as belief. What is clear, though, is that in addition to its affirmation as theological dogma, *tawhid* was, and still is, widely seen as having two specific applications in the South African context. At an existential level, it means the rejection of the dualistic conception of human existence whereby a distinction is made between the secular and the spiritual, the sacred and the profane. Religion thus becomes a legitimate, even necessary, means with which to alleviate political injustice. At a socio-political level, *tawhid* is opposed to a society which sets up race as an alternative object of veneration and divides people along the lines of ethnicity. Such division is regarded as tantamount to *shirk* (associating others with God), the antithesis of *tawhid*.

Apartheid was denounced as 'openly reject[ing] the *tawhid* nature of mankind as told to us in the Qur'an: "mankind is a single nation" (Call of Islam 1985, *Interfering with the Sanctity of Islam*, p. 2). It was viewed as a form of *shirk* because, in terms of social outlook and practice, it consciously divided people along ethnic lines, thereby denying the unity of humankind, which is a reflection of *tawhid*. It furthermore set up race as an alternative to divinity and as a form of *shirk*; apartheid was described as 'the path of division, the path of *shirk*' (Call of Islam 1985, *Muslims Against the Emergency*, p. 1).

In contrast to the divisive nature and *herenulthood* of apartheid, 'apartheid as associationism (*shirk*)', Islamists offered the view of *tawhid* as divine holism with socio-economic implications. The Qur'anic text 'God's nature upon which He created humankind' (30:30) thus became an exhortation to create a non-racial and unitary society in opposition to

the racial divisions of apartheid. In relating *tawhid*, the most important principle of Islamic belief, to the quest for an undivided society, Islamists touched deep chords in the aspirations of the South African masses.

A statement made by three ANC cadres just prior to their being sentenced to death expands on this dream of a unitary South Africa built on the ashes of apartheid: 'The new South Africa must reflect our oneness, breaking down the destructive idea and practices of defining our people by race, colour or ethnic group' (*Uppfront* 1989, p. 21) Another ANC cadre, Ashraf Karriem, explaining in court why he had embarked on the path of armed struggle, said 'Islam sees South Africa as oppressive and exploitative and believes in the oneness of God and the oneness of people' (*The Argus*, 10 November 1988, p. 1).

*Tawhid*, like *taqwa*, is for the engaged interpreter both a necessary component of preunderstanding as well as a principle of interpretation. In an unpublished speech, Rasool exemplified its first role as follows:

Belief in *tawhid* with all its implications must have absolute hegemony in our consciousness and, until this has happened, we cannot convincingly say that we fully realize the meaning of 'Say indeed, God's guidance is the true guidance' [Qur'an 2:120]. Once belief in the *tawhid* of God, with its implications, is embedded in our consciousness, and we accept Allah's guidance as the true guidance, we have [acquired] Islamic subjectivity. (1983)

The Qur'an deals with all dimensions of existence as an extension of an interconnected reality. God's word, reflecting His personality, contains the highest degree of holism and comprehensiveness. Consequently, the Qur'anic moral philosophy covers all dimensions of human activity. Even the idea that the Qur'an deals with spirituality and politics or morality and economics does not adequately reflect the comprehensiveness of the Qur'an, for this implies that these are distinct from each other. It rather views all of these as integrated aspects of existence.

Viewing *tawhid* as a hermeneutical principle means that the different approaches to the Qur'an - philosophical, spiritual, juristic or political - must be regarded as components of a single tapestry. All of these are required to express the fullness of its message, for no single approach can adequately express it. A number of Call and MYM internal documents insist that each of these approaches, particularly the political one, be mindful of the principle of *tawhid* lest the Qur'an becomes a mere tool to argue for a specific view entirely divorced from its basic ethos (MYM 1978, pp. 2-4; 1987, pp. 3-4; Call of Islam 1988, p. 4).

An approach to the Qur'an based on *tawhid* does not imply that all its dimensions ought to receive equal public or private attention or expression all the time. The Qur'an is, after all, not understood in a vacuum. 'The comprehensive nature of Islam', says the MYM, 'begs total leadership, but necessitates heightened political leadership especially in South Africa' (MYM 1983, p. 6). The emphasis on the horizontal or so-called this-worldly dimensions of the Qur'an as a 'spiritual requirement of a community steeped in ritualism' (Rasool 1987, p. 3) was drawn from texts such as Qur'an 107.

Have you observed the one who belies *al-din*?

That is the one who is unkind to the orphan,  
and urges not the feeding of the needy.

So, woe to the praying ones,  
who are unmindful of their prayer,

They do good to be seen,  
and refrain from acts of kindnesses.

Engaged interpreters, such as Rasool, argued that 'a narrow view of formal worship deprives a community of spiritual life and an emphasis on the struggle of the oppressed is thus needed to restore life to its worship' (*ibid.*, p. 3).

In constructing a Qur'anic hermeneutic of liberation, *tawhid* would demand rejecting a discourse based on *shirk*, i.e., one of dualism whereby theology is pursued separately from social analysis. To discover the theological element in a particular socio-economic or historical situation is to imply an understanding of the latter. Such understanding will not come from avoiding the so-called this-worldly, nor will that assist in bringing to light the theological element in every human endeavour. The Islamic ideal is integrated entities committed to one God and to holism.

### The People(s) Understanding) Shall Govern!

*Nas*, from the root *n-w-s* or '*n-s*', refers to 'the people' as a social collective and is usually employed as such in the Qur'an (e.g., 114:5-6; 72:6). The Qur'an places humankind in a 'world of *tawhid* where God, people and nature display a meaningful and purposeful harmony' (Shari'ati 1980, p. 86). The divine trust was placed exclusively in humankind's hands (33:72), thereby lifting humankind beyond matter to the status of guardians of earthly life. The centrality of humankind is reflected in

God's choice of them as His vicegerent on the earth, and by the blowing of God's spirit into them at the time of their creation (15:29; 32:9; 38:72).

The Qur'an says that God chose humankind for His vicegerency on the earth and designated humankind as the earthly carrier of His responsibilities: 'Lo I am to create a vicegerent on the earth', God announced (2:30). To the protests of the angels that humankind would 'wreak corruption and shed blood therein while we offer Thy limitless glory, and praise Thee, and hallow Thy name.' (*ibid.*), God responded that He knew what they did not know (2:31). Thus distinguished, humankind becomes the carrier of 'a great trust' (33:72) and the 'recipient of enormous power' (4:32-3; 16:12-15). All the angels were commanded to bow down in front of Adam as the personification of humankind (2:34), despite the fact that they were created from light with no leanings towards evil while humankind was created from 'darkened mud' (55:14).

