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Stray Camels in China: Islam's Attitude towards Other Religions with Special Reference to Confucianism

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I was asked to speak about Islam's attitude towards other religions, with special reference to Confucianism. One very useful way to deal with this question would be to provide a historical survey of Islamic viewpoints. This approach would lead us to the conclusion that over history, various Muslims have had diverse understandings of other religions, Confucianism included. Having concluded that, we might then ask which of those understandings best represents Islam. Then we would face the problem of how to define Islam. And of course, over history, various Muslims have had diverse understandings of what exactly Islam is and what it demands from them.

That would be a useful way to approach the topic, but I have neither the resources nor the means to make a historical survey of Islamic views of other religions. Therefore, instead of addressing the historical issue of Islam's attitudes towards other religions, I

want to ask a theological question, which is the following: What are Islam's resources for coming to an understanding of other religious traditions?

Here I understand the word **Islam** to refer not to any particular school of thought, but to the basic texts of the tradition—the Quran and the Hadith—and to the intellectual perspectives of the great representatives of the tradition over history. Again, I do not want to provide a historical survey, but rather a theological argument, an argument that is rooted in fundamental Islamic perspectives. It is an argument that strives to suggest how Muslims might acknowledge not only the legitimacy of religious diversity, but also its necessity and providentiality. What I have to say will be an argument *for* inclusivism (although perhaps “pluralism” is the better term) and *against* exclusivism. In other words, I would like to show that Islam has the theological means not only to accept religious diversity, but also to appreciate it and approve of it. Muslims may if they wish, on the basis of their own traditional teachings, look at Confucianism and many other religious traditions as revealed ways that lead to the absolute truth of God. However, I do deny the legitimacy of exclusivism, because, by excluding the exclusivists, I would then join them in being exclusivist. Instead, I would say that exclusivists are perfectly free to read Islam in an exclusive manner. They may, if they wish, understand Islam—by which they usually mean their own, specific version of Islam—as the only way to truth. There is certainly support in the tradition for understanding Islam in these terms. But this exclusivist perspective has no interest for me, especially not in a discussion that is aimed at mutual understanding.

To repeat, the question I am asking is as follows: What are Islam's resources for coming to an understanding of other religious traditions? Before attempting to answer this question, it is necessary to ask which specific topics we wish to understand. Nowadays, topics that are discussed on the international level are typically

determined by international interests, and these in turn depend largely on current events and, more specifically, on the political, economic, and social agendas of the industrialized powers. If our purpose here is to discuss "Islam" and not country x or country y that has a majority population of Muslims, then the current issues—as designated by politicians, the media, and economic interests—should be ignored for the time being. Instead, we need to address the perennial issues of Islamic discourse, issues that have not changed over the past several thousand years, because human beings have not changed. These issues start with first principles, and the first of all principles is that of reality itself.

In Islamic terms, in order to discuss reality we have to discuss God. This raises immediate problems in the context of so-called contemporary issues, because people have no patience with theology, and they also have no sense that theology can have any meaning save as an ideological ploy. When God is mentioned, many immediately start to grumble about fanaticism and fundamentalism, and that ends the possibility of discussion. We are told that we need to address immediate and pressing issues—the "real" problems. However, we are then compelled to let contemporary intellectual predilections, or the lack of them, provide us with a definition of what these "real" problems may be. The "real" here has little relevance to what Islamic tradition has always understood to be real. Hence, Muslims who want to participate in the discussion have no choice but to forget the first principles of their own tradition. Nevertheless, no discussion can have a meaningful claim to have anything to do with Islam until the participants agree on the necessity to begin with first principles. Naturally, if Islamic first principles are to be discussed in the present context, they must be discussed along with Confucian first principles.

In what I have to say, I will not address Confucian first principles directly, because I have no qualifications to do so.

However, I am not completely unfamiliar with Confucian teachings and have, on occasion, been bold enough to lecture to undergraduates on Confucianism. In preparing my remarks on Islam, I have kept traditional Chinese ways of thinking in the back of my mind, and in choosing the terminology that I use to express Islamic ideas, I have tried to employ terms that are not specifically Islamic with the hope that people familiar with the teachings of other religious traditions will be able to understand the points without difficulty. I will say, however, that since I am addressing theological issues, the Chinese texts that I find helpful in discussing the same sort of issues include the *Yijing* and Neoconfucianist writings, especially those of Zhu Xi.

If Muslims are to discuss first principles with representatives of Confucianism or other traditions, they will immediately be faced with the very important problem of language. Even supposing that we all know excellent English, it is a difficult task to express with clarity the ideas of the basic texts in the respective traditions. It is not easy, for example, to render the Quran into English, nor is it much easier to explain the basic principles of Islamic theology as explained by al-Ash'ari, or al-Ghazali, or Ibn al-'Arabi, in understandable English—or in understandable Arabic, for that matter.

