



The Role of Qur'an in the Transformation of Human Society

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Abstract

There is no denying the fact that at one time in human history Muslims were the leaders in human values. They were the torchbearers of knowledge when other civilizations lived in darkness. They developed the physical aspect of human civilization by establishing libraries, hospitals and centres of higher learning. Today, however, Muslims are in a state of moral and intellectual decline. This paper argues that the primary cause behind the advancement of the early Islamic society and the subsequent decline of later Muslims are primarily due to the way the Qur'an has been dealt with. While the early Muslims read the Qur'an, understood it and acted upon its injunctions; today the majority of the Muslims read the Qur'an ritually, gaining no insight or knowledge from it. The paper addresses two questions: Why the Qur'an quickly transformed and improved the early Islamic community and not the present one? Why Muslims have lost their supremacy in knowledge and morality?

Keywords: *Qur'an, transformation, enlightenment, barbarism, primitivism, civilization.*

Abstrak

Tiada dinafikan bahawa pada satu masa dalam sejarah manusia dahulu, umat Islam merupakan pemimpin dalam nilai kemanusiaan. Mereka adalah pembawa obor pengetahuan ketika negara-negara lain masih di dalam kegelapan. Mereka membangunkan aspek fizikal tamadun manusia dengan mewujudkan perpustakaan, hospital dan pusat-pusat pengajian. Hari ini, bagaimanapun, umat Islam berada dalam keadaan kemerosotan moral dan intelektual. Kajian ini menerangkan bahawa punca utama kemajuan masyarakat Islam awal dan kemerosotan umat Islam berikutnya adalah disebabkan bagaimana cara Al-Quran digunapakai. Walaupun umat Islam awal membaca, memahami Al-Quran dan mengambil tindakan injunksi berhubung dengan itu, tetapi hari ini ramai orang Islam membaca Al-Quran secara ritual, namun tidak mendapat apa-apa daripadanya. Kajian ini mempersoalkan dua perkara: Mengapa Al-Quran dapat mengubah masyarakat Islam yang awal dan bukan yang sekarang? Mengapa umat Islam kehilangan kekuasaan mereka dalam pengetahuan dan moral?

Kata Kunci: *Al-Quran, transformasi, kesedaran, tidak bertamadun, primitivisme, tamadun.*

Introduction

The term Qur'an is a verbal noun (*masdar*) that carries the connotation of a "continuous reading," "recital,"ⁱ or message that is recounted or listened to over and over again."ⁱⁱ The nouns 'recitation' and 'reading' as meanings of the Qur'an imply that the *Qur'an* is "both recited from memory and read from

text".ⁱⁱⁱ When written with a definite article *al* (*alif lam*) – *al-Qur'an*, it refers to Allah's final 'revelation' to humanity. Among its many characteristics and functions are the following:

Firstly, it is *al-Furqan* (discernment or the criterion (of right and wrong)) (The Qur'an 25:1)^{iv}. It is the standard by which people of all ages discern the right from wrong, true from false, and justice from injustice. The absence of a criterion stating what is right or wrong was seen as the factor behind constant conflicts and perpetual war in the state of nature as depicted in Thomas Hobbes's political philosophy. The state of nature is a hypothetical state of humanity before the creation of a civil society. He wrote that the state of nature is a state of war (of every man

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against every man), quarrel, continual fear and danger of violent death, and that the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.^v Moral relativism – the philosophy that asserts that right and wrong are not absolute values, but rather are relative to the time, place, culture, and outlook of individuals or societies – is one of the teachings of secularism, positivism and postmodernism. It is also one of the defining characteristics of the modern civilization.