According to the Qur'an, the spirit of God covers all of humankind and gives them a permanent sanctity (e.g., 15:29; 17:22, 70, 21:91). Despite the regular reminders of the inevitable return to God, the spiritualizing of human existence, which regards earthly life as incidental, is unfounded in the Qur'anic view of humankind. The human body, being a carrier of a person's inner core and of the spirit of God, is viewed as sacred, and physical concerns are, therefore, not incidental to the Qur'an.

Throughout the Qur'an, God's gentle sustainership over humankind is evident on the one hand (2:243; 10:60; 12:38; 13:6) and an intense identification with His servants on the other. God refers to humankind as His who are always in a state of journeying to Him (23:60), and describes Himself as 'Lord of the people' (114:1). On several occasions, the Qur'an identifies the interests of humankind with those of God<sup>10</sup> and financial assistance to people is regarded as a loan to, or an investment, with God.<sup>11</sup> Humankind, all of them, are described in a *hadith* as 'the family of God' (al-Albani 1979, 1, p. 189).<sup>12</sup>

The 1980s saw the emergence of the notion of 'the people' as a significant concept of resistance in the popular imagination. 'The people' as a socio-political category was presented as the revolutionary alternative to the apartheid state, its institutions and its values. The emergence of the University of the Western Cape as a 'people's university', the growth of 'people's courts', the search for 'people's history', and the development of 'people's theatre', all during the 1980s, were but some of the manifestations of this concept. All of these were aimed at bringing about a greater awareness of, and involvement in, the struggle against apartheid. They were, furthermore, intended to build viable alternatives to the



structures and institutions of apartheid and to infuse people with the sense of self-esteem that comes from assuming personal and political responsibility for one's own life. These were all elaborations of the growing call that 'the people shall govern', a phrase from the Freedom Charter, the principal document of the ANC.

As I showed in chapter 1, the idea of the elevation of 'the people' as sovereign and a standard of legitimacy met with considerable Muslim ideological resistance.<sup>13</sup> An inability to recognize various and distinct kinds of sovereignty has confused many committed Muslims who believe in an elusive sovereignty that resides in a solitary proprietor, God. Yet, God clearly does not exercise sovereignty in a political sense. The logical outcome of confusing the sovereignty of God with that of temporal political sovereignty has been that people assume sovereignty in God's name. This simply has to lead to tyranny in His name.<sup>14</sup> The call of the people of South Africa, that power and sovereignty belonged to them, was an affirmation of a basic political right which had been denied to them. It was a call to free the rulers of temporal coercive political power and to enable the people to determine their own political destiny. The notion of popular sovereignty was located in the unjust control of political sovereignty and was entirely unrelated to the sovereignty of God. The vast majority of South Africans had been walked over since the arrival of the colonists in 1652. Nothing of the dignity and honour promised by God, or the manifestations of His spirit blown into humankind, had been allowed to surface during more than three centuries of relentless and ruthless oppression and economic exploitation. In opposition to a history of subjugation, the cry that emerged from the oppressed was that 'the people shall govern'.

Given the stewardship of humankind on the earth and God's overwhelming concern for them, two hermeneutical implications follow. First, it becomes essential that the Qur'an be interpreted in a manner which gives particular support to the interest of people as a whole or which favours the interests of the majority among them, rather than that of a small minority.<sup>15</sup> Second, interpretation must be shaped by the experience and aspirations of humankind as distinct from, and often opposed to, that of a privileged minority among them.

The notion of humankind as a hermeneutical key poses two theological problems which require a considered response; the first problem relates to the value of people as a measurement of truth and the second relates to the question of authenticity.

First, if one accepts the understanding and role of humankind as

outlined above, then does it follow that the interest of God is identical with that of humankind? If so, is this not a way of elevating the *humanum*, the truly human, as criteria of truth, even the criterion of truth, a criterion whereby Islam itself is to be judged? Humankind as a hermeneutical key is located and affirmed within the framework of *tawhid* and grounded in the absolute. Without people using language, there is no concept of God to speak of, no divine intervention in history, and for the Muslim, without revelation there is no real meaning of humankind as *humanum*. Thus, one may argue that while the *humanum* is a criterion of truth, it is not an autonomous *humanum* as an absolute criterion that is being advocated, but one drawing its sustenance from *tawhid*. Furthermore, humankind is one hermeneutical principle among others and this serves to balance its role in the overall interpretative process.

Second, a legitimate concern of all those committed to the sacredness of the text is what may be described as 'hermeneutical promiscuity', where anyone is allowed to get into bed with the text. When a particular group whose legitimacy has been traditionally established and upheld is no longer in control of interpretation, what guarantees does one have that the sacredness of the text will not give way to an exegetical free-for-all where every text is stripped entirely of its religious legitimacy?

From the outset, it is important to acknowledge that the very idea of qur'anic hermeneutics challenges traditional concepts of the sacredness of the text. Irrespective of the piety, awe and reverence with which the text has been approached by traditional scholarship, the text has always been something about which scholars have differed. Furthermore, in a context of injustice, if concepts such as the sacredness or theological legitimacy of a text are not related to the struggle for justice, then these concepts are themselves little more than additional weapons in the ideological arsenal of injustice. As for the problem of 'hermeneutical promiscuity', one can argue that this task is embarked upon by Muslims who have chosen to be committed to the text. Their interpretation is not the wild speculation of individuals but a goal-oriented communal search for meaning. The goals of this interpreting community come from the depths of their humanity and are affirmed in the text beyond any doubt.

I have outlined the importance of humankind and the significance of their interests and experiences as factors in shaping a qur'anic hermeneutic. The Qur'an, however, singles out a particular section of humankind, the marginalized, and makes a conscious and deliberate option for them against neutrality and objectivity, on the one hand, and the powerful and oppressors, on the other.

