

# THE QURANIC METHODOLOGY FOR GNOSIS OR MARIFAH

Dr. Absar Ahmed

It is my pleasure and proud privilege to address this august assembly of Muslim scholars on the most vitally important question of renewing our relationship with the Holy Quran in the field of Ma'rifah i.e. Gnosis or metaphysical philosophy and wisdom. In other words, this paper is a study of the Quranic methodology for attaining Gnosis or 'Irfan' -- that illuminative knowledge which unites man with God after penetrating and transforming him completely.

Let me emphasise at the very outset that Islamic faith, as against deism or agnosticism, is essentially a way of knowledge; it is a way of gnosis (ma'rifah). It is based on gnosis or direct and immediate communion with God that cannot by any means be equated with contemporary rationalism which is only indirect and secondary form of knowledge. Islam leads to that essential communion with Reality which integrates our being, which makes us know what we are and what we know or, in other words, it integrates knowledge and being in the ultimate unitive vision of Reality. In this sense, the Islamic perspective and point of view is radically different from many other religious traditions. For example, Christianity is essentially a mystery which veils the Divine from man. According to Augustine, the beauty of Christianity lies in the acceptance of God as a mystery and in bowing before this mystery, in believing in the unknown or Otto's 'mysterium'.<sup>1</sup> In Islam, however, it is man who is veiled mahjoob from God. The Divine Being is not veiled from us, we are veiled from Him and it is for us to try to rend this veil asunder, to try to know God. Our reason al-aql is not a limited and narrow faculty in the sense of contemporary philosophers, but a God-given instrument whose ultimate object is God Himself. The Arabic word al-aql means both reason and intellect and al-though used to mean that reason is also what binds us to God. In fact one of the meanings of the root 'aql' is to tie or to bind. The Quran calls those who have gone astray from religious truths as those who cannot intellect, 'la ya 'qilun, those who cannot use their intelligence correctly and fruitfully. It is very significant here that the loss of faith is equated in the Quran not with the corruption of the will but with the

improper functioning of intelligence and reason.

The Holy Quran conceives of man as a theomorphic and not an anthropomorphic being:

فاذا سويتة و نفخت فيه من روحى

'I have made him and have breathed into him my spirit' (-15: 29).

There is, therefore, something of a 'divine nature' (malakuti) in man; and it is in the light of this profound nature in man that Islam envisages him. That divine element in man is first of all an intellect and soul that can discern between the true and the false and is naturally led to Unity or tawhid. As such, the very idea of Islam is that through the use of intellect and higher spiritual faculties which discern between the Absolute and the relative one should come to surrender to the will of the Absolute. This in fact, is the meaning of Muslim: one who has accepted through free choice to conform his will to the Di-vine Will made known in detail in the divinely revealed law of the Quran.

According to the Quran, it is necessary that the religious duties al-Shari'ah should be internalized. Namely, it should be assimilated in personal experience as best as possible in every individual case -- rather than remaining an imposition 'from out-side', any meaningful transformation of personality being impossible in the latter case. Internalization, in its turn, demands the adoption of a method al-tariqah and actual meaningful journey suluk in the realm of experience. Then as the transformation proceeds, the appreciation of the Truths that Islam has taught begins to deepen in terms of personal realization al-Ma'rifah --realisation with total consciousness and not merely rationalistic appreciation through discursive thought, which can never provide unshakable 'iman' (faith), and realisation in respect of the metaphysical tenets which are of the most basic importance in the Islamic scheme of Guidance. That realisation brings the earnest Muslim progressively closer and closer to the understanding of the Reality al-Haqiqah. That understanding attains in due course a standard level when a Muslim's consciousness becomes fixed on Allah, the Really Real.

### **Ultimate Goal of Religious Quest.**

The Holy Quran emphasises the 'vicegerency of God' as the status of man, and invites human beings to undertake the pilgrimage of eternity in

terms of dynamic movement towards God. The Quran says:  
ye who believe!

يا ايها الذين امنوا اتقوا الله  
وابتغوا اليه الوسيلة  
وجاهدوا في سبيله  
لعلكم تفلحون

Do your duty to God,  
seek the means unto Him,  
And strive hard in His cause;  
That ye may attain salvation

al-Ma'ida: 38.