The problem of finding an appropriate intellectual language in which to express first principles leads me to the conclusion that, for Muslims, the most basic and the most intractable problem that stands in the way of understanding the first principles of Chinese civilization is not ignorance of China, but ignorance of the riches of the Islamic intellectual heritage. Even supposing that Muslims are familiar with these riches, they face the extremely difficult task of expressing them in a language that is comprehensible to people of other cultural backgrounds. Hence, implicit in my theological argument is the attempt to render Islamic first principles in a

language that is appropriate to the profundity of the first principles and will ease the way towards interreligious discussion.

First Principles

The first of the first principles of Islamic thought is *tawhid*, the declaration of God's unity. When we read the great Muslim thinkers of the past, we see that they had complete confidence in the universality of this principle. By "universality," I mean the idea that *tawhid* was known and understood by all peoples at all times and places, because it was the message of all the prophets and all the sages. The Quran asserts that God has sent a messenger to every community and that the underlying content of every divine message is *tawhid*. Muslim thinkers who understood this had no fear of learning about other civilizations, because the Quran taught them that the Quranic message was nothing new, but rather a confirmation of earlier messages. This attitude helps explain the great interest shown by the early Muslims towards the Greek and Iranian intellectual heritages, not to mention the Indian. Islamic thought, in its fully developed form, is inconceivable without Greek formulations in particular, but this was nothing for Muslims to be ashamed of, because it simply confirmed the Quranic teaching that wisdom is universal.

Among the many traditional expressions of the early Muslims' recognition of the universality of *tawhid* in the pre-Islamic heritage are two well-known sayings attributed to the Prophet. The first, I am sure, is familiar to everyone here: "Seek knowledge, even unto China" and "Wisdom is the believer's stray camel; wherever he finds it, he has the most right to it."¹ Such sayings suggest that the goal of Muslim intellectuals in addressing Chinese civilization should be to recognize the wisdom that is inherent in traditional Chinese civilization and to acknowledge that this Chinese wisdom

is nothing foreign to Islam because, at root, it is the wisdom of *tawhid*.

However, before Muslims look for stray camels in China, they need to examine their own herds. If they take a close look at their own intellectual resources, they will find several domains of wisdom that can be extremely helpful in addressing issues of religious diversity. However, these domains tend to be forgotten or glossed over in contemporary discussions. If Muslims do not recognize these domains of learning as Islamic wisdom, they will not be able to find wisdom's camels under Chinese blankets.

I said that, in order for a discussion to be Islamic, it must begin with first principles and that, in Islamic terms, the first of all principles is *tawhid*. Other first principles follow in the wake of *tawhid*. Traditionally, Muslims divide the domain of first principles into three topics—*tawhid*, prophecy (*nubuwwa*), and the Return to God (*ma'ad*).² Besides this domain of first principles, there are two other important domains of Islamic learning that need to be discussed, but, if we are to discuss them, we need to understand that they are applications of the first principles. Without understanding the principles, we cannot understand the rationale for the applications. These two other domains are, first, the applications of the first principles on the level of activity, that is, the domain of legal and social teachings; and second, the interiorization and realization of the first principles through love and sincerity, that is, the domain of what one might call "spirituality." In the present context, I will limit myself to the first principles themselves.³

Muslim scholars who have studied the domain of first principles address various theoretical issues that answer to the human need to understand the nature of things. In Islamic terms, the basic givens about the nature of things are designated by certain words mentioned in the Quran, including *God*, *angels*, *scriptures*, *prophets*, *Last Day*, and *measuring out* (*qadar*). Having accepted the

truth of the Quranic revelation, Muslims are expected to have faith in the realities that are designated by these terms. But naturally, many Muslims have little understanding of what these words mean. They may, for example, simply acquiesce in Islamic teachings by believing that these words designate true ideas, without reflecting on their meaning. They may understand these words in terms of the received wisdom of their own times and think that this received wisdom represents definitive statements of these ideas, just as many unreflective people nowadays look upon the received wisdom of science as definitive statements of truth.

Muslim intellectuals, however, never simply accepted Islamic first principles on faith. Because of a deep drive towards understanding that animates much of Islam, Muslims developed the fields of learning connected with the first principles into three broad-ranging schools of thought, each of which has had several subdivisions. These schools can be called dogmatic theology (*Kalam*), philosophy, and theoretical Sufism.⁴ These schools have many similarities and differences among themselves. They are similar in the basic impulse to understand reality as designated by the terms of the discussion set down in the Quran. They are different in the means that they use to achieve knowledge and in the details of many of the conclusions that they reach.

