

THE BOSNIAN PARADIGM:

The Bosnian Experience of Intercultural Relations

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There used to be a part of Illyria, now called Bosnia,

A savage land, but rich in silver ore.

There were no long furrows of land there,

Or fields yielding abundant harvests,

*But rugged mountains, and rough rocks reaching to the sky
And tall towers soaring on craggy hills.*

From *Stone Sleeper* by Mak Dizdar

The land of Bosnia as a cultural unity of differences is the subject matter of my presentation. But I want to point out at the beginning that the Bosnian paradigm, as the title suggests, is diametrically opposed to the currently prevailing perceptions of my country. Actually, the problem is in the point of view: are you more inclined to look at Bosnia through the differences highlighted by ethnic conflicts in the last century and, particularly, in the course of the past ten years or so, or are you more prone to take into account its thousand-year-old history of the interweaving of different religions and cultures? If you take the second point of view, then you will see Bosnia as a unique place in the world, the paradigm of the structure of the global concept, a locus where the issue of multiculturalism is not just a brilliant theoretical elaboration of this concept, but the experience of a centuries old way of life by that model. True, as a result of a tragedy of cosmic proportions which happened there before the eyes of the entire world, this Bosnian paradigm was marred and pushed aside. However, even after all those tragic events, the awareness is growing of seeking resort in this model of thinking and living as the only possible and realistic prospect.

At the very beginning of his preface to the Bosnian translation of *The Heart of Islam: Ensuring Values for Humanity*,¹⁰⁷ a book translated by two dear colleagues and myself within a very short period of time on the occasion of the anniversary of the tragic events of September 11, 2001, the esteemed Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr offers a remarkably faithful picture of Bosnia:

Bosnia lies at the heart of the European continent, at once a witness to the reality of Islam, a bridge between the Islamic world and the West and for most of its history a living example of religious accord and harmony between the followers of the Abrahamic religions. Today in a world so much in need of mutual religious and cultural understanding, Bosnia can play an important role far beyond the extent of its geographic size or population, provided it remains faithful to its own universal vision of Islam threatened nowadays by forces both within and outside its borders.

In the same preface, however, Professor Nasr calls for a new ethic of responsibility by emphasising the role of Bosnia as a bulwark of a strong as well as universalist and inclusivist Islam at the heart of Europe, seeing in us people who will spread to the rest of the world the spiritual and ethical norms that constitute the heart of Islam, as well as the essence of the other revelations that God sent as guides to humanity. This is an extremely difficult task in this miserable age when ignorance is power and when the Bosnian peoples are turned more toward the differences that set them apart than toward resemblances which connect them and which are undoubtedly much more numerous.

*This is the text of a lecture delivered at the Georgetown University Centre for Muslim Christian Understanding in Washington, DC, December 2002. (Courtesy: **Sophia, Journal of the Traditional Studies**, Washington, DC, Vol. 9, No. 1, Summer, 2003)*

¹⁰⁷ See “Predgovor bosanskom prijevodu” (“Preface to Bosnian Translation”) in S. H. Nasr, *Srce Islama: trajne vrijednosti za civilizaciju*, translated by E. Karic, R. Hafizovic and N. Kahteran (Sarajevo: El-Kalem, 2002), p. 11.

The point is that Bosnia and Herzegovina has become one of many places on the map of the world where things are routinely bad. I hasten to say that I do not intend to deal here with the unfortunate events which afflicted my country for so many years and whose consequences will be felt by the people of Bosnia for years to come. All the images of the sufferings and horrors of war might be summarized by quoting a brilliant passage from a book by the Bosnian writer Dervis Susic:¹⁰⁸

.....Bosnia is not what our senses perceive from her colors and shapes. Listen to me! Bosnia is the deepest cauldron of Hell. Her bad roads, her entrenched habit, and her incurable suspicion have closed her to the beauties created by others, while her position makes her open to aggression from all four sides.