The Quran supplies this method Wasila, of God which is enshrined in the verse; "he attains 'falah' who subjects it (i.e., the soul) to tazkiyah (Shams:9). As such, it consists in the pursuit of tazkiyah -- i.e., eradicating of the evils that obstruct or keep in abeyance the development of human personality in the spiritual dimension, and consequently in the moral dimension, thereby ensuring healthy spiritual growth under the impact of Islamic injunctions al-Shari'ah -- which operates on the twin wheels; Zikr ('remembrance of God') and Fikr ('probe into the mysteries of Creation and which ends in the establishment of 'falah' salvation -- in one's personality (i.e., spiritual development in terms of the harmonious and comprehensive actualisation of the latent capabilities that relate to the transcendental dimension of the soul.

Thus the Quran lays down the doctrine of the 'Ascent of man to God'. This 'Ascent' consists in a spiritual journey, or what I would like to call, the Religious Quest. We learn the following from the Holy Quran in respect of its progress and achievement.

The spiritually un-regenerate person stays in a state of spiritual inertia and darkness al-Anam:122. When his heart is opened to the understanding and the appreciation of the ideal of 'Surrender to God':

افمن شرح الله صدره للاسلام فهو على نورٍ من ربه

'Is one whose heart God has opened to Islam, so that he has received enlightenment from God, (no better than one hard-hearted?)

Zumar: 22

and he undertakes the Religious Quest, he is revived spiritually and his spiritual nearness to God increases.

The two relevant verses read:

او من كان مَيِّتاً فاحيَّيه و جعلنا له نوراً يمشى به في النار كمن مثله حيَّيه في  
الظلمت ليس بخارج منها

1. Can he who was dead, to whom We gave life, and a light whereby he can walk amongst men, be like him who is in the depths of darkness, from which he can never come out?

Al-Anam: 122

كلا لاتطعه واسجدوا اقترب

2. Nay, heed him not; But bow down in adoration, and bring thyself closer to God.

Alaq: 19

And as it increases, the harmony with the Divine Will in-creases, and as that harmony increases, God's Grace bestows upon him 'a Light with which he walks among human beings'. Then he continues his spiritual pilgrimage with the help of that Light, acquiring more and more holiness in terms of harmony between himself and God;

ارجعى الى ربك راضية مرضية

'Come back thou to thy Lord-well pleased (thyself) and  
well-pleasing unto Him'

maturing more and more in terms of the direct experience of Reality, and acquiring deeper and deeper conviction about God, as the Quran says:

واعبد ربك حتى ياتيك اليقين

'And serve thy Lord, until there comes unto thee utmost certainty (or the time that is certain)

In this, the pursuer of Religious Quest attains the realisation of God on the one hand, and realises himself in terms of vicegerency of God on the other; whereby he attains the fulfilment of the highest and the most ultimate yearning of his soul --which constitutes his essential personality -- in the state of Beatitude and Felicity. That is the highest possible achievement for the human personality, because of the realisation in it of the ideals of all forms of human consciousness at their highest.

It becomes evident from the above lines that the Quranic philosophy differs radically from those religions which create a distinct class of 'pursuers of Gnosis ma'rifah or saintliness', on the one hand, and a vast mass of 'religious proletariat', on the other, -- with principles, ideal and modes of life different for each class. According to the Quran, the stage of al-Ma'nfah (or 'the realisation' as opposed to the possession of 'formal knowledge' of Islamic beliefs) bears reference to the fruits of the strenuous labour Jihad undertaken in respect of Divine obligations, and this, of course, can be attained by any true Muslim. This stage is attained when the Light that God establishes in His devotee 'abd illumines all the dimensions of his consciousness to an extent that he lives and moves only under the impact of that Light, and not through his desire 'hawa . At this level of experience, his ego transcends, in terms of its approach to the reality of Existence, the phenomenological level of 'Diversity' and be-comes focussed in the realm of 'unity' Tawhid -- 'unity' being the reality 'Haqiqah of existence.

### **Iman -- The Basis of Islamic Gnosis**

In the preceding section of this essay I spoke about the 'altariqah' and

'suluk' as important concepts in the Islamic gnostic scheme. I now want to make it clear that the connotation of both these terms and other allied notions are covered under the basic Quranic term of 'iman' i.e., doctrinal belief in, and conviction of, God's existence and other metaphysical tenets of the Islamic faith.