## From the Vantage Point of the Disempowered and Marginalized

From the root *d-'af*, *mustad'af* refers to someone who is oppressed or deemed weak and of no consequence and is treated in an arrogant fashion. The *mustad'afun* are thus those people of 'inferior' social status who are vulnerable, marginalized or oppressed in the socio-economic sense. The Qur'an also uses other terms to describe the lower and impoverished classes of society, such as *aradhil* (marginalized) (11:27; 26:70; 22:5), the *fuqara'* (poor) (2:271; 9:60) and the *masakin* (indigent) (2:83, 177; 4:8). The major difference in the term *mustad'afun* is that someone else is responsible for that condition. One can only be *mustad'af* as a consequence of the behaviour or policies of the arrogant and powerful.

The Qur'an deals with the *mustad'afun* in three categories: Muslim, *kafir* and those comprising both groups. Qur'an 4:75 exhorts the Meccan community of Muslims to 'fight in the way of God and of those *mustad'afun* men, women, and children, whose cry is "Our Lord! Rescue us from this town whose people are oppressors"'. Qur'an 7:150 uses the term with reference to Aaron, the brother of Moses, who complained that the Israelites had weakened or marginalized him. Qur'an 34:31-3 deals with the *mustad'afun* as the rejecting and ingrate Other and distinguishes between the 'wrongdoers' who were oppressed on the one hand, and the arrogant and powerful (*mustakbirun*), on the other.

Those who had been marginalized will say unto those who had gloried in their arrogance 'Had it not been for you we would certainly have been believers!'

[And] those who were wont to glory in their arrogance will say unto those who had been marginalized: 'Why - did we keep you [forcibly] from following the right path after it had become obvious to you? Nay it was but you [yourselves] who were guilty!'

But those who had been marginalized will say unto those who gloried in their arrogance: 'Nay, [what kept us away was your] devising of false arguments night and day against God's messages - as you did when you persuaded us to blaspheme against God and to claim that there are powers that could rival Him! (34: 31-3)

The contrast between the *mustad'afun* and the *mustakbirun* in this text occurs in other parts of the Qur'an as well. Unlike this text, which describes them as hurling accusations at each other, elsewhere the Qur'an makes a clear choice for the *mustad'afun* against the *mustakbirun* even though the former may not be Muslim (7:136-7; 28:5).

And so We inflicted Our retribution on them, and caused them to drown in the sea, because they had given a lie to Our messages and had been heedless of them.

Whereas unto the people who had been deemed utterly low, we gave as their heritage the eastern and western parts of the land We had blessed (7:136-7)

In the chapter of the Qur'an called *al-Qasas* (The Story) a preferential option for the *mustad'afun* is made in unambiguous terms, despite their rejection of God. This preferential option for the oppressed is reflected in the particularized identification of God Himself with the oppressed, the lifestyles and methodology of all the Abrahamic prophets, the Qur'anic denunciation of the powerful and the accumulation of wealth, and the Qur'an's message of liberation to women and slaves. Furthermore, a number of verses link faith and religion with a humanism and a sense of socio-economic justice. A denial of these is linked with a rejection of justice, compassion and sharing (107:1-3, 104; 22:45):

According to the Qur'an, virtually all the prophets, including Muhammad, came from peasant or working-class backgrounds and the option for the marginalized seems to be implicit in their very origins. All the Abrahamic prophets mentioned in the Qur'an had their origins among the peasants and were generally shepherds in their formative years. The singular exception, Moses, was destined to sojourn in the desert of Madyan where he was employed as a shepherd for eight or ten years (28:27). One may describe this as a process of 'deschooling' in the ways of the powerful, in anticipation of his mission as a prophet of God and a liberator of his people.

Opposition invariably came from the ruling and dominant classes, whom the Qur'an describes as the *mala'* (rulers or aristocracy) (11:27, 38; 23:24, 33; 26:34), *muwafun* (ostentatious) (34:34; 43:23), and the *mustakbirun* (arrogant) (16:22; 23:67; 31:7). Support for the prophets was usually forthcoming from the *aradhil* (lower classes), the *fuqara'* (poor) and the *masakin* (indigent). Al-Tabari describes Muhammad's followers as 'the weak, the destitute, young men and women. However, of the elderly and socially distinguished none [initially] followed him' (1879, 3, p. 1563). In fact, the disdain of the aristocracy for social intercourse with slaves, serfs and workers was a significant factor blocking their own entry into Islam. In Muhammad's latter years in Mecca, the aristocracy indicated their willingness to enter Islam if he got rid of the 'riff-raff' surrounding him. The Qur'an condemned such offers and warned Muhammad against considering them (8:28, cf. 6:52-4).

There are other qur'anic examples of this tension between the powerless and the powerful. Moses entering the court of Pharaoh in his shepherd's garb, Jesus emerges as a powerful advocate of the poor struggling against the entrenched Jewish priesthood and the merchants who had allied themselves to the Roman conquerors and Hud remonstrates with those 'who build a landmark on every elevated place to amuse themselves and fine buildings in the hope of living therein forever' (Qur'an 26:128). Salih shatters the hopes of the rich and the corrupt by his refusal to be co-opted into their value system (1:62); Joseph resists the sexual harassment of the powerful and wealthy Zulaikha and suffers the consequences of it (12:23-30) and Shu'aib struggles against the merchants for economic justice (11:89). The choice of prophets from particular social origins and the appeal which their message had, and continues to have, for the marginalized and the oppressed shows the revolutionary content of their messages, which threaten to destroy socio-economic systems based on exploitation or belief systems based on *shirk* and superstition.

The insurrectionary and preferential option for the *mustad'afun* is particularly evident from the way of life of Muhammad and his early followers in Mecca. He was instructed by the Qur'an to remain committed to the marginalized despite the short-term financial and economic advantages for Islam which would have followed the subsequent entry into Islam of the wealthy and the powerful had he abandoned them (80:5-10). This would have meant a reversion to pre-Muhammadan monotheism, which did not challenge the socio-economic practices of Quraysh in any way. This identification with the marginalized was also a personal choice of the Prophet, as is evident from his prayer to 'continue living among the poor, to die among the poor and to be raised among the poor' (Ibn Maja 1979, p. 84). His wife, 'A'ishah, described his character as a 'living reflection of the Qur'an' (Ibn Hanbal 1978, 2, p. 188). This is significant and is equally applicable to the option that he exercised for the *mustad'afun*. Muhammad's personal way of life and path also reflects the qur'anic bias. It was the result of a particular choice that he had made for himself when wealth was available. He washed his own clothing, patched it, repaired his sandals, served himself, gave fodder to his camel, ate with his servant, kneaded dough with him, and carried his own goods to the market (Ibn Fudi 1978, p. 152). Anas ibn Malik says: 'Dates were presented to the messenger of God and I saw him eating them. Due to hunger he was sitting on the support of something.' (Al-Tirmidhi 1990, p. 138).