Secondly, it is a universal message and a detailed legal text. It is the only revealed book free from adulteration and still read in its revealed language. Other books were revealed in languages that are now dead and understood only by a few people. As argued, “even if these books still existed in their original and unadulterated form, it would be virtually impossible to understand them correctly and to interpret and implement their injunctions.”^{vi} It is further argued that “a translation can never be the same as the original.”^{vii} Thus, Muslims believe that “the book revealed to Muhammad (peace be upon him) should be read and understood in its original Arabic” as “translation would distort its meanings” and further more “destroy its poetic beauty. It could only lead to variations in the scripture and faith and to schisms in the Muslim community”.^{viii}

Thirdly, it is *al-Dhikra* (the reminder) (The Qur'an 21:50). It reminds man of his Covenant with Allah and the reason for his very existence, and his obligations and duties towards himself, his creator – Allah, his fellow humans and the rest of Allah's creation including the environment and animals. The Arabic word for man is *insan* which etymologically is derived from the noun *nisyan* (forgetfulness) or from the verbs *nasiya* ((he) forgot) and *yansa* (he is forgetting or he forgets). It was due to forgetfulness that Adam (and Hawa) ate the forbidden fruit which resulted into their eviction from the heaven. Man is in dire need to be constantly reminded of his promise and obligations and it is for this very reason that Allah sent many Prophets and Messengers. It is also for this reason that Allah promised to preserve the Qur'an as the last revelation to mankind.

Fourthly, it is the most read book. Ramadan is the time when the Qur'an is read and listened to more often because the reward is more than at any other time in the year.^{ix} Thus Ramadan is known as “the blessed month of the Qur'an”. It is reported that *Imam al-Shafi'i* used to read the Qur'an sixty times every Ramadan^x and he “regularly used spend one-third of the night for Qur'anic study, one-third for prayers and one-third for sleep.”^{xi} It is also reported that khalifah Walid bin 'Abd al-Malik used to complete Qur'an reading every three days and he used to read it a full seventeen times during Ramadan.^{xii}

Fifthly, it is the fountain of knowledge and the main source of guidance. The Qur'an is the main source of guidance in the life of a Muslim. It is *nur* (light) and *huda* (guidance) to all seekers of the truth be they believers or disbelievers. It guides them to the true path, known as *al-Sirat al-Mustaqim* (the straight path) i.e. the path that has been trodden by the prophets (who teach), the sincere (lovers of Truth), the witnesses (who testify), and the Righteous (who do good).^{xiii} This path comprises of beliefs known as *arqan al-Iman* (the pillars of *Iman*), and practices known as *arqan al-Islam* (the pillars of Islam). 'Ali described the Qur'an as follows:

“The Book of God, in it is the record of what was before you, the judgment of what is among you, and the prophecies of what will come after you. It is decisive, not a case for levity. Whoever is a tyrant and ignores the Qur'an will be destroyed by God. Whoever seeks guidance from other than it will be misguided. The Qur'an is the unbreakable bond of connection with God; it is the remembrance full of wisdom and the straight path. The Qur'an does not become distorted by tongues, nor can it be deviated by caprices; it never dulls from repeated study; scholars will always want more of it. The wonders of the Qur'an are never ending. Whoever speaks from it will speak the truth, whoever rules with it will be just, and whoever holds fast to it will be guided to the straight path.” [Al-Tirmidhi]

It is understood from the above that the Qur'an is guidance par excellence. Whoever makes it his guide does not go wrong and whoever deviates from it can never find a guide.

Sixthly, it is a cure for illnesses. Allah created illnesses and their cure. According to a *hadith*, for every illness there is a cure, except for death.^{xiv} One of the cure for illnesses is the Qur'an. It is a cure for what is in one's breast (suspicion and doubt) and also a protection against envy (the evil eye), sorcery and harm from the devil which modern medicine does not treat. The Qur'an cures illnesses: Firstly, by enjoining the individuals to cleanse themselves before engagement in certain acts of devotion to Allah, to eat what is pure and legitimate and forbids them from consuming what is hazardous to health such as intoxicants, excessive food and beverage; secondly, by forbidding the individuals from sexual promiscuity, homosexuality and sexual intercourse during the menstrual period; thirdly, by narrating stories of wise men such as Luqman and Prophets for man and societies to draw lessons from; fourthly, by commanding Muslims to perform *salat*, *zakat*, *sawm*

and *hajj* as means to purify hearts. According to the following *hadith*, the Qur'an is a means to overcome one's sorrow and to release stress. Hence putting the soul at peace:

'Abdullah ibin Mas'ud reported that the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: "There is no-one who is afflicted by distress and grief, and says: Allah, I am Your slave, son of Your male and female slave, my forelock is in Your hand, Your command over me is forever executed and Your decree over me is just. I ask You by every name belonging to You which You have named Yourself with, or revealed in Your Book, or You taught to any of Your creation, or You have preserved in the knowledge of the Unseen with You, that You make the Quran the harvest of my heart and the light of my chest, and a departure for my sorrow and a release for my anxiety but Allah will take away his distress and grief, and replace it with joy He was asked: O Messenger of Allah, should we learn this? He said: Of course; everyone who hears it should learn it."^{xv}

Stress is regarded as "the most common ailment of modern age".^{xvi} It is believed to be a cause of "peptic ulcer disease, coronary heart disease, depression, autoimmune disease, hypertension, diabetes, cancer, and also insomnia, obesity, unrest, and violence, at work, school and home."^{xvii}

Seventhly, it is the basis of Islam and an intrinsic part of a Muslim life. It is a gateway to a new world, the strong rope that connects Muslims to their Lord, Allah, the Straight Path (*al-Sirat al-Mustaqim*) leading them to everlasting bliss and the backbone of their success in both existences, i.e. *al-Dunya* and *al-Akhirah* (here and hereafter).

Last but not least, it is an elevator. It uplifts those who act upon it morally and materially. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said, "Verily, Allah elevates some people with this Qur'an and abases others."^{xviii} It is undeniable fact that the Qur'an elevated the Arabs from "an abysmal low to the ultimate zenith".^{xix} "Without the Qur'an," writes Nadwi "These Arab Bedouins would have hardly survived on the world map."^{xx} Adil emphasizes that it was the Qur'an and *sunnah* which led to the transformation of Arabia and that indiscipline due to the spell of too much wealth and power is what led to the decline of Muslims.

"it was the guidance provided by Qur-aan Majeed and the example set by the unique personality of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) that

transformed the desert into a divinely formed dynamic garden. Muslims were on top in the world for as long as they followed that guidance but when, under the spell of too much wealth and power they slipped into a life of ease and indiscipline, they naturally had to face evil days and difficulties. These can be dispelled provided (that) they revert to the life of Islamic discipline and austerity..."^{xxi}

Many Muslim scholars have argued that the Muslim *ummah* (nation) will never be delivered from its current state of weakness and backwardness except by turning back to the Qur'an: "Because Allah will never change the grace which He hath bestowed on a people until they change what is in their (own) souls: and verily Allah is He Who heareth and knoweth (all things)" (The Qur'an 8: 53).

The Qur'an and transformation of human society

The sole purpose of revealing the Qur'an is to transform lives and deliver mankind out of darkness (ignorance and barbarity) into light; to guide them to the straight path of moral conduct and resolve their problems. The Arabic terms used for ignorance and barbarity are *jahl* and *jahiliyyah* respectively. It is a fact that the years prior to revelation of the Qur'an were filled with darkness; monotheism (the belief in one God and the worship of Him alone (*al-Tawhid*)) had for long been replaced with polytheism and idolatry (the belief in superstitions and the worship of objects (*shirk*)) and wisdom and guidance with blind acceptance of tradition (*taqlid*). In short, man had lost his dignity. The Qur'an changed the lives of the Arabs and turned them into a literate nation of high moral standards. It inspired them to become the pioneers of Islamic civilization, the greatest civilization in human history: "In the unfolding of human history, there has never been another global civilization like it."^{xxii}

In his 'Rise and Fall of Islam', Allama Altaf Husain Hali, describes the Qur'an as a formula of alchemy. He says:

"He (the Holy Prophet, peace be upon him) descended from Hira and came to his people, bringing with him a formula of alchemy that turned the copper-ore into pure gold and separated the noble from the base. The land of Arabia that was immersed under ignorance since centuries was suddenly transformed (into a territory of Knowledge and Light). The fleet had no longer to fear the destructive waves, for the course of winds was entirely changed."^{xxiii}

It is true that great transformations have taken place since man's existence on the earth but the greatest

transformation was the transformation of primitive Arabs of the *jahiliyyah* by the Qur'an. It transformed them into bearers of knowledge and agents of change.^{xxiv}

I. The Qur'an and transformation of the pre-Islamic Arabia

Before the advent of Islam, Arabia was troubled with political, economic and social problems. Socially, it was fragmented due to the inter-tribal wars between the different tribes and clans such as the Aws (Bani Aws) and Khazraj (Bani Khazraj) in Medina. The war between these two clans was perpetual and if not because of Islam they would have been wiped out from existence.^{xxv} There was no written code of law, a proper state to enforce it or a police force to back it.