However, like the writer just quoted, anybody with any knowledge of what has happened in Bosnia and Herzegovina is aware of the fact that the evil was not brought by its inhabitants, and that “the secrets of the commitment of ordinary people, of the violence, exclusivity, and the dogged persistence of those commitments” should be sought elsewhere. This situation is maintained also by the monstrous creation called “the Dayton Bosnia,” although I do bear in mind that it was the Dayton Agreement, such as it is, that brought an end to that unfortunate war. Even as I am speaking about the peace, however, I am facing a question to which I myself have no satisfactory answer, the question of the function of a philosopher in a country in which publication is virtually non-existent, in which culture is in the hands of the nation’s “fathers” full of nationalist nonsense. Nevertheless, when everything is taken into account, our immersion in the sameness, in the commonalities that connect us, creates a feeling of a vital and promising attempt to extricate ourselves from the vicious circle within which we are separated by hatred, but at the same time gives rise to a sincere wish for a strengthening of our consciousness, both in ourselves and in others, that we can survive only by love, or at least by communication between individuals and communities. The Anglo-American academic community can discover some of the baroque complexity of the Balkans in the work of the authors

¹⁰⁸ *Pobune (Revolts)* by Dervis Susic (Sarajevo: Svjetlost, 1991), pp. 91-92.

like Michael A. Sells, who wrote *The Bridge Betrayed: Religion and Genocide in Bosnia*,¹⁰⁹ and *The Balkans as Metaphor*,¹¹⁰ a recently published book offering a somewhat different approach to the study of the region of south eastern Europe. There are many other volumes available in English dealing with the enormous inconsistencies and complexities of the Balkan world and of Bosnia in particular.

However, the issue that I want to raise here is exactly that of the ways to avoid the stereotypes and absurdities that have characterized too long the debates on the Balkans and, regularly, those on Bosnia and Herzegovina. Therefore, I wish to mention *The Historical Atlas of Bosnia and Herzegovina*,¹¹¹ the product of nearly a decade of hard work by a team of university professors, of whom as many as five have since passed away. As you turn the pages and look at the different historical maps, most of which were put together by non-Bosnians, you cannot help wondering what the key aspects are of the prevailing stereotype of Bosnia, in the face of the irrefutable evidence about its thousand-year old continuous existence and the richness of its different identities. I therefore pose a very serious question: why not take the differences not as a Bosnian inconsistency or inadequacy but as a rich fermentation in which the West itself could take pride as proof of its inherent tolerance? Because only in that case would the previously mentioned Bosnian writer be refuted when, in another of his novels, he said resignedly:

¹⁰⁹ Also translated into Bosnian. See *Iznevjereni most: religija i genocid u Bosni* (Sarajevo: Klio, 2002).

¹¹⁰ The MIT Press, 2002.

¹¹¹ Sarajevo: Sejtarija, 2002. *Geographical and Historical Maps of Bosnia and Herzegovina* is the first publication of its kind in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Atlas comprises basic geographical and historical maps of Bosnia and Herzegovina, showing the centuries 'long continuity of the country's statehood. Bosnia has figured on geographical maps from the earliest times to the present, as featured in the Atlas, using old geographical and historical maps of the country found in European cartographic archive collections and now, for the first time, classified and presented to the general public.

The Atlas, which is 25.70 x 36 cm in dimensions, has 352 pages, and is printed in six colours. It comprises twelve chapters. I sincerely hope that this remarkable volume will soon become available in English or that an English supplement will be incorporated into a future edition of the Atlas.

“May the Lord have mercy on this land. Until it finds its identity, there is not much we can ask for in this country.” We seem to be dealing with the principle of double standards in the case of Bosnia, since what is allowed there would never be tolerated in their own environments by those who make the most important decisions on Bosnia.

After all the unfortunate years of conflict and destruction, it is not difficult to see how the radical transformation of the global ideological geography, i.e., the fall of the system based on a bipolar distribution of power, left an indelible trace on the map of Bosnia by disfiguring the beauty of its traditional mosaic almost irrevocably. Furthermore, the collapse of the “Eastern ideological paradigm” doesn’t seem to have been as painful and destructive anywhere as in Bosnia.