Muhammad's way of life, however, was not merely a choice based on

personal asceticism but was part of the qur'anic objective of an egalitarian social order. The existing socio-economic order was denounced for its inequalities and this denunciation went along with active measures to empower the *mustad'afun*. Muhammad abolished ground rent, usury and all speculative and exploitative economic practices. Usurious transactions were prohibited with a warning of 'war from God and His Prophet' against those who continued such practices (Qur'an 2:279). Creditors were exhorted to recover only their capital sums, 'but if you dispense even of that then it would be more virtuous for you' (2:280). The abolition of the leasing of lands negated landlordism and these ordinances or legal injunctions were backed up by qur'anic exhortations to the wealthy to spend whatever was beyond necessity (2:219). To facilitate the empowerment of the poor and dispossessed, the Qur'an announces that in the wealth of the rich there is an intrinsic share for them (70:25; 51:19). The principle of distributive justice was unambiguously affirmed so 'that the wealth should not only circulate amongst the rich' (59:7). Elaborating on this principle, Muhammad mentioned various forms of wealth and power that had to be shared with those who did not have them 'until we thought that none among us had the right to any of our superfluities' (Ibn Hazmi n.d., 6, p. 157).

The social and economic implications of the doctrine of *tawhid*, the idea that one Creator means a single humanity, were evident from the beginning of the prophetic mission. At the heart of Muhammad's opponents' contempt was his lowly origin and his option for others from a similar background. The aristocracy of Mecca, with their commercially vested interests, were threatened both by his challenge to their traditional religion based on *shirk* and his emphasis on justice for the oppressed and marginalized.

The most significant text of the South African qur'anic discourse on liberation is undoubtedly Qur'an 28:4-8. This particular text was quoted with unceasing regularity at the rallies of virtually every Islamist organization - both fundamentalist and progressive - during the uprisings of the 1980s, as well as in their magazines, newspapers and pamphlets. The text reads as follows:

And it is Our will to bestow Our grace upon the *mustad'afun* on the earth, to make them the leaders), and to make them the heirs, and to establish them firmly on the earth, and to let Pharaoh and Haman and their hosts experience through those [the Israelites] the very thing against which they sought to protect themselves. (28:5)

The use of *mustad'afun* in this text was applied to all the oppressed people of South Africa, irrespective of their religious background, as is evident from the following two quotations:

O *Mustad'afun* of our land, the system that we have fought against for so long and paid for so dearly in life, blood, and property is evil and rotten to the core. (Qibla n.d., *One Solution, Islamic Revolution*, p. 2)

[The task of the Muslim community is] to join forces with the progressive streams among the *mustad'afun* . . . to contribute towards the unity of the *mustad'afun*, . . . to declare clearly to the oppressors: 'If you rise against the oppressed or stand in the path of the oppressed, we are commanded by God to defend ourselves against injustice and oppression.' (Solomon 1985, p. 6)

The text referring to the *mustad'afun fi'l-ard*, cited above, occurs in the beginning of the chapter of the Qur'an called *al-Qasas* (The Story) (28), a chapter which deals essentially with the flight of the Israelites from Egypt. The significance of this example of liberation and of God's commitment to the political freedom of people, irrespective of their faith commitment, is more closely examined when we consider the question of solidarity with the religious or rejecting Other in chapter 6. Here I only wish to point out that the case of the *mustad'afun* in these verses, a reference to the Israelites who were oppressed by Pharaoh and the Egyptian ruling class, reflects God's preferential option for the oppressed. Furthermore, the promise of liberation is held out despite the absence of any commitment to faith in God and belief in His prophets. As for Pharaoh, the signs rejected by him seem to have been more than just the prophethood of Moses or the divinity of God, because in that rejection most of the Israelites shared. The signs rejected by Pharaoh evidently included the oppressed and marginalized.

In the discussion of *tawhid* and *al-nas* we have seen how apartheid divided the people of South Africa. 'The people' in South Africa were transformed into a mass of *mustad'afun* under a vicious system which not only meant separation, but an existence of discrimination and the criminalization of any attempt to escape from it. The engaged interpreter in South Africa may certainly ask, 'if God regards the Israelites as His people and demands that His prophets become of them, destroy their oppressors and lead them into freedom, then why would He treat the people of South Africa any differently?'

The need for the interpreter both to place himself or herself among the marginalized and within their struggles, as well as to interpret the text from

the underside of history, is based on the notion of the divine and prophetic preferential option for the oppressed. Those committed to liberation in South Africa have thus argued that a similar bias must be exercised by anyone who approaches the Qur'an and who wants to bring its basic spirit to life. This is a conscious denial of 'objectivity'. In its place is offered a subjectivity which enables one to walk in the path of the prophets.

The engaged interpreter approaches the text with a conscious decision to search for meaning, which responds creatively to the suffering of the *mustad'afun* and holds out the most promise for liberation and justice. It is within a context of oppression that the interpreter is called upon to bear witness to God. A commitment to humankind and active solidarity with the *mustad'afun* results in a re-reading of both social reality and the text from their perspective. This re-reading and the engagement in social analysis from that point of departure shapes the search for a Qur'anic hermeneutic of pluralism for liberation. The objective of this search is an effective Qur'anic contribution to the ongoing struggles for justice on the part of the country's people; a struggle whose participants are mainly the religious Other, for they are the overwhelming majority of the *mustad'afun*.