"Since there were no such things as police, courts or judges, the only protection a man could find from his enemies, was in his own tribe. The tribe had an obligation to protect its members even if they had committed crimes. Tribalism or 'asabiyya (the clan spirit) took precedence over ethics. A tribe that failed to protect its members from their enemies, exposed itself to ridicule, obloquy and contempt. Ethics, of course, did not enter the picture anywhere."^{xxvi}

Economically, wealth was concentrated in the hands of a few individuals known as the capitalists or money-lenders. They charged very high interests on the loans given to the poor so as to make them poorer and themselves richer and more dominant.

Based on what has been mentioned above, some scholars have concluded that the Arabs of the pre-Islamic era were leading a life similar to that of beasts; they were uncivilized and they had no civilization. The following speech delivered by Ja'far ibin Abi Talib to the Christian king of Abyssinia (Ethiopia) describes the pre-Islamic Arabian moral and religious conditions:

"O king! we were plunged in the depth of ignorance and barbarism; we adored idols, we lived in unchastity, we ate the dead bodies,^{xxvii} and we spoke abominations, we disregarded every feeling of humanity, and the duties of hospitality and neighborhood were neglected; we knew no law but that of the strong, when Allah raised among us a man, of whose birth, truthfulness, honesty, and purity we were aware; and he called to the Oneness of Allah, and taught us not to associate anything with Him. He forbade us the worship of idols; and he enjoined us to speak the truth, to be faithful to our trusts, to be merciful

and to regard the rights of the neighbors and kith and kin; he forbade us to speak evil of women, or to eat the substance of orphans; he ordered us to fly from the vices, and to abstain from evil; to offer prayers, to render alms, and to observe fast. We have believed in him, we have accepted his teachings and his injunctions to worship Allah, and not to associate anything with Him, and we have allowed what He has allowed, and prohibited what He has prohibited. For this reason, our people have risen against us, have persecuted us in order to make us forsake the worship of Allah and return to the worship of idols and other abominations. They have tortured and injured us, until finding no safety among them; we have come to your country, and hope you will protect us from oppression."^{xxviii}

Jahiliyyah or the period of ignorance and barbarism is a period prior to the coming of Islam or the revelation of the Qur'an to Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Although there were some traces of monotheism in the *hanifs*,^{xxix} the overwhelming majority of Arabs worshiped idols, believed in superstition and followed their lust. A few Arabs were Judaists and Christians. It is worth noting that the worship of a multitude of deities besides Allah contributed greatly to the fragmentation of Arabian society. Each tribe had its own gods. This means there was no religious unifying system. The following are the major transformations that took place under Islam:

A. Moral Transformation

The Qur'an is a complete Code of Morality. It outlines the principles of ethical behavior. It is the standard by which a particular mode of conduct is judged and classified as good or bad. It calls upon the people to bid the good and to forbid the wrong. It defines the responsibilities and rights of various relationships such as the relationship between the individual and Allah; the relationship between the individual and himself; the relationship between the individual and his fellow humans; and the relationship between the individual and the rest of Allah's creation (animals and environment). It teaches kindness, respect and care, patience and steadfastness, fulfillment of one's promises, truthfulness, humility, modesty, generosity, honesty, justice, moderation, equality, obedience to one's parents and to those in righteous authority, etc. These are moral values, which have been highly valued since the dawn of human civilization and they have always formed the basis of any healthy human society. Furthermore, it exhorts the purification of the soul from cruelty,

hatred, selfishness and greed, envy and jealousy. These are vices that contributed to the fall of many nations. Writing on the comprehensiveness of the Moral Code of Islam, Afzalur Rahman says:

"All the old Books contained Codes of Morality and of justice but none was comprehensive enough to contain a complete Code covering every aspect of human life. The Qur'an, on the other hand, provides the perfect Code for every branch of human activity so that people with wisdom can benefit from it"^{xxx}

One of the aims of the Qur'an is to reform the character of individual and remold it into a new form that is loved by Allah.^{xxxi} Reformation of character is a prerequisite for closeness to Allah and a necessary condition for attainment of success.^{xxxii} Thus, reformation of character was one of the tasks of the Prophet (peace be upon him).^{xxxiii}

The Qur'an puts great emphasis on the reformation of character and it also provides the means to its realization. These are *salat*, *zakat*, *sawm* and *hajj*. To begin with, *salat*, which is described in one *hadith* as the "pillar of religion,"^{xxxiv} restrains a person from shameful and unjust deeds. In other words, it is the cure for the sicknesses of the heart and a remedy of one's soul. Allah says, the meaning of which is:

"Recite what is sent of the Book by inspiration to thee, and establish regular Prayer: for Prayer restrains from shameful and unjust deeds; and remembrance of Allah is the greatest (thing in life) without doubt. And Allah knows the (deeds) that ye do." (The Qur'an 29:45).

Commenting on this *ayah* al-Sawwaf wrote:

"Genuine prayer, based on humility and submission, illuminates the heart, purifies the soul, and teaches the worshipper both the refinements of worship and his obligations to the divinity of the great and almighty Allah, for it is through prayer that the glory and majesty of Allah is implanted in his heart. Prayer endows and ennoble man with such excellent virtues of character as truthfulness, honesty, moderation, integrity, understanding, modesty, fairness, and generosity. It raises him up and directs him to the One Allah, increasing fear and dread of Him. In this way his moral standards are raised, his soul is purified, and he sets aside lying, falsehood, evil, deception, anger, and pride and thus rises above injustice, enmity, meanness, iniquity and disobedience."^{xxxv}

Salat promotes unity and dispels racism and segregation, which are common and ancient diseases found in almost every society. Artz writes: "Of all world religions, Islam has been most successful in overriding barriers of colour and nationality. No line is drawn except between believers and unbelievers."^{xxxvi}

When a Muslim confronts difficulty and crisis in life he or she resorts to prayers. Thus, *salat* is consolation factor for a believer. It should be made clear that despite the continual resistance from the Quraysh, Muhammad (peace be upon him) still experienced great joy and contentment in communion with Allah by performing the *salat*.^{xxxvii}

Zakat is a religious obligation that the well-off owe to the needy because their wealth is seen as a "trust from Allah's bounty". *Zakat* purifies the heart of the donor from greed and that of the recipient from envy (The Qur'an 9:103).

Greed is one of the causes of economic inequality. It is also the cause of corruption. In nations where there is economic inequality, there is less happiness, more violence, and shorter life expectancies. Today many Third World countries suffer because of greed; it is the main factor behind colonization and enslavement. It is in the light of this that Proudhon, a fundamentalist Socialist, defined property as "theft". In his famous work *What is Property?* Proudhon described private property as "the origin of evil on the earth, the first link in the long chain of crimes and misfortunes which the human race has endured since its birth."^{xxxviii}

Sawm (fasting) helps a person to control the low desires. It is also a means to the attainment of *taqwa*; that is, a state of the heart that prompts virtuous acts and abstains from vices. Allah says: "O ye who believe! Fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you, that ye may gain *taqwa* (self-restraint/piety/God-consciousness)" (The Qur'an 2:183). Furthermore, *sawm* (fasting) is described as "a great restorer of youth and prolonger of life."^{xxxix} It is believed that "people who fast acquire a clearer skin, a rosier tint to their cheeks, and a more youthful complexion than they had before."^{xl} Patients suffering from "high blood pressure, asthma, allergies, chronic headaches, inflammatory bowel disease (ulcerative colitis and Crohn's disease), irritable bowel syndrome, adult onset diabetes, heart disease, degenerative arthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, psoriasis, eczema, acne, uterine fibroids, benign tumours, and systemic lupus erythematosus" are advised to fast.^{xli}

Finally, *hajj*, the fifth pillar of Islam, teaches Muslims to observe cleanliness most of the time, to be

kind and generous, and more important, to be patient and tolerant (The Qur'an 2:197).