Yet, in today’s Bosnia there is an increasing number of genuine intellectuals who hope that they can offer a corrective platform to counter the currently prevailing perceptions of Bosnia. In this sense there is indeed a need to homogenize the West in order to “unhomogenize” Bosnia. Namely, the rapid acceptance of the cultural codes of a global society is extremely attractive to Bosnian intellectuals, who are eager to be recognized as members of the world community, above all of the European Union and other Western and Euro-Atlantic associations. In Bosnia, however, this universal globalism is, unfortunately, also ethnic in character, emanating as it does from hidden ethnicity. In such a situation, the challenge we naturally face is for us to realize— in spite of the wish of such intellectuals for a non-ethnic identity— that their resistance to globalism is, in fact, a natural consequence of their nationalistic short-sightedness. What I have in mind is the failure to accept the fact that globalization on the economic plane inevitably involves globalization on the spiritual plane, which in turn means greater awareness of the sameness rather than continuing insistence on differences. Naturally, we must be fully aware that, as a small country, we are totally insignificant on the former plane, but on the latter plane we do have a great deal to offer to the modern world, which gives us a good opportunity to play an important global role, if you will allow me to paraphrase Professor Nasr’s words quoted earlier.

Thus, the obvious question now is the following: how can we reinforce the aspirations for a traditionally good multicultural co-existence, shaken up and brought to the edge of survival by the unfortunate events during the period between 1992 and 1995 and by an unnatural situation maintained to this day in one way or another? Another way of putting the question is: how do we support the building of the stage for peaceful co-existence with due respect for all Bosnian peculiarities and different cultural frameworks, without their violent removal on the one hand, and without becoming prey to nationalistic nonsense on the other.

What we have said so far has brought us to a paradoxical situation. With regard to the context of the events that have taken place in Bosnia and Herzegovina and produced the current situation. This “country of endless inspiration,” which was dismembered at all its seams, is again being watched, through the prism of the forgotten paradigm of Bosnia as it had been through many centuries of its existence, as a fertile ground for religious pluralism and understanding of all the holy forms of Abraham’s family of religions as well as others. I will again refer here to Professor Nasr’s book mentioned earlier, in which he says literally that Muslims must extend the hand of friendship not only to the followers of other religions, as ordered in the Qur’an, but also live together with, and show particular respect to, those who have abandoned the world of religion, i.e., the secularists. This is a very difficult task, new to both modernism and postmodernism.¹¹²

At this point, however, a critique suggests itself of the main modern sin, the sin of the obsession with the ego, in the business of paving the road to the forgotten Bosnian paradigm, permeated with perennial wisdom. But our critique of modernism and post-modernism is by no means an anti-Western attitude, but a perspicacious observation of the cracks of the mind that are becoming evident to the modern recipient. We could rather say that it is a true expression of the concern and apprehension for the future of humanity as a whole. Because Bosnia originated and has existed by divine providence

¹¹² See my translation of “Ljudske odgovornosti i ljudska prava” (“Human Responsibilities and Human Rights”), chapter VII of Nasr’s book mentioned earlier, published also by *The Herald* of the Riyasat of the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Vol. LXIV, No. 7-8 (July-August 2002, Sarajevo), pp. 773-798.

at the crossroads of different worlds. Admittedly, the reestablishment of the perennial perspective transcends the finiteness of the cunning of the utilitarian and utilized minds, and we do keep finding, within the Bosnian heritage, a great deal more to be learned about its cultural peculiarities and plurality—not as mere theories or mental concepts held or advocated, but as a centuries old model of living. This is why I spoke earlier about the disfiguring of the traditional beauty of the Bosnian face, since nowadays most people know only its Frankenstein appearance, i.e., the post-Dayton situation. However, the destruction of the multi-religious and multi-ethnic identity of Bosnia is not a loss only to the Bosnian peoples and the region of south eastern Europe, but to all of humankind.

Bosnia and Herzegovina needs the wisdom I have spoken about more than ever before, both from the philosophical and intellectual standpoint and, even more, in the practical sense of improvement of daily life. Furthermore, it seems that only from this angle can we implement the idea of the pluralistic unity of Europe and the world at large; this, however, needs to be clarified. Namely, we must make it clear why the concepts of modernism and post-modernism cannot be applied to Bosnia and Herzegovina as elsewhere in Europe, although, as a European country, it will become, sooner or later, one of its important members because of its centuries old devotedness to the idea of multi-cultural living.