### Through the Eyes of Justice

The Qur'an uses two terms to refer to justice: *qist* and '*adl*. *Qist* means 'equity', 'justice', 'to give someone his or her full portion' (Lane 1980, 'q-s-r'), and the agent noun *muqsit* is one of the names of God. '*Adl* means 'to act equitably, justly, or rightly' (ibid., '*adl*'). These two terms are used interchangeably in the Qur'an (49:9; 2:282) and, according to it, justice forms the basis of the natural order: 'And God has created the heavens and the earth in truth; and so that every person may be justly compensated for what he [she] had earned and none be wronged' (45:22). This verse, as well as Qur'an 39:69, equates justice with truth. 'God (Himself) bears witness that He is the Upholder of justice' (4:18). In two verses, the Qur'an exhorts the faithful to uphold justice as an act of witness unto Him (4:135; 5:6) and those who sacrifice their lives in the path of establishing justice are equated with those who achieved martyrdom in 'the path of God' (3:20).

An understanding of '*adl* and *qist* based on *tawhid* is well illustrated in the first verses of the chapter of the Qur'an titled 'The Gracious':

The Most Gracious has imparted this Qur'an. He has created humankind; He has imparted unto him [her] speech. The sun and

the moon follow courses computed; the stars and the trees submit; and the skies He has raised high; and He has set up the balance of justice in order that you may not transgress the measure. So, establish weight with justice and fall not short in the balance. It is He who has spread out the earth for [all] His creatures. (55:1-10)

These verses place humankind and the task of doing justice within the context of their responsibility to the Creator, on the one hand, and the order which runs through the cosmos, on the other.<sup>16</sup> It is within this overall context that humankind are being warned against 'transgressing the measure' and exhorted to 'weigh [your dealings] with justice'. The enforcement of justice is given as one of the objectives of revelation (56:25) and it is seen as a stepping stone to *taqwa* (5:6). Some scholars, such as Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, are, in fact, of the opinion that justice is the *raison d'être* for the establishment of religion: 'God has sent His Messengers and revealed His Books so that people may establish *qisr*, upon which the heavens and the earth stand. And when the signs of justice appear in any manner, then that is a reflection of the *shari'ah* and the religion of God' (1953, pp. 14-16).

Islamic society is expected to uphold justice as the basis of socio-economic life. The Qur'an is often specific about those areas of social affairs wherein lapses are most likely to occur, such as the trust of orphans and adopted children (4:3; 33:5), matrimonial relations (4:3; 49:9), contractual dealings (2:282), judicial matters (5:42; 4:56), interfaith relations (60:8), business (11:65), and dealings with one's opponents (5:8). The Qur'an postulates the idea of a universe created with justice as its basis. The natural order, according to the Qur'an, is one rooted in justice and deviation from it is disorder (*fimah*). The status quo in a particular social order, irrespective of how long it has survived or how stable it has become, does not enjoy an intrinsic legitimacy in Islam. Injustice is a deviation from the natural order and, like *shirk*, though it may stabilize over centuries as did *shirk* in pre-Islamic Mecca, it is, nonetheless, regarded as a disturbance in 'the balance'. In the Qur'anic paradigm, justice and the natural order based on it are values to be upheld, while socio-political stability *per se* is not.<sup>17</sup> When confronted with this disturbance in the natural order through the systematic erosion of human rights (or threats to the ecosystem), the Qur'an imposes an obligation on the faithful to challenge such a system until it is eliminated and the order is once again restored to its natural state of justice. In another text that was very significant in South African Islamic liberatory discourse, the Qur'an presents revelation itself as the ideological weapon whereby

disorder (*fimah*) must be countered: 'Indeed we have sent our Apostles with clear proof; And through them we have bestowed revelation and the balance so that humankind may behave with *qisr*; And we have provided you with iron, in which there is awesome power as well as (other) benefits for humankind' (57:25). The Qur'an establishes itself as a dynamic force for justice, legitimates the use of iron with 'its awesome power' as a means of achieving it and encourages an active struggle for it. The Qur'an, as indicated here, repeatedly contrasts justice with oppression and transgression (3:25; 6:160; 10:47; 16:111) and imposes on its followers the obligation to destroy the latter and establish the former.

Virtually every publication, speech or sermon by the progressive and fundamentalist Islamists during the 1980s appealed to the Qur'anic demand for the faithful to rise as 'God's witnesses for justice'. If a single concept could be said to have been the axis around which Muslim resistance to apartheid rotated, then it was that of justice for the oppressed and marginalized. Texts denouncing injustice and demanding justice were tirelessly invoked and when the text did not specify it, then justice was read into the translation as an implication. For example, the verse 'And fight them on until there is no more *fimah* and the *din* is for God' (2:193) was regularly presented as 'Fight them on until there is no more tumult and oppression and there prevail justice and faith in God.'

Besides being potent anti-apartheid weapons, for which abundant references could easily be found in the Qur'an, for most progressive Islamists justice and equity were also key socio-economic concepts which had to lead to an egalitarian and just society. The Qur'anic understanding of justice may be said to embrace the socio-economic dimensions but, as is evident from the Qur'anic texts cited, the term it employs, *qisr*, is wider in scope than these. The crying need of the South African people for socio-economic justice has often resulted in a rather myopic view of the Qur'anic meaning of justice. Consequently terms such as 'adl and *qisr* and their Qur'anic antonyms, *zulm* and *udhan* (evil/oppression and transgression) were invoked primarily to refer to political justice or injustice within the context of racial domination. Justice employed in such a context thus seldom embraced, for example, the socio-religious liberation of women. Similarly, the idea of *zulm al-nafs* (to wrong oneself), an important dimension of the Qur'anic understanding of injustice, was never invoked in Muslim liberation rhetoric, nor did it receive any coverage in the speeches or written works that emanated in the period under discussion. At an internal organizational level, both the Call and the MYM acknowledged the need to redress the unbalanced appreciation of 'adl and *qisr*

although they failed to do much in practical terms. Internal MYM papers appealed to its membership to become rounded personalities with a commitment to comprehensive justice. Towards the end of the 1980s the MYM increasingly took up the more radical issue of gender discrimination in the *shari'ah*. The Call has, since its inception, dealt with various other dimensions of injustice such as the oppression of women and religious minorities in Muslim countries and humankind's injustice toward the physical environment. This attention, though, was invariably drowned under the more vociferously proclaimed and vigorously pursued political dimensions of injustice.

The present work is an argument for the legitimacy of hermeneutical ideas emerging out of the interaction between Islam and the South African struggle for liberation. However, the uncritical imposition of the requirements of the struggle and the ideas coming therefrom on to the text is to deprive the struggle of the visionary insights that a scripture such as the Qur'an is capable of supplying. The context of a liberation struggle not only has something to say to the text; the text also has something to say to that context.