According to the Quran, the real understanding and true knowledge of all things is dependent on our knowledge of God. Just as light is essential for sensory perception of objects, similarly the real true nature of things can be apprehended only through an intimate knowledge of the Creator of the universe. The famous prayer of the Prophet (peace be upon him) sums up the end toward which the gnostic strives with all his mind, soul and body:

"O God, deliver us from preoccupations with worldly vanities and show us the nature of things 'as they really are'. Remove from our eyes the veil of ignorance, and show us things as they really are .... Deliver us from ourselves, and accord us intimate knowledge of Thee."

A true Muslim sees all things as manifestations of the Supreme Divine Being. It is not accidental that the verses of the Quran as well as phenomena in nature and events within the soul of man are called signs or portents ayat. According to the well-known Quranic verse:

سنريهم آياتنا في الافاق و في انفسهم حتى يتبين لهم انه الحق

'We shall show them Our portents on the horizons and within themselves until it will be manifest unto them that it is the Truth'.

Ha Mim Sajda: 53.

The gnostic thus views cosmos in its dual aspects of positive symbol and negative illusion. In so far as any manifestation is real, it is a symbol of a higher order of reality; in so far as it is separated from it, it is merely an illusion and non-being. This view of the cosmos has its positive aspects in its vision of Nature as symbol, and in the consequent cultivation of the sciences which deal with natural phenomena not as facts, but symbols of Divine wisdom and creativity. It is precisely these signs which are displayed in the Quran. The Quran corresponds in a sense to nature, to God's creation. That is why when a Muslim looks at a natural phenomena he should be reminded

of God and His power and wisdom. Man should be reminded of the wonders of creation and constantly see the 'signs' of God upon the horizons.

Pondering over the three categories of signs i.e., the Quranic verses, the signs in the physical universe and the signs in the spiritual world of the human heart, a man will be able to perceive a perfect concord, he will grasp certain fundamental truths which are borne out by the internal testimony of his own nature. In other word, full and intense awareness of Absolute Reality, which is the core of 'iman' will spring up to his consciousness like the memory of a forgotten thing shooting up from the dark depths of the mind to its surface with the aid of a pertinent suggestion. For this very phenomena, the Quran uses the term 'Tazakkur'. The Muslim gnostic Arif or Hakeem who possesses this knowledge inwardly knows the secret of the relation between God and the phenomenal things, the secret of nearness and proximity, immanence and transcendence. Not only does he know these metaphysical truths, but he also feels the immediate presence of God within his own self, as the *Quran* says:

ونعلم ماتوسوس به نفسه ونحن اقرب اليه من حبل الوريد

'We know that his soul whispereth to him, and We are nearer to him than his jugular vein'. Qaf: 16

A true Muslim 'seeks to realise the meaning of the Shahadah, La illaha ill' Allah, and practically seeks to emulate the life of the Propeht (peace be upon him) who is the prototype of Islamic spirituality and who realised the unity or tawhid implied by Shahadah in its fullness. True gnosis is achieved only through following a spiritual path based on the Quran and prophetic practice actively with the aim of gaining that illuminative knowledge al-'irfan which is the ultimate goal of the believer. In this way, 'iman' must be transformed from mere verbal attestation qal to an inward existential faith hal. 'Iman' is essentially attestation of, and inner faith in, some metaphysical truths. The first step towards attaining this faith is to believe more firmly in some truths even though they are not observable or perceptible, and to hold the things heard by the heart to be more trustworthy than the things heard by the ear. Belief in the unseen -- 'Iman bil-ghaib' -- is the first and foremost condition of iman, and this requires a radical change in the thought system and in the point of view of the believer. According to this new perspective, the whole

order of creation should be taken as nothing more than a fleeting appearance of shadow, whereas the existence of God should be felt as an eternally living Reality. Contrary to the view that the universe is a chain of eternally present and uncreated causes and effects or the world of 'natural' forces and rigid mechanical laws, the will of God and His design and purpose should be 'seen' and felt in operation at all times and in all parts of the cosmos. Matter is looked upon as insignificant, and the soul is thought to be man's essence. The locution 'insan' is not to be attributed to man's animal and corporeal body, but to that di-vine spirit the presence of which makes man superior to angels .3 Worldly life should appear to be transitory and unreal, and life hereafter should alone be taken as real and everlasting. The pleasure of God should be held as more valuable than the attainment of all the riches of this world. And, according to a Prophet's (peace be upon him) saying, the riches of the world should not be assigned more value than a mosquito's wing deserves. Let it be clearly and distinctly understood that unless and until a major portion of the Muslim community really undergoes this profound transformation, the vision and the fond hope of an Islamic renaissance can never be realized.