Given that Muslims have always taken a diversity of positions concerning the expression of first principles, we can attempt to suggest what sort of positions might be most helpful in the context of interreligious dialogue. The brief answer here is that any position recognizing a broad base for determining Islamicity will find it relatively easy to recognize the universal truths of Islam in non-Islamic forms. Those who know and appreciate the diversity of Islamic camels will have little difficulty recognizing their camels outside the borders of the Islamic community. In contrast, those who like to think that there is one Islam and that other Islams are

deviant or distorted will find it exceedingly difficult to see Islamic truths beyond the borders of their own position.

Two Perspectives

The first of Islam's first principles is *tawhid*, the assertion of God's unity. This principle is said to be expressed most succinctly in *kalimat al-tawhid*, the "statement that asserts God's unity." This statement is the words, "(There is) no god but God." It is, of course, the first half of the *Shahadah*, the formula of testimony or "witnessing" that begins Islam. The second half of the *Shahadah* is the words, "Muhammad is the messenger of God." The two halves of the *Shahadah* establish two basic levels of discourse. The first level has to do with God, and the second has to do with the wisdom that God sends to his creatures. Hence the second half of the *Shahadah* is an explicit expression of what came to be known as the second of Islam's first principles, that is, prophecy.

It is important to keep in mind that the Quran speaks of the universality of *tawhid*. In other words, it declares that *tawhid* has been affirmed by all prophets. Of course, the Quran also affirms the universality of prophecy, because it asserts that prophets have been sent to every people. However, the Quran makes clear that each prophet has a specific message or historical role. In other words, the Quran affirms that *tawhid* is a universal truth, but it does not claim that the statement "Muhammad is the Messenger of God" is universal in the same sense. Before the coming of Muhammad, there were other prophets and other messages. Each messenger was given the message of *tawhid*, but along with it, each prophet was also given specific teachings and laws that were not identical with the laws and teachings of other prophets. Hence, the Quranic view of things is that all the prophetic messages are the same on the level of *tawhid*, but different on the level of specific teachings and practices.⁵

Any discussion of Islamic first principles has to focus first on the meaning of the two halves of the *Shahadah*, which establish the first two principles of faith. After all, the *Shahadah* gives voice, in the most succinct manner, to the teachings of the Quran. The first half of the *Shahadah* is the declaration of a universal truth that is understood to be present in all wisdom. The second half is the declaration of a specific set of teachings that is aimed at a specific historical community. Thus we have the first two principles of Islam, *tawhid* and prophecy. The first principle tends towards inclusivism and plurality, but the second tends more towards exclusivism.

One way to understand how these two principles establish both inclusivism and exclusivism is to meditate on the implications of the two most basic names of the Quran, which are *qur'an* itself and *furqan*. If we look at the linguistic root of the term, we find that *qur'an* means not only "recitation," but also "gathering" and "bringing together." The Quran is understood as a bringing together because it is looked upon as containing in itself all the wisdom of all mankind. As for the word *furqan*, it comes from a root that means to separate, so it signifies "separation, differentiation, discernment, discrimination." Together, the two names *qur'an* and *furqan* tell us that the Quran is a recitation of divine wisdom that brings together all wisdom and that also provides the keys for discerning between truth and falsehood, reality and unreality, right and wrong, guidance and misguidance, salvation and damnation. The divine wisdom that is brought together in the Quran is the wisdom that was given to all the 124,000 prophets who are said to have come to mankind from Adam down to Muhammad. This universal wisdom of all the prophets is summarized in one Quranic verse: "There is no god but I, so serve Me" (21:25). This is *tawhid* along with its diverse implications. *Furqan*, or the discerning and separating wisdom that the Quran establishes, is also *tawhid*, because it allows people to distinguish between the One and the many, the

Real and the unreal. But *furqan* also refers specifically to the diverse implications of *tawhid*, the many concrete teachings and guidelines that were given to the prophets over history. It is through these specific applications and concrete guidelines that separation occurs among the prophetic messages, and Islam becomes distinct from other religions, even if, on the level of the first half of the *Shahadah*, *qur'an*, all the messages are the same.

The first half of the *Shahadah*, the statement of *tawhid*, is often understood as summarizing the whole message, both *qur'an* and *furqan*. Hence, the first half of the *Shahadah* implies within itself the second half. However, one cannot argue that it demands the second half only in the specific historical form of "Muhammad is the Messenger of God." Rather, *tawhid* demands the reality of wisdom and prophecy, a reality that becomes manifest to all peoples. By insisting that God sends prophets to all nations, the Quran is asserting that *tawhid*—the unity of Reality—demands that wisdom appear only in function of the source of all reality. In other words, wisdom is inaccessible without the initiative of the source of all wisdom, which is the Real itself, God, the Absolute Principle.

