

Reading the signs of Allah

(Spahic Omer)

The first thing Almighty Allah communicated to mankind through their final messenger, Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him), were the words "Read! In the name of your Lord who has created (all that exists)" (al-'Alaq, 1).

This is the first verse (*ayah*) of the *surah* or chapter *al-'Alaq* (the Clot). The *surah* ends with the words "Fall prostrate and draw near (to Allah)!" (al-'Alaq, 19).

This means that the beginning, as well as the total dynamism and disposition, of life should be anchored in a vibrant culture of reading and everything that goes with it such as exploring, researching, questioning, discovering and innovating. The process applies as much to individuals and their personal development as to communities and their collective cultural and civilizational consciousness and evolution.

The net results of such processes should be in support of attaining, internalizing and applying the truth. They should help a person understand himself, life and his Creator better. They should make him draw closer to his Creator and Master, and make him submit his total being to His Will, with the prostration representing the ultimate sign of such an advancement and conformity.

Life between reading and submission

Man's life purpose and mission reside and unfold between the parameters of the heavenly instructions to read - as the first word

of the surah *al-'Alaq* - and to humbly submit and prostrate to Allah and so, constantly draw closer to Him - as the last two words (instructions) of the same *surah*.

Reading leads to knowledge and wisdom, which in turn lead to certainty and the truth. Reading enlightens. It is believing, and believing is doing.

Reading is intangible and intellectual. Its results need to be transported into the realm of palpable realities.

Reading is to be an act of devotion. At the same time, it is to lead to the sphere of supreme and ultimate devotion, equating itself with it.

In a sequential order, man is created to read, know and worship his Creator. He is created to acknowledge and follow the truth. He is to become its epitome.

No form of devotion is acceptable without reading and knowledge, just as reading and knowledge without devotion are untenable. The truth is the life force of all life dimensions.

The truth is life, and life is the truth. In the midst of both of them, man as Allah's vicegerent on earth has been thrust. His life is an embodiment of meaning, import and accountability.

Reading here means reciting, studying, internalizing, interpreting and applying the signs (*ayat*) of Almighty Allah. Doing so connotes the foundation of all knowledge and wisdom. It is the soul of culture and civilization.

Reading the revelation and creation

Those signs (*ayat*) are to be found at two levels: the level of revelation and the level of creation.

That also means that there are two books of signs to be read: the book of revelation, which is the Holy Qur'an; and the "book of creation", which is the universe with all its proceedings and phenomena.

The two books could further be named *al-Qur'an al-tadwini* (the Qur'an or scripture revealed to the Prophet Muhammad) and *al-qur'an al-takwini* (the ontological "qur'an" or "scripture" whose pages and lines are the worlds of animate and inanimate beings, occurrences and affairs).

Both books are replete with signs (*ayat*) which attest to and authenticate the omnipresence, omnipotence and benevolence of the Creator and Sustainer of man and the universe. They are the media through which Almighty Allah speaks and conveys the truth about Himself, man and life.

That is why the verses or sentences of the revealed Qur'an are called *ayat* or signs, and all natural phenomena and events, big or small, are also called *ayat* or signs. The contents of the two books are more than just symbols and orations. They are not goals in themselves. Rather, they are sources of active communication, whereby Allah reveals Himself and thus helps man come to terms with the absolute truth and embrace the right course of action.

The truth is manifested so vividly in every tier of the orb of revelation and of that of creation, as much in the minutest and least notable as in the grandest and most sophisticated.

Reading the signs (*ayat*) from the two books leads one to the same conclusions and results. The two readings complement one another.

The truth disclosed within one reading is the same as the one disclosed within the other, only in different ways and with different levels of intensity.

The revelation first, the creation second

However, the first book to be read and internalized is the revelation or the revealed Qur'an. Only then can the second reading be successfully undertaken. Reading productively the "book" of creation is conditioned by the former.

That is the case because in reading the creation man is given more freedom and authority, which if manipulated and mishandled can become deceptive and dangerous. In such a situation, the revelation serves to man as inspiration, orientation and frame of reference. From it he departs and to it he returns for support and validation of his actions.

Reading the creation without revelation is perilous and misleading. The furthest that such can lead man to is the threshold of the truth, never the truth itself. That is why science alone as much guides as misguides, and as much enlightens as obscures and confuses. Science is indeed important and dominant, but by no means invincible and absolute. It is mighty, but not almighty.

Obviously, human reason has its limitations and weaknesses. In areas where they overpower it, human reason takes a back seat, allowing the revelation to take over. In those areas, human reason still plays a role, but it remains second best. It plays second fiddle to the revelation.

Whereas reading the revelation only without reading the creation is incomplete. It is only a partial activity. Doing so can be as damaging for man's total wellbeing as the earlier scenario. Surely, reading the

revelation one-dimensionally and ineffectively, without relating it to the miracle of life, cannot give man all the answers.