Intolerance has been a social problem since ancient history. It is the principal cause of conflicts in and between nations

B. Intellectual Transformation

The Qur'an is a comprehensive Book of knowledge. It contains much information whose source cannot be attributed to anyone other than Allah. Mutahhari writes:

"The study of the Qur'an is essential for every committed Muslim, since it is the main source and foundation of the religious thought and faith. Whatsoever gives meaning, essence and sanctity to his existence lies in the Holy Qur'an."^{xlii}

According to Murad, the Qur'an is "a world of untold treasures of knowledge and wisdom to guide (a person) on the pathways of life, to mould (a person's) thought and action."^{xliii} The main subject of the Qur'an is *al-Tawhid* (Absolute oneness of Allah). Therein Allah is described, among others, as the One and Only God; the Eternal, Absolute (One without a beginning and an end); One who begets not, nor is He begotten; and there is none like unto Him (The Qur'an 112: 1-4). Other subjects of the Qur'an include man, universe, human society, ethics and morals, injunctions of the *shari'ah* (Divine Law), information (*akhbar*), etc. Regarding man, the Qur'an accurately describes the process of his creation and states his role and duties. Regarding the universe, it explains how and why it was created. Regarding human society, it describes the laws governing a well ordered society and mentions how societies should interact. It mentions some of "the nations that flourished in the past—their way of life, the goals they pursued, the values around which their culture was organised, their actions and the consequences of those actions."^{xliv} It invites people to study the history of the past nations with a view to take lesson from it. According to Mutahhari,

"all developments of human history take place in accordance with systematic norms and laws. All historical events involving honour or disgrace, success or failure, good luck or bad luck have their definite and well-calculated rules. By knowing these rules and laws current history can be brought under control and can be turned to the advantage of the present generation."^{xlv}

As regards ethics and morals, the Qur'an states the bases of morality e.g. *al-'Adl* (justice), *al-Musawat*

(equality) and *al-Wasatiyyah* (moderation) and condemns all excess leading to transgression. Regarding the injunctions of the *Shari'ah* (Divine Law), it states rules pertaining to *'ibadat* (acts of devotion to Allah), *munakahat* (marriage and divorce), *mirath* (inheritance), etc.

In regards to information, it tells about Paradise and Hell and the news of all that has happened and that is going to happen in future. As a Book of knowledge, the Qur'an is likened to an ocean which benefits all, regardless of age:

"The less learned, like children, collect pebbles and shells from its shores. The scholars and thinkers, like pearl divers, bring out from it the highest philosophy, wisdom and rules of a perfect way of living."^{xlvi}

Inspired by the Qur'an, the Arabs made significant contributions to science and philosophy. It is their contributions which led to renaissance of the 12th century. Describing the intellectual transformation of Europe, John Davenport wrote that all the knowledge that "flourished in Europe from the 10th century was originally derived from the Arabian schools, and the Spanish Saracen may be looked upon as the father of European philosophy." Another scholar Bertrand Russell said, "The supremacy of the East was not only military. Science, philosophy, poetry, and the arts, all flourished... in the Muhammadan world at a time when Europe was sunk in barbarism...."^{xlvii} Yet another scholar Robert Briffault wrote, "It is highly probable that but for the Arabs, modern European civilization would have never assumed that character which has enabled it to transcend all previous phases of evolution...."^{xlviii}

C. Social and Religious Transformation

The revelation of the Qur'an brought many social changes in Arabia, including the establishment of a community known as the *ummah*. One of the distinctive characteristics of this unity is "indivisibility": "Verily, this brotherhood of yours is a single brotherhood, and I am your Lord and Cherisher: therefore serve Me (and no other)" (The Qur'an 21:92 and 23:52). An indivisible unity is one that is formed on mutual love and brotherhood: "The Believers are but a single Brotherhood: So make peace and reconciliation between your two (contending) brothers; and fear Allah, that ye may receive Mercy." (The Qur'an 49:10). Nu'man bin Bashir reported Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) as saying: "The similitude of believers in regard to mutual love, affection, fellow-feeling is that of one

body; when any limb of it aches, the whole body aches, because of sleeplessness and fever.”^{xlix}