'*Iman*', in the true sense, is a degree of participation in the religion implying intense faith and attachment to God. In fact, many Sufis have over the ages defined Tasawwuf by the well-known Hadith of the Prophet (peace be upon him) who when asked about the definition of ihsan said:

الاحسان ان تعبد الله كأنك تراه فان لم تكن تراه فانه يراك

'It is to adore Allah as thou doest see Him, and if thou does not see Him He nonetheless sees thee'.

What the Quran wants is precisely to worship God with the awareness that we are in His proximity and therefore 'see' Him or that He is always watching us and we are always standing be-fore Him.

Contemporary philosophical empiricism maintains that we finite beings cannot know God, the Infinite. According to its advocates, logical purity demands that it is impossible to specify the nature of the referent in the term 'the Infinite'. They hold that any attempt to 'fill out' the character of the 'object' in question will, ipso facto, render it finite. They pair finite with intelligible and infinite with unintelligible. But surely this approach is radically

misguided and the pairing breaks down easily. For example, some mathematical infinities are perfectly intelligible, while some finite objects, at the present time, are not intelligible to us. To a person wholly ignorant of mathematics, the calculus may be completely unintelligible. For someone totally void of mystical insight, the nature of his own spirit ruh which is in some sense also 'infinite' remains unintelligible. As a matter of fact, if one prays to God passionately and soulfully, He answers him. This is a partial but perfectly good perception of God's nature, and one which has some degree of verifiability, as the Quran says:

وإذا سألك عبادى عنى فانى قريب احجيب دعوة الداع اذا رعان

'When My servants ask thee concerning Me. I am indeed close (to them): I listen to the prayer of every supplicant when he calleth on Me'

al-Baqara: 186

Indeed the Islamic faith provides the possibility of achieving the highest form of spiritual realisation and beauty. According to a divine saying Hadith Qudsi revealed through the mouth of the Prophet, (peace be upon him) God said: "the heavens and the earth cannot contain Me, but the heart of My believing servant does contain Me". Another Prophet's (peace be upon him) tradition explains the Divine proximity thus: "My servant continually seeks to win My favour by works of superogation until I love him, and when I love him, I am to him an ear and an eye and a hand. Through Me he hears and through Me he sees and through Me he walks". Al-Bukhari.

To be sure, the Holy Quran lays more emphasis on acquiring personal and genuine relationship with God rather than having abstract cognition of Him. Indeed it is not possible for mortals like us to comprehend the Essence of God in its entirety. Allah is Ahad, and Ahadiyat is a state of the colourlessness, the state of the Essence. Consequently the desire to acquire gnosis of the Dhat or Essence of Allah is of no avail. The Quran refers to this in these words:

لا يحيطون به علما

'But they shall not compass Him with their knowledge'.

Even the Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of God be upon him) had said about it: I have not known thee to the extent that thy knowledge demands, and had warned thinkers thus; 'Do not indulge in speculating on the nature of God lest ye may be destroyed.'

It becomes clear from the above lines that true and genuine apprehension of the attributes sifaat of God is attained through devotional worship, supplication and humility towards Allah. In this process the Creator discloses Himself to the worshipper in a manner which is beyond communication or philosophical categorization. It must be emphasised, however, that all this makes sense in the living context of Islamic beliefs and practices. Adherence to Quranic injunctions and the Prophet's (peace be upon him) Sunnah is the sole criterion of attaining veridical and genuine religious experience of God.

### **Gnosis through Moral virtue**

The Muslim Gnostic Ar'if billah is one whose conduct to-wards God is sincere. According to the Quran and the traditions of the Holy Prophet (peace and blessings of God be upon him), the unveiling of divine gnosis is entirely dependent on inner purity and moral excellence. Verse 26 of Surah Saad reads:

ولا تتبع الهوى فيضلك عن سبيل الله

"And follow not the lusts (of thy heart) for they will mislead thee from the Path of God."