Let me first underline the opposition between, on the one hand, the metaphysically blinded perspective of the modern mind and, on the other, the all-inclusive framework of traditional civilizations relating to the multiplicity of holy forms and ethnic genealogies. On the opposite side, the traditional world in which holy traditions influence each other implies a somewhat different way of relating to, and understanding, “the other one.” Bosnia and Herzegovina as a country of multi-religious identities, in spite of the imported nationalist ideologies, must avoid the pitfall of reactionary nationalism and insist on a supranational and supra political framework for the sake of its future, although this year’s elections are a setback in that sense. Therefore, issues like unity, difference, pluralism, tolerance, etc. cannot be fully resolved within the framework of modern concepts. In fact, there is a genuine need for a metaphysical perspective within which ethnic and religious differences in Bosnia could be transformed into meaningful co-

existence, and this is how the important traditional concept of unity of different religious forms can take us out of the dead end in which we have found ourselves.

However, when I refer to, for example, Will Kymlick with his book *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* and Charles Taylor, the author of “The Politics of Recognition,” published in the volume *Multi-culturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, as well as the most important French contribution made by Sylvie Mesure and Alain Renaut, *Alter ego: Paradoxes of Democratic Identity* as supporters of multi-culturalism, I want to ask whether or not they correspond to the Bosnian paradigm mentioned earlier.

If we approach this topic from the standpoint of the traditional understanding of Islam, but also of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, then the option of accepting the relative as the only significant category and of public banishment of the category of truth from intellectual discourse becomes suicidal and least credible in the case of any traditional society, and thus of Bosnia too. However, in order to clarify what I have just said, I ought to give brief characterizations of modernism and post-modernism, which should make it easier for us to understand the principles of perennial philosophy. In this case I will use an extract from the review of my study on perennial philosophy by someone I am very fond of, Bosnian Franciscan Professor Mile Babic from the Franciscan Theological Faculty in Sarajevo, who summarizes these ideas in a remarkable way.¹¹³ He writes that it is symptomatic for perennial philosophy to be discussed at the present time, the time of post-modernism, and poses a direct question about what it is that perennial philosophy wants to emphasise in this post-modern era.

The point is that modernism emphasizes *oneness*, *one principle* common to all, a principle that applies to everything, which is, therefore, universal. The characteristic of modernism is *unity* and *universalism*.

¹¹³ See Mile Babic's review of my book in *Bosna Franciscana*, Vol. X, No. 16 (2002), pp. 230-233.

Post-modernism emphasizes plurality, difference, discreteness of every being and every culture. Every being is totally different, and every culture is totally different. The characteristic of post-modernism is *otherness*, which means that there are only many beings and many cultures, which are mutually incommensurable, with nothing connecting or unifying them. To post-modernists there can be no feature, measure, value, or principle which would be shared by all. Every human being is an island unto himself or herself, and every culture is an island unto itself. Among those different people and cultures there is no *commensurability*. Cultures are *incommensurable*. The notion of *incommensurability* best defines the spirit of post-modernism. It implies that there is nothing common to different cultures and so they cannot be measured on the same scale— they are, thus, *incommensurable*. Every culture has its own scale of measurement immanent to it, and every one is different. Comparing one culture with another is, to post-modernists, a type of violence against that culture.

Post-modernism rejects every pluralism based on different representations of one and the same principle. Post-modernism rejects *monism*, which holds that one entity is manifested only in one way, as well as *pluralism*, which considers that one entity is manifested in a number of ways. Even Aristotle said that the being is manifested in many ways. Post-modernism rejects such pluralism. In a word, post-modernism rejects every kind of monistic and pluralistic metaphysics, that is everything that unites, unifies, and brings about uniformity.

We can simply say that post-modernism rejects all that modernism advocates. Modernism advocates *monism*, and post-modernism *pluralism*; modernism advocates *commensurability*, and post-modernism *incommensurability*, modernism is in favour of *reducing* all differences to one entity, while post-modernism argues for *otherness*, incommensurability of differences to oneness; modernism advocates uniting to produce unification and uniformity, while post-modernism rejects any idea of a union or any comparison of different cultures. Modernism seeks universalism, post-modernism multi-culturalism.

In addition to the stated differences, it needs to be said that modernism favours *aggressive dogmatism*, and post-modernism *aggressive relativism*. Modernism considers the norms of a culture *infallible* and imposes them, as

such, on other cultures. This is what is called aggressive dogmatism. Post-modernists take the view that the norms of a culture are infallible only in that particular culture, which means that every culture has its own infallible norms. The norms valid only for one culture are relative. That is why we call this aggressive relativism.