Let me explain briefly how the first half of the *Shahadah* demands both *qur'an* and *furqan*. I begin with *furqan*, the separation and distinction that it establishes, on the basis of which we can differentiate some things from other things. By saying "No god but God," people assert that God is one. This formula negates the idea of other gods and separates God from all false claimants to godhood. In order to understand this meaning from the formula, one needs to grasp the meaning of the word *god* (*ilah*) in Arabic. The basic idea of the Arabic root has to do with service, worship, and adoration. A god is what one serves. By this definition, practically anything can be a god. Anything that one serves or sets as one's ideal is a god. Any object, any idea, any ideology can be a god. A person can, of course, have many gods, and most people do. The Quran often criticizes the worship of many gods. Among the gods

it stigmatizes vehemently is "caprice" (*hawa*), that is, self-will and individual desire. In the Quranic perspective, all those who depend upon themselves and make decisions on the basis of their own personal likes and dislikes are following the god that is "caprice," and this god will certainly lead them to an unwelcome destination.

In short, the first thing that one understands from the Quranic assertion, "No god but God," is that nothing is worthy of service, worship, and trust save God himself. Thus the *Shahadah* establishes the *furqan* or discernment between God, who is worthy of service, and everything other than God, which is not worthy of service. But what exactly is this God that is worthy of service? The Quran never answers this question directly, partly because to ask about the "whatness" of God is already to misunderstand God's reality. If all things in the universe can properly be the object of the question "What?," God alone cannot be, because he is outside the universe and different from all things within it.⁶

Although the Quran never explains exactly what God is, it provides many signs and indications of God, and the whole book is understood as nothing but God's self-revelation. Thus, although the Quran does not say what God is, it does say what he is not—for example, that he is not like anything (42:11)—and it also speaks of God in terms of names and attributes. Thus it tells us that God is merciful, compassionate, creator, all-knowing, desiring, powerful, just, avenging, forgiving, and so on. None of these names and attributes define God, however. Rather, each of us announces to us a certain manner in which God interrelates with the universe. But what God is in himself, as he himself knows himself, is humanly unknowable. Here one cannot help but be reminded of the first sentence of the *Daode jing*.

In brief, then, the Quran and the first formula of the *Shahadah* establish a basic *furqan* or differentiation between God and the world. God is on one side, and the whole cosmos is on the other. If God is designated by the names and attributes that the Quran

gives to him, it follows that these names and attributes do not belong to the universe in any real sense. Thus, for example, God is one, but the universe along with everything within it is many. God is knowing, but the created things are ignorant. God is compassionate, but the created things have no compassion. God is, in short, the Real (*haqq*), but the universe is unreal (*batil*). The first half of the *Shahadah* means that "There is nothing real but the Real." It establishes a separation between the Real and the unreal, the Absolute and the relative, the Permanent and the impermanent, the Living and the dead, the Knowing and the ignorant.

But the Quran and the first half of the *Shahadah* do not limit themselves to the perspective of *furqan*. They also establish *qur'an*. They separate the Real and the unreal, but they also demonstrate how the Real and the unreal are interrelated. Thus the Quranic teachings explain that the unreal comes into existence from the Real, ultimately goes back to the Real, and, in the meantime, appears in function of the Real. The unreal, after all, is not absolute unreality, but relative unreality, which is to say that it is unreal in relation to God. But, since it is relatively unreal, it is also relatively real, which is to say that it is real in relation to absolute nothingness. It follows that everything in the universe displays certain traces of reality, certain signs of God, and hence the Quran repeatedly tells people to strive to comprehend and understand God's signs (*ayat*). These signs, the Quran says, are found in the natural world, in the human self, in the messages of the prophets, and in the very verses of the Quran itself, which are called by this same name *signs*.

These two ways of looking at reality—discernment or *furqan* and gathering together or *qur'an*—are integral to the Quran and are found throughout the Islamic tradition, though frequently one side is stressed over the other, depending on who is speaking and which school of thought is being represented. Thus, for example, dogmatic theology tends to stress *furqan*, because it wants to

establish the utter difference between God and the world and the necessity for recognizing the rights of God over his creation. Dogmatic theology strives to show how human beings are servants ('abd) of God who must accept his revelation and act accordingly. The juridical sciences also stress *furqan*, because they are rooted in the understanding that right and wrong activity must be differentiated and separated out from each other. In contrast, many expressions of Sufism stress *qur'an*, because the Sufis are concerned not so much with separating the servant from God, but rather with showing that God is present in the world and in the servant and that the servant should strive to find God here and now.

From about the seventh/thirteenth century onward, these two perspectives—one of which stresses *furqan* and the other *qur'an*—are often described in terms of *tanzih* and *tashbih*. *Tanzih* means to assert God's incomparability. It is the understanding that ultimate reality lies infinitely beyond the world of phenomena. God cannot be compared to anything in the universe. God alone is truly real, and hence all things other than God are like specks of dust in the face of infinity. In contrast, *tashbih* is the assertion of God's similarity. The perspective of *tashbih* recognizes the signs of God in everything that exists. It allows people to understand why the Quran says, "Wherever you turn, there is the face of God" (2:115) or "God is with you wherever you are" (57:4).