It is crystal clear from this verse that true Ma'rifah and propinquity of God is attained only through the purification of the senses and the will, through the effacement of one's desire in the will of God. It is attained through the renunciation of all selfish pleasures and unlawful carnal desires. At an other place the Quran says:

والذين جاهدوا فينا لنهدينهم سبلنا وان الله لمع المحسنين

"And those who fight strenuously for us, We will surely guide them into Our way. Verily, Allah is with those who do right."

Believing in these exhortations the great Sufi Yahya has said: 'the spirit of gnosis will never reach thy heart, so long as there is a duty owing to God which thou hast not discharged'.

Again, the immediate illumination that makes the individual sovereign in the realm of knowledge also inspires superior rules of conduct. The creature 'abd discovers his own true nature as a compliment to the attributes of God – his humility to God's greatness, his gratitude to His generosity, etc. I believe this is the sense of the following Quranic verse:

ولا تكونوا كالذين نسوا الله فانساهم اولئكَ هم الفسقون

'And be ye not like those who forgot God; and He made them forget their own selves. Such are the rebellions transgressors'.

Hashr: 19

To forget God is to forget the ultimate Reality. As we are only reflected and contingent realities, how can we understand or do justice to or remember ourselves, when we forget the very sources of our being. Self-knowledge is thus tied to knowledge and remembrance of God and His attributes, and the relation between them is complementary and symbiotic. Of course, this knowledge is not mere theory or metaphysical speculation. If a man appreciates God's generosity he will himself be sincerely and truly grateful. So character and conduct are an essential part of this knowledge. A man cannot appreciate God's quality of forgiveness without throwing his own sin, and the two recognitions develop and mature together. As they mature, they naturally bring with them repentance and the striving for purity.

Gnostic knowledge of eternal and timeless realities thus has a salvational quality. It is not the common property of all and sundry. In gnosis there is no attempt, as in the modern West, at a theory of knowledge which applies equally to all men. Knowledge is given to some, not to others, yet remains genuine knowledge. This undoubtedly is a strongly privileged sense of knowledge opposed to modern democratic and levelling tendencies. A man's nature as expressed in his behaviour and his knowledge go hand in hand, and his nature is determined by God and His Grace. Thus, according to the

Quran, those without faith are said to be more in error than even animals. 'Remembrance of God' has been contrasted with following the desires and lusts (al-Kahaf:28 (al-Najam: 29). Remembrance of God brings deeper and intimate knowledge of God and oneself; following one's wayward and animal impulses turns one to the world, causes him to disobey God's commands and ultimately leads to condemnation. Thus, self-discipline, purity of heart and conduct, and some degree of worldly detachment zuhd are essential pre-requisite for attaining knowledge and appreciation of the Di-vine.

The heart is the seat of genuine metaphysical understanding. It may turn towards the world or towards God, and the consciousness turns with it. It turns towards the world through the instrumentation of the self nafs. This self or soul has varying degrees of purity and the heart responds accordingly. The Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) explained this fact beautifully in one of his sayings quoted in al-Bukhari thus:

"Mark, in man there is a lump of flesh, if it is kept whole-some and healthy the whole body remains in a healthy condition; and if it is corrupted, the whole body is corrupted Mark, it is the heart!"

This kind of knowledge is not the same as I.Q. or the knowledge of pure mathematics (despite Plato's theories of mathematics and the eternal ideas, etc.). A person can obtain much theoretical knowledge but still be essentially ignorant concerning God and his own soul, and in need of salvation. It is not merely a question of study, but of faith and character development, and thus the problem of communicating, this knowledge is much more difficult than that of communicating, for instance, Arabic grammar. Reason, logic and experiment (in the outward sense of experiment and empirical observation), are not sufficient, and an over-reliance upon universally accepted sources of knowledge may cause gnostic and salvific knowledge to dry up.

My God bless us, advance us in true knowledge, grant us wisdom, illuminate our hearts and draw us ever nearer to Him-self. Amin!.

(Paper presented at the 15th International Conference of Islamic thought in Algeria in September, 1981).