It follows that man's assignment on earth is but to read the signs and act upon them. That is to be done in myriads of contexts and at myriads of levels. In the process, man is to constantly improve his living conditions and his overall terrestrial stature, encompassing his physical, intellectual, moral and spiritual dimensions. The final results of those pursuits are what we call cultures and civilizations.

In passing, man himself is an amalgam of infinite signs. As such, he is the greatest sign of all. He is a microcosm. All his readings should start first and foremost with the self and its intricate relationships with the rest.

Reading versus misreading

Man's life is tantamount either to the reading or the misreading of the signs (*ayat*) of Allah. Reading translates itself into the domain of existential successes, while misreading leads to existential failures.

For example, a person performs his religious rites and rituals as a result of his reading and understanding of pertinent signs (*ayat*) especially in the revealed Qur'an, which pertain to those rites and rituals and to his personal character and life as the object of the signs or *ayat* in question.

Indeed, a believer does not just believe, in the sense that he blindly and irrationally accepts, or simply supposes or thinks that something is true or real. Instead, he confidently knows based on the abundance of revealed and created signs and so, exhibits firm faith that something is true or real.

Nor does a believer do good deeds merely because he has to, or because everybody around him does so, or simply because such became part of his daily, often senseless, routines. On the contrary, he does his good deeds because he wants to endorse practically his true knowledge and faith. He wants to substantiate the truth at all levels of his existence and to become an integral part thereof, one way or another. He wants to live and be the truth. He himself and his life pattern want to become one of the signs.

This behavioural paradigm is in response to a number of injunctions of the Holy Qur'an to the effect that knowledge ought to precede every conceptual and actual activity, such as: "Know therefore that there is no god but Allah..." (Muhammad, 19); and "Know that this worldly life is no more than play, amusement, luxury, mutual boasting, and competition in wealth and children..." (al-Hadid, 20).

Accordingly, no sound faith is possible without sound knowledge, and no Islam as a way of life is likely without a synthesis of both of them.

Thus, believers are often comprehensively described as those who "believe in the signs (*ayat*) of their Lord" (al-Mu'minun, 58), and those who "believe with certainty in Our signs (*ayat*)" (al-Sajdah, 24). Most commentators of the Qur'an agree that the word "signs (*ayat*)" in these and similar verses are wide-ranging and include both the revealed and created signs.

Allah moreover portrays believers and their affirmative relationship with His signs as follows: "Who, when reminded about the signs of their Lord, do not turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to them" (al-Furqan, 73).

On account of this, belief (faith) is called *iman*. From *iman's* root word the words *amn* (security) and *amanah* (trust) are also derived. There is a close relationship between the three terms.

It is to say that believers are so strong and confident in their creed and conduct - based on their reading of signs - that such a state becomes a source of security (*amn*) not only to their own selves, but also to their surroundings. Consequently, they become worthy of being honoured with the miracle of life and earth stewardship as heavenly trusts (*amanah*).

Because they are at peace with their own souls, believers likewise easily establish peace with Heaven, the order of nature and other people. It is no accident, therefore, that while a believer is called *mu'min* (an embodiment of faith, safety, security, peace and trust), Allah too is called *Mu'min* (the source and bestower of all faith, safety, security, peace and trust).

Parenthetically, Jibril or Gabriel as an archangel and the angel of revelation who acts as intermediary between Allah and man and was the bearer of revelation (revealed signs) to Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) - and to other prophets - was called, due to the significance of his tasks, *al-amin* (the trusted one). For obvious reasons, Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) was also nicknamed *al-amin* (the trusted one). And Makkah, as the first physical context where the first phase of Islam and the Prophet's honourable mission unfolded, was called *al-balad al-amin* (the city of security).

All these worldly and otherworldly systems were put in place and were set in motion only with one objective: to produce and sustain the people of *iman*, *amn* and *amanah*, that is, believers. Unquestionably, a

believer: his life, property, blood and dignity, signifies the holiest thing and the greatest sanctity on earth.

As such, a believer is the most expressive and persuasive sign.

Furthermore, whatever else man does on earth as part of his vicegerency mission should be seen only through the prism of reading - or misreading - signs.

For example, science with all its branches is an attempt to read and benefit from signs in nature (natural sciences), man and life (humanities, social sciences and formal sciences).

Moreover, education with all its teaching, learning and research components is also all about understanding, imparting and widening knowledge about signs and the truth. It is about challenging the limits of the known and a potential liberation from it. It is a multi-dimensional task. It is most challenging and hence, most rewarding.

Due to their creativity predilection, art and architecture are not only to subsist for the sake of reading and implementing the available signs, but also for generating their own man-made signs. The latter is to seamlessly integrate itself with the former, and to render them more unequivocal and more potent.