Perennial philosophy mediates between, and reconciles, the opposites contrasting modernism to postmodernism; it converts the opposites into differences which are part of an all-inclusive single entity. What modernism and postmodernism viewed as opposites are now different manifestations of one and the same truth. Perennial philosophy reconciles dogmatism and relativism by claiming that the one and the same truth is *universal*, that it is manifested in contingent historical (relative) facts. In this way, perennial philosophy also reconciles universalism and multi-culturalism.

Perennial philosophy demonstrates that differences and oneness are not mutually exclusive. Perennial philosophers assume that all philosophies agree in essence, that all religions agree in essence, that all philosophies and religions agree in essence. In this way, perennial philosophy overcomes the split (opposition) between the mind and faith, between philosophy and religion. And today the opposition between the mind and faith (science and religion) has reached its peak. Today we have made of science an ideology on one side, that is the mind which makes itself absolute, and made an ideology of religion on the other side, that is religion that makes itself absolute. Only truth is absolute, not religion. Perennial philosophy directs all religions, philosophies, and sciences toward the transcendental One, the One which is revealed, but which no revelation— or all revelations taken together— can exhaust. Finally, the most important thing is for us to become aware of the fact that while we are immersed in one horizon of thought, we must by no means allow all others to elude us.

Let us summarize what has been said so far. Post-modernism is opposed to the assumptions of modernism in many ways, but not— as Perennialists will splendidly observe— toward seeking fresh evidence of the reality of the Holy, regardless of what we name It and how we identify It. In fact, post-modernism tries to deconstruct the holy structures of religion and even the

holy texts themselves.¹¹⁴ While modernism emphasises rationality, post-modernism, as we can see, rejects even the knowledge obtained by means of man's limited mind. Hence, we can see immediately that, on the practical plane, the issue of applicability of these concepts to Bosnia and Herzegovina must be seen in a somewhat different light. But what, then, is the criterion suitable for the Bosnian reality?

Obviously the answer does not lie in mere refutation of, or confrontation with, these modern and post-modern Western philosophical traditions. We would rather say that the answer could be found in a fruitful association of controversial issues and in an improved understanding of the standpoints themselves and of the issues involved. Therefore, the goal is not overcoming those who think differently and who pray to God and invoke His Name in a way different from our own. On the contrary, the goal is to act creatively together and compete in the struggle for the general benefit of all humanity. This is the forgotten wisdom of Bosnia, the immersion in sameness rather than in differences, for which I am infinitely grateful to my first teachers of this perennial wisdom— my beloved parents. There is still a huge reservoir of that wisdom that can be tapped for meaningful inter-religious dialogue and joint foundations acceptable to everybody.

I believe it is generally known that in accordance with this perennial wisdom there exists a universal teaching by which different religions are largely mutually confirmable, a teaching originating from the Unity of the Divine Principle, which comprises all the teachings, metaphysically and practically. This teaching respects individual forms of each holy tradition, the details derived from the Source itself, which means that there is a realistic possibility of dialogue and mutual understanding among all nations. Thus, this teaching offers us something that we cannot find in the various modern and post-modern philosophical premises, those that constitute them and the others that cause their decomposition after a while, going on in that way for ever and ever. Hence, the existence of this teaching in Bosnia, as it was expressed for centuries there, is far more important than the different ways

¹¹⁴ See S.H. Nasr, "Islam at the Dawn of the New Christian Millennium," published in *Encounters*, 5:2 (1999), pp. 129-154.

in which it was expressed, even than the heresy that Bosnia was not infrequently accused of— both from the East and the West. Namely, to those from the East we are very bad Muslims, to those from the West we are equally poor Christians and Jews. However, I firmly believe that we shall be better Muslims, Christians, and Jews only if we are willing to follow the dominant principle I have just spoken about.

I am not arguing for any kind of heresy but for persevering action with regard to human differences in order to achieve the greatest possible measure of traditional harmony in Bosnia, whose lack for the past ten years has been witnessed by the entire international community. Naturally, as a result of the unfortunate events that have taken place during that period, Bosnia has been open for too long to a variety of foreign influences, including even those of fundamentalism, which represents a greater break with the Bosnian tradition than the arrival of modernism. For genuine traditions, of whatever provenance, have never preached terror and violence.