The Qur'an offers itself as an inspiration and guide for comprehensive insurrection against an unjust status quo. It, furthermore, asks to be read through the eyes of a commitment to the destruction of oppression and aggression and the establishment of justice. In a situation of injustice, the Qur'an, by its own admission, is compelled to be the ideological tool for comprehensive insurrection against oppression in all its manifestations. This has two implications. Firstly, one cannot justify adopting an objective approach to the Qur'an while one is surrounded by oppression, institutionalized or not, without searching for ways in which the Qur'an can be used against it. Neutrality or objectivity in such a context is, in fact, a sin which excludes one from the ranks of those imbued with *taqwa*, those to whom the Qur'an pledges guidance. Secondly, the approach to the Qur'an as a tool for insurrection presupposes all the ideological and theological commitments as well as an affinity to the values discussed earlier on in this chapter. These values are concretized in a struggle with humankind and the oppressed to create an order based on *tawhid* and justice. This struggle continues during the process of understanding the Qur'an.

### **Jihad as Praxis and a Path to Understanding**

*Jihad* literally means 'to struggle', to 'exert oneself' or 'to spend energy or wealth' (Ibn Manzur, n.d., 1, p. 709). In the Qur'an, it is frequently

followed by the expressions 'in the path of God' and 'with your wealth and your selves'. For Muslims, the term *jihad* has also come to mean the 'sacralization of combat' (Schleifer 1982, p. 122). Despite its popular meaning as a sacred armed struggle or war, the term *jihad* was always understood by Muslims to embrace a broader struggle to transform both oneself and society. The Qur'an itself uses the word in its various meanings ranging from warfare (4:90; 25:52; 9:41) to contemplative spiritual struggle (22:78; 29:6) and even exhortation (29:8; 31:15).

I have rendered *jihad* as 'struggle and praxis'. Praxis may be defined as 'conscious action undertaken by a human community that has the responsibility for its own political determination . . . based on the realization that humans make history' (Chopp 1989, p. 137). Given the Qur'anic comprehensive use of the term and the way *jihad* is intended to transform both oneself and society, one may say that *jihad* is simultaneously a struggle and a praxis.

The commonly assumed definition of *jihad* in South African liberatory rhetoric reflects a break with traditional juristic understandings of it. 'Jihad', said a Qibla pamphlet, 'is the Islamic paradigm of the liberation struggle . . . an effort, an exertion to the utmost, a striving for truth and justice' (Qibla n.d., *Arise and Bear Witness*, p. 2). Similarly, the Call argued that, for Muslims 'the struggle for freedom and justice in South Africa is a sacred one. Any Muslim who abandons the struggle in South Africa, abandons Islam. *Jihad* in the path of God is part of the *iman* of a Muslim' (Call of Islam 1985, *We Fight On*, p. 1). The centrality of justice as the objective of *jihad*, rather than the establishment of Islam as a religious system, was common in virtually all the public pronouncements of the Islamists. 'The purpose of *jihad* is to . . . destroy and eradicate injustice and not to replace one unjust system with another, or to replace one dominant group with another. *Jihad* is, therefore, a ceaseless, continuous, super conscious and effective struggle for justice' (Qibla n.d., *Arise and Bear Witness*, p. 2). Numerous anecdotes of resistance in the lives of the first generation of Muslims as well as the abundant Qur'anic texts dealing with *jihad* were regularly invoked in support both of the essentially non-violent uprisings and the armed struggle.

Praxis as a source of knowledge has always been widely recognized in Islamic scholarship and the Qur'an itself is explicit in its view that theory can be based on praxis: 'And to those who strive in us [our path] to them we shall show our ways' (29:69). The Qur'an lays great emphasis on orthopraxis and strongly suggests that virtuous deeds and *jihad* are also ways of understanding and knowing. The Qur'an establishes *jihad* as the

path to establishing justice and praxis as the way of experiencing and comprehending truth. *Jihad*, as praxis serving as a hermeneutical key, assumes that human life is essentially practical; theology follows. As for the presence of the divine in the process of transformation, the verse stating that 'God does not change the conditions of a people until they change what is in themselves' (13:11), was regularly invoked to insist that history and society is the terrain where, for people, transformation effectively takes place.

In South Africa a continual assessment of the meaning and contemporary relevance of the Qur'an occurred through this foundation of praxis: 'This involvement [in the struggle], the conflict that this involvement is going to lead to, our solidarity in the *halqah* [study circles] and our [qur'anic] reflections are going to teach us . . . This is the meaning of "and to those who strive in Our path, to them We shall show Our ways"' (Call of Islam 1988). Along with liberation theologians elsewhere, these activists turned to praxis as 'a way of making theology less a false theology, less an academic illusion and less an incoherent abstraction' (Chopp 1989, p. 37). 'The Review of Faith', a Call manual for activists, talks about 'a dialectical process whereby our jihad will be informed by the Qur'an and our faith as much as our understanding of these will be informed by our jihad' (Call of Islam 1985, The Review of Faith, p. 41).

In the midst of an ongoing experience of suffering and resistance, on the one hand, and a commitment to praxis as an expression of faith, on the other, a clear implication is made that both faith and understanding take shape in the concrete programmes of resistance against suffering and dehumanization. While all the progressive Islamists agreed on actual participation in the day-to-day struggles of the oppressed, the specific organizational and ideological framework within which *jihad-as-praxis* occurred was the subject of intense debate. In chapter 1 we saw that, while there was considerable discussion about 'a purely Muslim involvement' in the struggle, this did not actually materialize. As soon as those Muslims desirous of working in isolation started organizing, they were inexorably drawn into the work of others. On the other hand, groups like the Call and al-Jihad had from an early stage already been committed to a particular movement's liberative praxis, that of the ANC-UJDF.

The major issue for an organization like the Call was thus not whether its understandings and approaches to qur'anic concepts should be shaped by the liberation struggle, but whether they could be shaped entirely by a particular political tendency within it. The way this question was dealt with is also reflective of a hermeneutical method which is simultaneously liberative and heuristic (working through trial and error).