For many authorities, *tanzih* and *tashbih* represent the two eyes with which people must look upon God in order to understand the full implications of *tawhid*. With these two eyes people should understand that they are distant from God, but God is near to them. In effect, God is both far and near, absent and present, incomparable and similar. *Tanzih* asserts God's unique possession of the attribute of unity, while *tashbih* asserts that the many are the creation and the manifestation of the One. The universe comes from God, and hence it is full of his signs, and it will return to God, because he is the unique reality that determines all relative reality.

In discussions of *tanzih* and *tashbih*, Quranic divine names are employed to illustrate how the Quran asserts both God's distance and his nearness. Although every name of God can be understood as expressing both *tanzih* and *tashbih*, some names express one side more clearly than the other. Thus, for example, the names of majesty (*jalal*) are usually associated with *tanzih*. In contrast, the names of beauty (*jamal*) are associated with *tashbih*. The names of majesty—which are also called the names of wrath (*ghadab*), severity (*qahr*), or justice (*adl*)—express God's utter reality in the face of the unreality of the creatures. God is King, Majestic, Mighty, Tremendous, Great, Severe, Avenger, and, in face of these names, human beings are insignificant if not utterly nonexistent. In contrast the names of beauty—also called the names of mercy (*rahma*), gentleness (*lutf*), or bounty (*fadl*)—express God's concern for his creatures despite their insignificance. In respect of the names of majesty, God is infinitely distant from creation and, like a tyrannical king, simply expects to be obeyed. The only possible human response to God's majesty is to surrender (*islam*) and to be his servants (*'abd*). But, in respect of the names of beauty, God is infinitely close to his creatures, "closer than the jugular vein" (Quran 50:16), and he acts with much more compassion and gentleness than any mother ever acted towards her child. It is in respect of this nearness that human beings can be the vicegerents or representatives (*khalifa*) of God in the cosmos. Because of *tashbih* God "taught Adam all the names" (Quran 2:30) and created him in his own image. Because of the attributes of beauty and gentleness, God sent the prophets with the message of guidance and compassion.

Human Ambiguity

Once we have established the fact that the relationship between the absolutely real and the relatively real, or God and creation,

can be understood from two basic points of view, that is, *tanzih* and *tashbih*, or *furqan* and *qur'an*, we can usefully look at the human situation. Clearly, if human beings or other things are to be considered in relation to first principles, they must be considered from both points of view. But there is also a mystery about human beings that sets them apart from other creatures. This mystery has detailed metaphysical and cosmological reasons that cannot be dealt with here. But the fact of this mystery is well known. It is that human beings are not fixed in their nature, whereas other beings are what they are, and they cannot change in any radical way. But the very fact of human intelligence—of wisdom, sagehood, and prophecy—shows that a distinction, a *furqan*, needs to be drawn in the human case between what people are and what they should be. In other words, other things are what they are and cannot be otherwise. In contrast, human beings are what they are, but they can and should be otherwise. Other things are fully what they are without trying, but human beings have to learn to be fully human. Or, one can say that to be human is to have the possibility of being otherwise, to be more or less than what one is.

In terms of our previous discussion, we can say that the actual human situation is for people to be situated between *furqan* and *qur'an*, between *tanzih* and *tashbih*. Because of the disjunction established by the divine attributes associated with *tanzih*, people are utterly controlled by the Real, who is the Majestic, the Mighty, the Powerful. The Quran says, "Everything in the heavens and the earth has submitted [*islam*] to God" (3:83) and "There is nothing in the heavens and the earth that is not the All-merciful's servant [*abd*]" (19:93). This is to say that everything in the universe has submitted to God and serves God by its very nature. Nothing can act on its own. Whatever is done is done by the controlling power of the Real.

Human insignificance before the Real is understood through looking with the eye of *tanzih*. When we look at people with the

eye of *tashbih*, we find a different picture. In the actual human situation, people have a measure of knowledge and self-awareness and a sense of their own freedom. These attributes come from the Real. They allow people to understand that they are not complete, that their unfolding has not yet reached its end, and that their own activities and endeavours have an effect upon how they change and develop, or on what they become. Here guidance, prophecy, and wisdom intervene. In other words, the Real addresses this freedom and self-awareness and establishes paths of guidance that allow these qualities to be fully developed and realized.

God, then, addresses human beings through their own innate intelligence and through the prophets and sages, telling them what the human situation *should* be. The basic message is that people live below themselves. They are dominated by ignorance, forgetfulness, and the lack of reality. In other words, their present situation in respect of the Real is predominantly that of *furqan* and *tanzih*, of distinction, difference, and otherness. They must attempt to change their situation by clinging to *qur'an* and the divine attributes of *tashbih*. They must seize upon the signs of reality that fill the unreal domain of cosmic existence and follow these signs back to their source, which is the Real.