I also want to point out a social pathology of the contemporary world which makes people accustomed to the presence of violence as something perfectly normal and logical. People have developed too intimate a relationship with danger and the presence of death. The attitude of the Bosnian academician Muhamed Filipovic¹¹⁵ seems to me to be crucial with regard to this topic. He claims that terrorism in the modern world originates from the simple fact that the contemporary way of life is impregnated with violence, gratuitous violence totally unrelated to any beliefs or theories. Therefore, violence and terrorism are, according to him, a logical manifestation of the modern way of life, penetrating all cultures and religions from outside, without being in any way connected to their own premises and teachings. In that case terrorism cannot be, *eo ipso*, derived from the premises of religiosity. In fact, speaking about the madness of power, he claims that we are living against nature and that this backfires in such a way that we are no longer capable of clear distinction between good and evil, that we have lost the sense of the ethical, and that we ourselves are part of a great

¹¹⁵ See *Islam i teror*, by Muhamed Filipovic (Sarajevo: El Kalem, 2002).

pragmatic machine of exploitation and destruction, while terrorism is only the most direct and the most precise expression of such a state of affairs.

Finally, I think that we can agree that the search for causes of terror cannot by any means be located in the sphere of various faiths and ideologies, especially not in the sphere of Islamic belief, since it is absolutely obvious that terror is something that is much more deeply rooted in the modern way of life. Moreover, the actual appearance of terrorism is an expression of our contemporary European or Western civilization and of some of its features, of which we are either not aware or which we deliberately ignore. We do not seem to know how to tackle these features, although we do know that our present difficulties originate from them.

In conclusion, allow me to clarify what it is that makes me continue with my adherence to this universalist perspective, which, I sincerely hope, I have presented clearly enough. The question then is what is the reason supporting an inclusivist attitude in understanding the world and the world processes from the Islamic perspective, since Islam is that *topos* from which this understanding starts in the case of Bosnian Muslims and my own original impulse? Is it perhaps because, in the words of the brilliant Bosnian writer, Mesa Selimovic, we have always been plagued by misfortunes, so that we are afraid of loud laughter, we are afraid that we might anger evil forces which always lurk around Bosnia.”¹¹⁶ I feel obligated to quote his now famous passage about Bosnian Muslims:

History has never made such a joke with anyone else as it did with us... we had been torn away and disconnected and were not accepted. Like a branch of the river which had been separated from the mother river by a torrential flood, and had neither stream nor mouth, too small to be a lake and too big for a soil to absorb it within itself.

We live at the crossroads of the worlds, on a border of nations; we bear the brunt for everybody, and we have always been guilty in the eyes of

¹¹⁶ *Tvrđjava (Fortress)*, p. 31.

someone. The waves of history break themselves over our backs, as on a reef.

From this position, faithfully described by this writer, and in spite of all the troubles concomitant with the location in which we found ourselves, sprang and continues to grow this universalist and inclusivist perspective, which is a testimony to the constructive role of Islam that it plays and will play in the future of Europe. To me personally, as a Hafiz-al-Qur'an,¹¹⁷ this universalist perspective has enabled to avoid, without any shame or self-love, falling prey to any of today's prevailing "philosophies of the herd" in Bosnia, i.e., to that parochial philosophy and narrow-mindedness, which are unfortunately present in Bosnia at a moment when it is most essential to affirm the universal perspective of our original impulses. As for the Bosnian Muslims, they are becoming increasingly aware of the fact that universalism in its deepest sense is the very *raison d'être* of Islam. Hence the support of the Bosnian model and paradigm is not a matter of choice, but the issue which makes up or breaks up the picture of the modern world, reinforcing or weakening the trust in the unity of that world.

HI would like to conclude by conveying the opinion of a well known philosopher that where there is danger, there is also the possibility of salvation, which, in fact, is a paraphrase of the following statement in the Holy Qur'an:

So, verily, with every difficulty, there is relief: verily, with every difficulty there is relief.
(Al-Inshirah, 5-6).

Wa ma tanfiqi Illa bi'llah

¹¹⁷ Some one who has memorized the whole of the Qur'anic text. (Editor)