Al-Shura: The Qur’anic Principle of Consultation

Ahmad Al-Raysuni

Al-Shura or consultation is a tool for reconstruction and reform, mentioned in the Qur’an and suggested in the practices of the Prophet Muhammad (SAAS) and his Companions. At this time, Muslims remain largely unaware of al-shura’s importance and value, and Islamic scholars are uncertain about when the principle is obligatory and which matters call for consultation. In a modern context al-shura has been associated on the one hand with democratic participation in a decision making process, with qualification particular to the Qur’an and the Sunnah; on the other hand critics challenge equating al-shura with democracy. The Muslim world, largely mired today in political authoritarianism, should adopt consultation as a way of life to protect individual and community interests and as a tool for reconstruction and reform. This book explores how the principle can be introduced and applied in Muslim society and life.

The concept of consultation (al-shura) remains obscure despite publication in recent decades of hundreds of books and articles on the subject. Numerous additional aspects of al-shura remain to be addressed. This book focuses on the fundamental concept and explains how the practice can activate and support efforts to benefit the Islamic community worldwide. The book’s source-based methodology and legislative principles derive from verses in the Holy Qur’an, events from the life of the Prophet, and examples set by the rightly-guided caliphs. A number of texts from the Holy Qur’an and Prophetic traditions connect consultation to all areas of life: spiritual and material, individual and corporate… click for an abridged edition in pdf

Apostasy in Islam: A Historical and Scriptural Analysis

Taha Jabir Alalwani
This study aims to demonstrate a lack of consensus concerning the existence of a legally prescribed punishment, set down in the Qur’an and clarified in the Sunnah, for apostasy in the sense this term is used. The body of evidence regarding apostasy includes the words and actions of the Prophet (SAAS) as transmitted to us in relevant hadiths and traditions, attributed to his companions, which allows us to evaluate if there is or is not a specified, legally prescribed punishment in Islam for the crime of altering one’s beliefs, so long as no other criminal action is associated with it. In essence, the Qur’an and practices of the Sunnah confirm the freedom enjoyed by humans regarding their wills, intentions, thoughts, expressions, and actions.

To this end, the study also analyzes various juristic schools of thought, wherein the majority of Muslim jurists have based their claim that the apostate must be put to death on the verbal Sunnah and consensus. This study’s methodological approach is philosophical, analytical, and inductive/historical, including traditional approaches to the study of Islamic textual sciences and other relevant fields of knowledge. The Qur’an is the foundational source for all rulings on basic principles and foundations. The Sunnah is treated as the source that clarifies the meaning of the Qur’an in a binding manner.

In seeking to determine the meanings of linguistic terms that appear in the Qur’an, the following criteria are used: the Qur’an’s own usage of such terms; the Prophet’s explanatory statements in the Sunnah; and the Arabs’ customary usage of such terms in their various dialects, literary styles, and rhetoric. By following this order of priority, one ensures that Arab linguistic usages of terms are not allowed to determine the meanings of the Qur’an. Finally, Islamic law’s governing values and intents are universal, lighting the path for those seeking the truth and meanings of particular texts regarding apostasy.

To address such a controversial question as punishment for apostasy, Muslim jurists engage in the practice of exhaustive interpretation, or ijtihad. The fundamental issue addressed in this study is individual apostasy: a change in an individual’s doctrinal beliefs and a resulting modification in thought, conceptions, and behavior. The individual has not associated the act of changing his doctrinal beliefs with rebellion against the community or its statutes, nor against its legitimate leadership, whether political or religious. He has not threatened the community in any way, and has only changed his doctrinal position. Rather than become a public advocate of his newly adopted position, he has kept his apostasy to himself.

This study addresses the following questions: Has God established death as the legally sanctioned punishment for such a person, with or without the community’s first having urged him to repent? And is it, therefore, the duty of the Muslim community, represented by its rulers, to carry out the penalty by putting him to death for no reason but that he has changed his
beliefs? And is this the case even if the change in this person’s beliefs has not been accompanied by any other crime such as those we have mentioned? If some member of the Muslim community were to kill this individual, would he be exempt from punishment or retaliation for anything other than having taken the law into his own hands?