Human beings live in ignorance. The knowledge of *furqan* that the Quran brings establishes the separation of the Real from the unreal, the True from the false, the Absolute from the relative. From this perspective, human beings are utter slaves of the Real, since unreality possesses nothing in face of the Real. But in terms of *tashbih*, people are given a certain understanding and self-awareness. The knowledge of *qur'an* brought by the Quran asserts that people must surrender (*islam*) themselves voluntarily to the Real. Although they are God's servants in actual fact, they must also surrender freely to God through the trace of freedom and self-awareness that God has given them. Having freely surrendered to the Real, people can live in harmony with the Real. It is this free

submission to God that allows people to actualize the attributes of *tashbih* that are latent in their nature because "God taught Adam all the names" (2:31). Having freely surrendered to God, people may eventually become his vicegerents (*khalifa*) or representatives in the universe. Only those whom God "brings near" (*muqarrab*) to himself can be worthy of representing him. In other words, by following the guidance of the prophets, people can move from a predominance of the attributes of *tanzih* and difference to a predominance of the attributes of *tashbih* and sameness. The first message of the Quran is *furqan*, the separation of all things from God, but the second message is *qur'an*, the togetherness of God and those who freely choose to serve him.

The Precedence of Mercy

In the Islamic view, God's fundamental motivation for revealing the Quran does not lie in the establishment of *furqan*. On the contrary, God asks people to recognize the actual *furqan*, their actual separation and distinction from what is truly real. Then, on the basis of that recognition, they are asked to follow the guidelines of the Real in order to bring about *qur'an*, which is the togetherness and harmony of the servants and the Lord. The purpose of *furqan*, in other words, is to give people the discernment of their actual situation in order that they can overcome distinction, distance, and difference and establish togetherness, nearness, and sameness. *Furqan* gives way to *qur'an* and the attributes of *tanzih* are overcome by the attributes of *tashbih*.

In theological terms, the primacy of *qur'an* over *furqan* is understood as soon as we meditate upon the divine names that are associated with the two sides. *Furqan* establishes distinction and difference. Hence it is associated with knowledge and discernment, which separate the Real from the unreal and the Absolute from the relative. Knowledge discerns the levels, the differentiations,

the distinctions. Knowledge is a divine attribute, and God knows all things, as the Quran tells us repeatedly. Hence God establishes all the distinctions and differences, not only cognitively, but also ontologically, by creating an infinitely diverse cosmos, within which everything is put in its proper place on the basis of divine knowledge. But there is something deeper in God than knowledge, and that is the very fact of God, i.e., the Real itself. It is God who knows, and it is the fact that God actually is that allows him to know. In philosophical language, Being (*wujud*) is the precondition for knowledge. In terms of the Quranic names of God, God must first be Alive (*al-hayy*) before he can know (*al-'alim*). And God's life, God's reality, is a single reality, because God is one, as *tawhid* asserts. Therefore the principle of the oneness of God's Being takes precedence over the principle of the manyness of the cosmos, even though that manyness is rooted in God's eternal knowledge.

Through knowledge, the Real establishes *furqan*—differentiation and distinction. Through Being or Life, the Real establishes *qur'an*—oneness and togetherness. God creates the universe, but then he brings everything back to himself. This bringing back to himself is the third of Islam's first principles—the Return, the fact that everything goes back to God. In other words, the third principle asserts that *qur'an* or gathering together is the ultimate end of *furqan* or distinction, just as *qur'an* gave rise to *furqan* in the first place.⁷

Knowledge can be considered an attribute of *tanzih* in as much as it establishes *furqan*—difference and differentiation. Through the distinct identity of each thing in God's knowledge, all things are unique and thereby different. Hence, knowledge is allied with the attributes that assert difference, and these are the names of majesty, such as Mighty, Great, Transcendent, and High. In contrast, mercy and compassion are attributes of *tashbih*, because these establish the existence of all things, and existence is a single attribute, shared by everything in the universe. Each thing is unique

from the point of view of God's knowledge, but united and integrated with all things from the point of view of the existence that God gives to it.

In a famous saying, the Prophet said God has written on his Throne, "My mercy takes precedence over My wrath." The Throne of God is understood as the place where God sits while he governs the universe. Hence, the saying means that mercy embraces all things in the universe, and every appearance of wrath is in some way a manifestation of mercy. God's mercy has the first say, because through mercy he creates the universe. It also has the final say, because he brings everything back to himself, and he is Being, that is, sheer reality, goodness, and mercy. And mercy also determines the present situation, because it takes precedence over every phenomenon that seems to manifest wrath, such as ignorance, suffering, death, and destruction.