Some people say that they do want to join this group or that group because they are not hundred percent sure where it is going to end; and that they cannot afford to make errors with the future of the *ummah*. Excessive fear of making mistakes can often be a mask behind which we hide our cowardice and our unwillingness to drop our partnership with unjust systems, because it benefits us financially. It is also convenient for them to attract others for tactical errors in the struggle because they do not understand that errors come from action. Because they are not doing anything, it is hardly surprising that they do not commit any errors. (Call of Islam 1988, p. 37)

At an internal level, these issues were dealt with in a less polemical, more considered manner. Within their own ranks they also raised the following questions:

- a) To what extent should we allow our praxis, which is increasingly limited to UDF programmes and takes place within the ideological framework of National Democracy, to be the exclusive foundation whereby our qur'anic reflections take place?
- b) Can an Islamic movement afford to link itself to purely secular movements in the way that we have? To what extent has this secularized us as individuals and as a group? Has it blocked the growth of a truly comprehensive attitude to the Qur'an? (Call of Islam 1987, p. 5)

The organization attempted to respond to these concerns by greater emphasis on qur'anic reflection, internal moral exhortations and prayer. This was wholly inadequate against the underlying ideological messages, imbibed from a deep commitment to solidarity, within the 'organizations of the people'. The significant point in this theological method, though, is a rejection of the traditional ideas of theology and interpretation as happening before and outside of a historical process, a notion that presupposes that a reading and understanding of the text provide one with absolute certainties. In its place heuristic 'reflections' were offered. Those who claimed to have access to certainties were the ones paralysed into inaction despite the desire of some among them to engage in justice. Those who were committed to tentativeness were actually fully engaged in the struggle. The attitude of the progressive Islamists finds a resonance in Christian liberation theology in Latin America:

One must make a philosophical judgement among the existing philosophical methodologies in order to get an authentic and liberative understanding of human existence. In like manner, one must make a political judgement on the political processes and movements

around, choosing the one that lends itself best to ensuring the liberative authenticity on the part of the one who makes that commitment. But there are no magical, eternal guarantees in the revolutionary process as such (Boff 1985, p. 99).

### Conclusion: The Qur'an Speaks

I have explained the way God identifies with *al-nas* and the relationship between God's path and that of *al-nas*, His preferential option for the oppressed and marginalized and the importance of establishing justice. The Qur'an undertakes to teach the believing activist in the midst of his or her struggle to establish *tauhid*, *taqwa*, and to give concrete effect to the preferential option for the oppressed through *jihad*. As Ayatullah Mahmud Taleghani (d. 1979) put it, 'the way of God is that way which leads to the well-being of human society as a whole, the way of justice, of human freedom so that a few cannot gain dominance . . . appropriating for themselves the natural resources which God has placed at the disposal of all' (Taleghani 1982, p. 79). To engage in qur'anic hermeneutics in a situation of injustice is to do theology and to experience faith as solidarity with the oppressed and marginalized in a struggle for liberation. This represents a break from both traditional and modern theology. It is different in at least three aspects.

Firstly, the most significant difference is in the location of the interpreter. When *jihad* is invoked on the streets in concert with the religious Other rising against injustice; when the Qur'an is invoked in a court of law as legitimation for the armed struggle; and when God is fervently petitioned before a raid on a government building or on the eve of the outcome of a trial on charges of terrorism, then the break with more 'religious' or 'academic' ways of approaching theology is very significant. In fact, it stands in opposition to both.

Liberation theology insists that, in conditions of oppression and marginalization, Islam can only truly be experienced as the liberative praxis of solidarity. This is in contrast to both traditional and modern theology. The former struggles to retain its hold over the believers with its reduction of Islam to the formal rituals, themselves stripped of spiritual depth by the preponderance of legalities. Modern theology, on the other hand, as Rebecca Chopp has pointed out, is located in and addresses itself to the secularity of the privileged world and the serious thinkers therein, while liberation theology is located in and addresses the marginalized world.

Secondly, theology living in a world of 'violence and hope, reflection and action, spirituality and politics means that theology is always, to use Gutierrez's expression, "[consciously] a second act" (cited in Chopp 1989, p. 59). While faith may come before liberative praxis as a form of preunderstanding, theology does not. What others may thus denounce as *post hoc* theological justification is regarded by liberation theology as both inevitable and a privileged option.

Thirdly, truth, for the engaged interpreter, can never be absolute. As one's hermeneutic continuously moves on, one is pushed towards ever-increasing and authentic truth; truth which, in turn, leads to greater liberative praxis. There is no point at which God has disclosed the truth to the interpreter, but it continues to be disclosed, for there is no end to *jihad* and thus no end to His promise to disclose. The Qur'an is explicit that there is a 'Truth' to be known and it is possible to have deep convictions about it. That only dimensions or layers of this truth are knowable, however, is acknowledged in traditional and modern scholarship. The difference in liberation theology is that

it does not aim to prove eternal truths that are to be applied subsequently to history; it does not merely reflect on existential truth that is poetically disclosed through history. Rather liberation theology helps create truth . . . for theological reasoning is uttered upon a truth that is a way, upon a Word who has pitched . . . tent in the midst of history. (Chopp 1989, p. 61)

It was and remains inevitable that this word of God that has pitched its tent in the midst of history would be affected by the storms, rain, wind and, yes, the sunshine, surrounding it. The word has regularly become contested terrain as various entities staked claims to its ownership. For Muslims in South Africa during the 1980s, much of the controversy of these claims revolved around the question of space for the religious Other. The progressive Islamists argued fervently that faith and *taqwa* enabled them to access the text. They ignored the clerics, and insisted that the word also had space for all the marginalized. The word of God also excludes; but the excluded were now seen to be those who, despite possessing the correct formulae of faith, had made themselves unworthy of the description *muslim* by their participation in the structures of oppression.