Similarly, is it the Muslim community’s duty to compel this person and others like him to return to Islam by force? Or does the Qur’an deny the legitimacy of such compulsion? Further, has there been unanimous agreement since the dawn of Islam that it is the Muslim community’s duty to put the apostate to death? Or has this view been the subject of disagreement that has not been brought sufficiently to light? Is apostasy to be viewed as a mere departure from Islam, or as an act of aggression against it? Do the majority of those who support the death penalty for apostasy view it as a political crime, or as a felony? Moreover, assuming that it is a legally prescribed penalty and that, as is stated explicitly in authoritative Islamic texts, the legally prescribed penalties serve to atone for a person’s sin, is the death penalty for apostasy to be considered a form of purification or atonement?

The aim of this study is to provide a methodology to serve as a model which one can use to place Islamic tradition under the authority of the Qur’an, thereby bringing it into full conformity with Qur’anic teachings… click for an abridged edition in pdf

Authentication of Hadith Redefining the Criteria

Israr Ahmad Khan

The Qur’an and Hadith govern all aspects of Islam’s belief system and its manifestation in human life. The Qur’an represents the precisely revealed words of Allah (SWT) and the Hadith constitute the practical and methodological dimensions of the Qur’anic commands and instructions. Allah tasked the Prophet Muhammad (SAAS) to do the following: rehearse the Qur’an’s messages to people; unfold the truth revealed in the Qur’an; and teach his followers. The bayan of the Qur’an is known as the Hadith and Sunnah.
To that end, the following aspects are true and stated in the Qur’an: Allah’s blessings will cover those who obey Him and His Prophet; obedience is required and deliberate indifference is a serious offense; the Prophet is a judge in all disputes of life; and avoiding and disregarding the instructions of Allah and the Prophet leads ultimately to failure in life and causes man’s deeds to lose all meaning.

In contemporary times, Muslims comprise four categories in their approach to Hadith: those who totally reject its relevance in Muslim life; those who blindly accept all apparent ahadith regardless of their authenticity; those who indiscriminately select Hadith for practical purposes; and those who believe in the sanctity of Prophetic traditions but who carefully approach them regarding their logical and practical relevance to Islamic life and civilization.

Today, Muslims suffer less from rigid adherence to old traditions of the Prophet than from having strayed far from the Qur’an and the Sunnah in their thoughts and practices. For example, semi-literate Muslims with unconditional love for the Hadith and Sunnah can be misguided as to their meaning, and then misguide others, blindly adhering to anything labeled a Prophetic tradition regardless of authenticity. This situation is one of the main factors behind Muslim backwardness and decline in virtually every field of life, including the religious and spiritual.

In the Muslim world today we see a tendency to select only those Qur’anic ayat and Prophetic traditions that benefit people’s vested interests and covert agenda. On the other hand, a balanced approach to the Sunnah and Hadith denotes a belief in and practice of only those Prophetic traditions that are highly authentic.

Hadith compilations are commonly classified into four categories according to the rank of their authenticity: the most authentic works, such as those of al-Bukhari and Muslim; collections with only a few dubious reports such as al-Tirmidhi, al-Nasai, and Abu Dawud; collections with many problematic traditions such as those of Ibn Majah and Ahmad; and collections with many weak and fabricated traditions such as those of al-Tabarani.

Authentication of Hadith as claimed by Hadith authorities entirely depends on the authenticity of the chain of narrators reporting Hadith. Hardly any serious attention is paid to the authenticity of Hadith by the authentication of the text of Hadith. Muslim scholars believe that if the chain of narrators of a hadith fulfils five criteria, the hadith is to be accepted as authentic: continuity in the chain of narrators; integrity of character; infallible retention; freedom from any hidden defect;
and safety from any aberrance. Although the last two criteria also apply to the examination of
the text of a hadith, scholars of Hadith have rarely accommodated them in their examination of
Hadith text.

Nonetheless, many reasons justify the added examination of Hadith from a textual angle
including controversy over the position of a particular narrator and the inability of some narrators
to maintain the preciseness of the report, wherein most Hadith scholars believe that Prophetic
traditions were not narrated in the words of the Prophet but in terms of the meaning of the
message, which can cause confusion.