The same holds true as regards economics, law, technology, culture, etc. Hence, in Islam there is no separation between religion and state, and between the physical and metaphysical realms. Integration is the only way forward. The unity of purpose, mission and goal is the only solution. Just as man as a being is indivisible, his functions and objectives are not divisible either.

Suffice it to say that all the problems that beset man at any plane of his existence are nothing but a form of misreading signs. Indeed,

spiritual illiteracy is the ultimate bane of man's life. It is likewise one of the biggest crimes in the sight of Allah. The conventional literacy is not necessarily the redeemer, for outright ignorance, backwardness and fabrications are sometimes enforced in its name.

Allah says: "Certainly, We have destined many Jinns and human beings for Hell. Those are the ones who have hearts with which they do not understand, they have eyes with which they do not see, they have ears with which they do not hear. They are like animals, or even worse than them, because they are those who are heedless" (al-A'raf, 179).

Also: "Do they not travel through the land so that their hearts (and mind) may thus learn wisdom and their ears may thus learn to hear? Truly it is not their eyes that are blind but their hearts which are in their breasts" (al-Hajj, 46).

Spiritual illiterates neither appreciate nor enjoy life. Only those who understand life and know exactly how to live it, can do so. Living life without knowing it and without knowing the self - being essentially blind, deaf and dumb - is a perennially painful experience.

Hence, most people are stressed out, depressed and demotivated. True happiness is becoming exceedingly elusive and hard to come by. People are most of the time impatient, tense and worried. As al-Khidr said to Prophet Musa (Moses) when they were on their epic journey - thus acquainting him with a foremost principle of life: "And how can you have patience about (be at peace and bear with) a thing which you know not?" (al-Kahf, 68).

As another example, Allah says about Prophet 'Isa (Jesus) and his mother Maryam (Mary): "And We made the son of Mary and his mother as a sign (for mankind)..." (al-Mu'minun, 50).

That means that all the ideological fallacies surrounding the lives and personalities of Jesus and his mother denote the failures of people to properly read and comprehend them as Allah's sign (*ayah*) to mankind. Since that was an immense sign, the consequences of the misreading became correspondingly immense and dire.

The absurdity of misreading and rejecting signs

Once misread, the signs (*ayat*) of Allah are rejected next. This causes an absurd situation. An act of ignorance, instead of pushing for knowledge and annulling the ignorance scourge, leads to haughtiness and rejection of that which is unknown but positively exists.

However, how logical is it to regard as untrue and simply reject that which is unknown, but only because of limited and flawed measures? Resorting to such a thinking and behaviour is a fallacy. Just as it is fair that believers think and act based on sound knowledge and wisdom alone - as explained earlier - the same in equal measure should apply to nonbelievers and their non-belief as well.

One wonders, therefore, how wise on the part of nonbelievers it is to reject the existence of Allah as the Creator when only tiny portions of man, earth, life and universe are known to them. What do they base their non-belief on? How do they rationalize it?

It is ludicrous to deny the existence of the Creator in an environment of the prevalent ignorance concerning His creation. Believing that Allah is non-existent is supposed to be "the truth", but the truth is not compatible, nor associable, with ignorance. You never prove or disprove the truth with ignorance. Only knowledge (wisdom) and the truth can forge a harmonious relationship.

Similarly, you cannot neutralize the light of the sun by shutting yourself up in a dark room and adamantly denying that the light exists.

Nor can you undermine the credibility of the truth by living in, and shouting from, a cocoon of your personal selfish thought and vested interests.

It is owing to this that nonbelievers will be charged on the Day of Judgment with the offences of misreading signs and rejecting them merely because they did not encompass them with their limited knowledge. In other words, they will be charged with the abuses of their reason and other faculties of theirs, and with the reckless rejection of the all-pervading and definite signs of their Creator. All that spelled the root cause of their misfortune.

They will be told: "Did you deny and reject My signs without even comprehending them (without encompassing them with your knowledge)? Or what exactly did you do?" (al-Naml, 84).

Also: "Did messengers not come to you from among yourselves, reciting to you the signs of your Lord and warning you of the coming of this Day of yours?" (al-Zumar, 71).

Nonbelievers' conduct is accurately summarised in these Qur'anic words: "And how many signs in the heavens and the earth do they pass by? Yet they turn (their faces) away from them (arrogantly paying no attention to them)!" (Yusuf, 105).

They will admit on the Day of Judgment: "Had we only listened or used our intelligence, we would have not been among the inmates of the blazing fire" (al-Mulk, 10).

Nonbelievers failed to heed the first command of Allah to humankind: "Read! In the name of your Lord who has created (all that exists)" (al-'Alaq, 1).