## Notes

1. The *miswak* (here *miswaak*) was a twig used by the early Arabs, including Muhammad, for cleaning teeth. Its use is still in vogue among a number of Muslims who adhere to a literalist interpretation of the *sunnah*. The reference to it in this quotation is thus also a backhanded criticism of the selective interpretation of the meaning of *sunnah* by Muslim traditionalists.
2. Literally, 'without how', i.e., to accept certain Qur'anic doctrinal statements without further enquiry. With the notion of *bilā kayf*, the Ash'arites attempted to resolve the conflict between reason and revelation. This notion was particularly employed to respond to the apparently anthropomorphic expressions regarding God in the Qur'an.
3. Literally, 'to measure, estimate', later meaning 'to assign specifically by measure' as though God measured out His decrees. It deals with the doctrine of predetermination, i.e., God, by His *qadr* (decree) and *qadr* (power), determines all events and acts.
4. Al-Zamakshari, an exegete who frequently supplies the pre-Qur'anic meaning of words, explains that the word *wajin* was used in pre-Islamic days for a horse which exercised caution in protecting its hoofs against injury due to uneven or stony surfaces (n.d., I, p. 36). The root *w-ḡ-y* thus came to denote protecting something or oneself from whatever is harmful. Jafri has demonstrated how the term in pre-Islam was void of any religious, moral or ethical connotations and how the Qur'an transformed its usage into a term of 'great moral significance of the most comprehensive . . . ethical quality in a man's life' (Jafri 1980, p. 117).
5. In its various forms the term occurs 242 times in the Qur'an, of which 102 times are in Meccan verses and the rest in Medinan ones. In common Muslim discourse, and in several English translations of the Qur'an, its meaning has been connoted to 'the fear of God'. The Qur'an does use it in a manner which embraces this connotation (2:24, 46, 103, 206, 273; etc.), but this is an inadequate description of the term. The Qur'an uses *khawf* far more frequently to convey the meaning 'fear'.
6. The idea was certainly not alien to the classical scholars of Islam as is evident from the following comment on levels of *zakah* (social tax) by Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111): 'The first level [of *zakah*] is that of those who have grasped the true meaning of *tawhid*, fulfilled their agreement and surrendered all their wealth. They neither keep a gold coin nor a silver one and never reach the level on which *zakah* has to be paid' (cited in Ahmad 1979, p. 94).
7. In apartheid South Africa there were two parallel sport systems which were administered separately and frequented by different sets of spectators. Racial sport was supported by the government, organized along racial lines and played by people who argued that politics should not be allowed to interfere with sports. Non-racial sport was premised on the slogan 'No normal sport in an abnormal society'. All those connected to non-racial sport disciplines avoided any association, as players or spectators, with any event organized by the government-supported groups.
8. This does not imply a denial of differences between people. On the contrary, the Qur'anic view of humankind accepts the diversity of tribes and culture. It, however, rejects the notion that there can be a legitimate criteria for superiority of any kind. This diversity is, in fact, a challenge to draw closer to each other (9:13) and to appreciate the Other as another manifestation of God's presence and His grace (30:22).
9. The Qur'anic expressions are '*min sadaṣ ka'Fakhkhār*' (55:14) and '*min sadaṣ min ḥama'in mas-nun*' (15:26) which translate as 'sounding clay, like pottery' (Asad 1980, p. 825) and 'sounding clay, out of dark slime, transmuted' (ibid., p. 385), respectively.
10. See Qur'an 2:277-81; 9:71; 31:4-5. Even the formal rituals of worship which are normally regarded as entirely 'vertically' oriented are permeated with the factor of *al-ḥas* and thus assume a 'horizontal' dimension. Examples of these are the emphasis on the performance of prayers in congregation (2:43), the social dimensions inherent in *hajj* (the pilgrimage to Mecca) (2:197-200), the prophetic warning that there are many people who fast but derive

nothing from it except hunger (i.e., it does not teach them compassion) (Ibn Maja 1979, I, p. 549) and the linking of *zakah* (social tax) with the obligations to God (2:277; 9:60, 18; 23:1-4).

11. See Qur'an 2:245; 5:12; 6:17; 56:11; 57:16; 64:17; 73:20. The close relationship between obligations to God and those to *al-ḥas* is vividly illustrated in the response to allegations of injustice against 'Umar al-Khattab (d. 644), the second Caliph, in the case of a piece of sequestered land at Rabbiah (Nait-Belkacem 1978, p. 145). 'Umar sequestered the land and set it aside to serve as general pasture land to be shared by all the citizens. The owners of this land came to him complaining that it belonged to them: 'We have fought for it during *jahilyyah* [pre-Islamic ignorance]. It belonged to us even when we entered Islam. Why then have you sequestered it?' 'Umar replied, 'All goods belong to God; *al-ḥas* are the creation of God. If I were not obliged to do certain things to remain in the path of God, I would not have sequestered a single span of land' (ibid.).
12. Although appearing in a work by Albani of supposedly weak hadith, this hadith is nonetheless frequently invoked by Muslims and has thus acquired a value in reception which I feel free to appeal to.
13. The period 1986-7, in fact, saw an abortive attempt to introduce a Muslim fundamentalist version of the popular political slogan, *Amandla lilah* (Power is Ours). The short-lived alternative was *Amandla lilah* (Power for God). The idea that popular sovereignty is a heretical alternative to divine sovereignty has been a consistent theme in fundamentalist writings which enjoyed considerable popularity in South Africa in the late 1970s and early 1980s.
14. The inevitable link between making political claims on behalf of God and tyranny was recognized during the early days of Islam by Abu Dharr (d. 653), a Companion, in an encounter with Mu'awiyah. The latter insisted on expropriating community property in the name of God. ('All property belongs to God', was Mu'awiyah's argument.) Abu Dharr responded saying: 'You say this in order to draw the conclusion that since you are the representative of God, all property belongs to you. You ought to say that all property belongs to the people' (Nait-Belkacem 1978, p. 145).
15. The notion of *al-masalah al-'ammah* (the common good) or *al-masalah al-mursalah* (public interest) as a juristic principle, even a source of law, although not undisputed, has for long been operative in Islamic jurisprudence. However, its determination has essentially been confined to the jurists and clerics.
16. Verse 10 of this passage ('And the earth He has spread out for all living things') is more specific in focusing on the ecosystem and on social justice. The earth thus belongs to all who inhabit it, not only humankind, and humankind, as the vicegerent of God upon it, have a responsibility to be just in their dealings with all its co-inhabitants.
17. The post-Mawardi-Sunni theory of state saw stability elevated to a religious principle. Any disruption to that stability, irrespective of its underlying values, was regarded as *fandh*, which was invariably equated with mischief. This post-Mawardian negative attitude towards rebellion though, as Ayalon points out was itself a departure from a still earlier concept, commending the removal of an impious ruler by force. 'No obedience to a creature in disobeying the Creator', ran an oft-quoted hadith (n.d., p. 146).