The names of majesty and beauty, as already mentioned, are sometimes called the names of wrath and mercy. The statement that God's mercy takes precedence over his wrath can be understood to mean that the names of mercy and beauty are more fundamental to reality than the names of wrath and majesty. After all, the names of wrath depend upon difference and distinction. God is angry only with those who go against his command, and these can only be human beings (and *jinn*). But human freedom to act against God's command is exceedingly limited, because, by the nature of things, they are his creatures and hence his servants. They are submitted to him along with everything else in the heaven and the earth. Divine names such as mighty, majestic, avenger, and transcendent depend upon the independent existence of the creatures, but, in the last analysis, the creatures have no independent existence. All their reality is a reflection of the reality of the Real. Only the illusion of a real separation from the Real allows creatures to see themselves as different from the Real. But

the relative cannot be separated from the Absolute, and the relatively unreal cannot be independent of the absolutely Real.

If the attributes of majesty and wrath depend upon distinction and *furqan*, the attributes of beauty and mercy speak to unity and *qur'an*. Wrath depends upon separation from reality, because reality is inherently merciful and compassionate, and to experience the divine wrath can only occur when one remains distant from the inherent reality of the Real. In contrast, the mercy that embraces all things is simply the nature of the Real. Through mercy, gentleness, compassion, kindness, benevolence, beneficence, and bounty, the Real shows its own oneness and brings all things into harmony with its own self.

God is one, as *tawhid* assures us. In other words, unity, harmony, equilibrium, and balance pertain to the very nature of the Real. To the extent that the universe is unreal—the perspective of *tanziḥ*—it is multiple, dispersed, disharmonious, and imbalanced. However, these are attributes of the universe only when it is considered independently of its principle and source, which is the Real. In fact, it has no real independence, so the underlying attributes of the universe are unity, harmony, equilibrium, and balance. In other words, oneness takes precedence over manyness, equilibrium takes precedence over disequilibrium, *tashbih* takes precedence over *tanziḥ*, *qur'an* take precedence over *furqan*, mercy takes precedence over wrath, and Being takes precedence over nonexistence.

The Priority of Inclusivism

I have just provided a roundabout survey of certain basic Islamic ways of looking at things. Let me repeat that not all Muslim thinkers have articulated the two basic standpoints of *qur'an* and *furqan*, or *tashbih* and *tanziḥ* and many of them typically stress one side over the other. Those who stress *tanziḥ* and *furqan* will see difference as

more important than sameness, and the divine wrath as more basic than the divine mercy. In contrast, those who stress *tashbih* and *qur'an* will find that sameness is more significant than difference, mercy more fundamental than wrath.

I have already suggested that both dogmatic theology and jurisprudence emphasize *furqan*, and therefore they stress difference and differentiation. Once differentiation is the primary issue, it is not too difficult to conclude that there is one correct way of seeing things, and all different ways are false. This one true way leads to salvation, and the other ways lead to damnation. Islamic history is full of polemics among various schools of thought, much of it being motivated by the desire to prove the truth of one perspective to the exclusion of other perspectives. When Muslims who think in this way look at non-Islamic standpoints, they conclude with even more self-assurance that these viewpoints must be in error.

As suggested earlier, Islamic exclusivism is rooted in the second half of the *Shahadah*, the assertion that Muhammad is the messenger of God. This statement can be understood to abrogate the legitimacy of other prophets, that is, other messengers who have brought wisdom from the Real with the goal of eliminating ignorance. In contrast, Islamic inclusivism focuses upon the first half of the *Shahadah*. *Tawhid* is taken as the universal message of the prophets, everywhere and always a path of salvation. To establish *tawhid* fully is to achieve the *qur'an* which is the only goal of *furqan*. All prophets come with messages of *furqan*, but, given the nature of *furqan*, which is differentiation and distinction, each message must deal directly with the world of multiplicity and difference. Each must differentiate between right and wrong, true and false, absolute and relative, in specific and particular terms. But the goal of all this is to overcome the error of seeing the many as completely separate from the One. In other words, the goal is to establish oneness, unity, harmony, equilibrium, balance, and wholeness. This is *tawhid*, the realization of the ultimate unity that

underlies all multiplicity, and *tawhid* is the universal focus of all wisdom.

The full realization of *tawhid* establishes the precedence of *tashbih* and eliminates the negative effects of *tanzih*, which are difference, multiplicity, dispersion, disintegration, ignorance, and suffering. All these negative effects grow up from the reality of God's otherness. However, God's otherness is established in relation to the relatively unreal, that is, the cosmos, and hence otherness is mixed with unreality, which is why it demands wrath—which is the repudiation of the false and the unreal. Reality in its very self is unity and oneness, so it knows no otherness and sees all things in terms of sameness. This is what *tashbih* asserts—that God is present with all things, and, in respect of that presence, he embraces all things with mercy and compassion. Hence all things are real through God's mercy and compassion, and mercy takes precedence over wrath, which is to say that the Real takes precedence over the unreal. The oneness established by *qur'an* has the final say, and the difference that is established by *furqan* will be overcome by the oneness of mercy.