In addition, textual conflicts among reports arise when certain reports concerning the same
matter vary in words and meaning. Scholars generally suggest that such differences in reporting
result not from narrating errors but because the Prophet made the statements differently on
different occasions.

Another reason is the claim of ‘delusion’ of reliable narrators: at times the chain of narrators is
extremely authentic but there is an obvious problem in the text of the narration. Rather than
examine the text as a possible source of defect, Hadith commentators blame a narrator.
Instead, there should be some criteria to identify defect in the text.

The process of practical correction of narrations also justifies Hadith examination. Even during
the Companions’ time, serious attention was given to the reporting of Prophetic traditions,
particularly regarding their preciseness. Some statements of the Prophet that were reported
incorrectly and were then corrected by experts nonetheless led to confusion at times.

Hadith examination is crucial when identifying the contemporary relevance of Hadith: the Qur’an
and Hadith encapsulate the teachings of the Prophet and are intended for practical application
in our daily lives. Therefore, interpretations of the Qur’an and Hadith should be carefully
examined and the text reinterpreted.

Another reason for examination is understanding the methodological dimension of Hadith: the
Prophetic traditions may be classified into legislative and non-legislative categories, some
binding and some not. Binding traditions are viewed vis-à-vis the Qur’an, human reason, and
Sunnah with historical continuity (mutawatir). When the Hadith and Qur’an contrast each other,
scholars should affect a compromise among them. If this is not possible, traditions lose their eminent status as authentic. Only the authentic text of a tradition can be used as a source of guidance, both methodological and practical.

Regarding the probability of fabrication in some Hadith texts, their actual number runs into untold thousands. Hadith scholars undoubtedly did their best to identify the genuine from the false but despite great care and effort they could not ensure one hundred percent accuracy. Therefore it is likely that some fabricated traditions are still considered genuine due to the authentic chain of narrators behind them. We have no other way to check for fabricated traditions in the most popular sources except to examine the text of the particular traditions.

Many controversies exist among Muslim jurists concerning certain issues related to Muslim life, wherein certain texts of a particular tradition are preferred to other texts. Finally, the responsibility and task of scholars is not yet concluded regarding Hadith examination. The Hadith hold a very sacred position in Islamic life, but this sanctity is exclusively for the genuine traditions of the Prophet and should not be accorded to inauthentic ones.

The idea of an apparent conflict between various texts of recorded Prophetic traditions is discomforting for any concerned Muslim. In reading and analyzing traditions recorded in al-Bukhari and Muslim, the following is apparent: the Hadith commentators had not used any well-established and universally defined principles of Hadith commentary, and were not justly balanced in their approach to Hadith, placing their main focus on the chain of narrators, not on the text of the traditions…

Anthropomorphic Depictions of God: The Concept of God in Judaic, Christian & Islamic Traditions Representing the Unrepresentable

Zulfiqar Ali Shah
Zulfiqar Ali Shah’s Anthropomorphic Depictions of God: The Concept of God in Judaic, Christian and Islamic Traditions is a monumental study originally published (unabridged) in 2012. It examines closely issues of anthropomorphism in the three Abrahamic Faiths, as viewed through the texts of the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament and the Qur’an.

Throughout history Christianity and Judaism have tried to make sense of God. While juxtaposing the Islamic position against this, the author addresses the Judeo-Christian worldview and how each has chosen to framework its encounter with God, to what extent this has been the result of actual scripture and to what extent the product of theological debate, or church decrees of later centuries and absorption of Hellenistic philosophy. Shah also examines Islam’s heavily anti-anthropomorphic stance and Islamic theological discourse on Tawhid as well as the NinetyNine Names of God and what these have meant in relation to Muslim understanding of God and His attributes. Describing how these became the touchstone of Muslim discourse with Judaism and Christianity he critiques theological statements and perspectives that came to dilute if not counter strict monotheism. As secularism debates whether God is dead, the issue of anthropomorphism has become one of immense importance. The quest for God, especially in this day and age, is partly one of intellectual longing. To Shah, anthropomorphic concepts and corporeal depictions of the Divine are perhaps among the leading factors of modern atheism. As such he ultimately draws the conclusion that the postmodern longing for God will not be quenched by premodern anthropomorphic and corporeal concepts of the Divine which have simply brought God down to this cosmos, with a precise historical function and specified location, reducing the intellectual and spiritual force of what God is and represents, causing the soul to detract from a sense of the sacred and thereby belief in Him.

Dr. Shah’s work forms an important background to any study or debate of this historically pivotal theological issue… [click for an abridged version in pdf]
The Socio-intellectual Foundations of Malek Bennabi’s Approach to Civilization

Badrane Benlahcene

The Socio-Intellectual Foundations of Malek Bennabi’s Approach to Civilization was published in complete form in 2011. Since Samuel Huntington’s essay “The Clash of Civilizations?” first appeared concern over civilization and conflict has been reintroduced into the debate on the world order. Malek Bennabi (1905–1973), prominent Algerian thinker and great Muslim intellectual, intently focused on unravelling the causes of Muslim decline and the success of Western civilization and culture. The key problem he theorized lay not in the Qur’an or Islamic faith but in Muslims themselves. The author investigates Bennabi’s approach to civilization and the fundamental principles drawn, using metatheorizing methodology. In doing so he sheds further light on perhaps one of the more intriguing elements of Bennabi’s theory, that civilization is governed by internal-external and social-intellectual factors and that an equation can be generated for civilization itself. This equation of Man + Soil + Time = Civilization and of which religion, according to Bennabi, forms the all-important catalyst, is explained and its significance in terms of the reversal of Muslim decline evaluated. What is clearly apparent is that for Bennabi, Man is the central force in any civilizing process and without him the other two elements are of no value.

With regard to outcomes, Bennabi’s unerring conviction that unless Muslims changed their spiritual condition they could not effect any farreaching, meaningful change in society is echoed in the Qur’anic verse:

“Verily, never will Allah change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves” (13:11)… [click for an abridged version in pdf]
Epistemological Bias in the Physical and Social Sciences

Abdelwahab M. Elmessiri

The collection of papers making up the anthology, explore and critique an issue widely accepted in the Muslim academic world as an essential and defining aspect of academic knowledge despite being a western philosophy of science and thought. This is the dominance of philosophical positivism, and a near total adoption as well as unquestioned acceptance of paradigms, terminologies, and research models that are in fact alien to the socio-economic-religio realities of the Muslim world. So how credible is their application and viability? For Elmessiri, the question of bias in methodology and terminology is a problem that faces researchers east, west, north and south; however, it faces Third World intellectuals with special keeness, because although they write in a cultural environment that has its own specific conceptual and cultural paradigms, they nevertheless encounter a foreign paradigm which attempts to impose itself upon their society and upon their very imagination and thoughts. Why not establish a new science, ideally suited for the purpose, with its own mechanisms, methodologies and points of reference to deal with epistemological biases and open up the gate of ijtihad with respect to them?

The papers aim to discover some of the biases latent in our terminology, methodologies, research tools, and conceptual principles, and to propose alternative ones marked by a greater degree of independence and neutrality.

This is not to belittle the human value of the West’s creative contributions but to emphasise the danger of making it the ultimate point of reference and then trying to continuously play ‘catch up’ with it…

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The Essence of Islamic Civilization

Ismail Raji al Faruqi

International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) has great pleasure in presenting Occasional Paper 21 The Essence of Islamic Civilization by Ismail al Faruqi. It was originally published as chapter four of The Cultural Atlas of Islam by Ismail al Faruqi and Lois Lamya al Faruqi (1986), and formed part of a monumental and authoritative work presenting the entire worldview of Islam, its beliefs, traditions, institutions, and place in the world. Aside from the map illustrations and two arabesques all other images have been updated and are not those of the original.

Professor Ismail Raji al Faruqi (1921–1986) was a Palestinian-American philosopher, visionary, and an authority in comparative religion. A great contemporary scholar of Islam his scholarship encompassed the whole spectrum of Islamic Studies covering areas such as the study of religion, Islamic thought, approaches to knowledge, history, culture, education, interfaith dialogue, aesthetics, ethics, politics, economics, and science. Without doubt al Faruqi was one of the great Muslim scholars of the 20th century. In this paper he presents the meaning and message of Islam to the wider world, pointing to tawhid (the unity of God) as its essence and first determining principle which gives Islamic civilization its identity… [click for an abridged version in pdf]