What I want to conclude from all this is that fruitful discussion of first principles demands a recognition of the precedence of the first half of the *Shahadah* over the second. In other words, in order to discuss first principles with followers of other traditions, Muslims need to recognize that the fundamental message of the Quran is God's universal truth and universal reality, and this means the precedence and predominance of mercy in all things. This precedence of oneness and mercy demands that God deliver the message of *furqan* and *qur'an* to all peoples. Hence, "every nation has a messenger" (Quran 10:47) because "God's mercy embraces all things" (7:156).

Hence, Muslims should never doubt, if they understand the Quranic message of predominant mercy and predominant *qur'an*, that the saving wisdom of mercy is found outside of Islam. This

does not, of course, negate the possibility of error, ignorance, forgetfulness, and dispersion—whether outside of Islam or within. But it does assure us that mercy has the final say, not wrath. The Prophet tells us that God is with his servant's opinion of him, so they should have a good opinion, and certainly the idea that God is fundamentally merciful and compassionate to all creation is a good opinion. In the case of human beings, God's mercy and compassion demand sending the message of *furqan* and *qur'an* to all peoples. The message is there, but the separation and multiplicity demanded by *furqan*—or the diverse forms that prophecy takes—may make it difficult to recognize wisdom for what it is. It is here that Muslims have a duty to know the diversity of the camels within the confines of their own community. If they are not aware of the diversity of their own wisdom, how will they be able to recognize wisdom when they see it in other pastures?

Notes

1. Of course, neither of these *hadiths* is found in the most authoritative sources, but that is not the issue. The issue is rather that they represent a typically Islamic way of looking at things, which explains why they are well known and often quoted.
2. This last topic can be understood to embrace not only the issue of posthumous becoming, but also the full development of human capacities in the present world, a development through which people return to their proper place in the universal scheme of things. These two topics are sometimes called the "compulsory return" (*al-ruju' al-idtirari*) and the "voluntary return" (*al-ruju' al-ikhtiyari*).
3. For an investigation of Islamic teachings in terms of these three domains, see S. Murata and W. C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (New York: Paragon, 1994).
4. For an overview of the role of these three schools in Islamic thought, see *ibid.*, chapter 6.
5. There is, of course, the common Islamic belief that a later message abrogates (*naskh*) an earlier message, but this finds no strong support in the Quran. Quite the contrary, the Quran repeatedly stresses that the later messages confirm and strengthen (*ta'yid*) the earlier messages. If we want to escape from exclusivist readings here, we need to let the Quran say what it says. When it affirms that "Every nation has a messenger" (10:47), this means that prophecy is a phenomenon that appears wherever there have been human beings. Moreover, the specific prophetic history that the Quran addresses is Abrahamic. Even if one can argue that the Quran abrogates earlier Abrahamic messages—and this is highly debatable—why should it abrogate messages addressed to religious worlds that stand outside the Abrahamic dispensation?
6. This, of course, is a very important issue in theology and philosophy. Typically, it is said that God has no "whatness" or "quiddity" (*mahiyya*), because he is *wujud* itself, the absolute reality from which all quiddities arise (*wujud* and *mahiyya* being considered as the two sides of a thing's reality, its "existence" and "essence"). The only answer to the question philosophically is that God's whatness is his *wujud*, his existence is identical with his essence, in contrast to everything in the universe.

Some commentators find a specific Quranic rejection of the question "what?" for God is found in verse 26:23. Pharaoh asks Moses, "And what is the Lord of the worlds?" Moses refuses to answer him directly, leading Pharaoh to say, "Your messenger [i.e., Moses] who is sent to you is mad" (26:27).

7. To put this somewhat differently, in the Quran, two divine attributes are said to "embrace [*wasi'a*] all things." One of these attributes is knowledge (6:80, 7:89, 20:98) and the other is mercy (7:156). In one verse, these two attributes are brought together. In it, the angels address God and say, "Our Lord, You embrace everything in mercy and knowledge" (40:7). Many commentators have thought that the order of the attributes here is no accident, because the divine mercy that embraces all things is precisely the divine reality in terms of which he knows all things. The existence of things is predicated upon the knowledge of God that they will be given existence, but God's knowledge of the things is predicated upon the very Being and Reality of God. Hence the manyness of the universe is predicated upon the oneness of God's reality. The One gives rise to the many, which is to say that *qur'an* gives birth to *furqan*. Then, in the cosmos, *furqan* prepares the way for the return to *qur'an*.