Islam teaches its followers to develop mutual love and affection towards one another and it makes it a condition for entering Paradise. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said:

“By Him in Whose Hand my soul is, you will not enter Paradise unless you believe, and you will not believe unless you love each other. Should I direct you to something that if you constantly did it, you would love each other? Spread the greetings of peace among you.”^l

One of the greatest achievements of Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the unification of the people of Arabia and beyond. He established peace and unity between the communities of Aws and Khazraj. These two tribes were always in conflict with one another and if not because of Islam they would be annihilated due to perpetual fighting. Furthermore, he formed brotherhood among the *muhajirin* (migrants from Makkah) and *Ansar* (Medinites, known as helpers). The bonds of brotherhood were so strong to the extent that a member of the *Ansar* would offer to split his wealth and his belongings with a Muslim brother from Makkah. This brotherhood which transcended colour, language, race and ethnicity is considered as one of the unique achievements of Islam. Further still, he constructed a mosque so as to bring Muslims together in worship. Bernard Lewis wrote about the significance of Prophet Muhammad's achievements as follows:

“He had achieved a great deal. To the pagan peoples of western Arabia he had brought a new religion which, with its monotheism and its ethical doctrines, stood on an incomparably higher level than the paganism it replaced. He had provided that religion with a revelation which was to become in the centuries to follow the guide to thought and count of countless millions of Believers. But he had done more than that; he had established a community and a well organized and armed state, the power and prestige of which made it a dominant factor in Arabia.”^{li}

II. The Qur'an and transformation of contemporary society

The Prophet's companions used to read the Qur'an in beautiful rhythm, they understand it and reflected on it, and often had tears in their eyes when reading it. Their hearts trembled and they felt like Allah was talking to them when reading the Qur'an.^{lii} Consequently, the Qur'an enlightened their hearts and

they attained tranquility and peace of mind. A tranquil heart makes the body healthy. Baig in his “Relating to the Qur'an” wrote:

“The companions were the first group of people who followed [the Qur'an] as it must be followed. They were transformed from being the lowest of the low to being the highest of the high. They established personal standards of piety and virtue that no other group of people since then can match. They established a society based on justice, fairness and goodness that no other society can match.”^{liiii}

In response to the question: How could the Qur'an bring about such dramatic change? Magdi al-Hilali wrote: “what made the Qur'an so effective is the excellent approach followed by the Prophet's Companions toward it. They understood the Qur'an and appreciated its value, taking in this regard the Prophet (peace be upon him) as their best example.”^{liv}

Today Muslims read and listen to the Qur'an but many do not lead their lives according to its teachings.^{lv} Al-Ghazali in his *Kayfa nata'amal ma'a al-Qur'an* exclaimed, “the attitude of Muslims towards the Quran is shocking. For several centuries the call of the *Qur'an* has become ineffective and the message of Islam is like a river dried up.”^{lvi} Here it is evident that the malaise of the Muslims stems from their inability to understand and act upon the teachings of the *Qur'an*.

It is argued that

“if the Qur'an had been understood fully and accurately and practiced effectively,...modern poisons (materialistic and secular beliefs) would have found only a few Muslim customers even if they had been presented in golden cups.”^{lvii}

The failure of Muslims to lead their lives according to the teachings of the Qur'an has resulted into the weakness of faith and morality.

III. Factors of effective transformation by the Qur'an

In order for the Qur'an to transform one's life, the following conditions have to be fulfilled:

A. Purification of Intention

The intention of reading the Qur'an is to be guided (The Qur'an 2: 1-2). According to Islahi, a person who reads the Qur'an with an intention other than the search of guidance “will not only be barred from its

blessings but would instead...be driven even still further away from it.”^{lviii}

B. Proficiency in Qur'an Reading

Proficiency in Qur'an reading means reading it the way it should be read or in Arabic *tilawatuhu haqqa tilawatih*. Allah says:

“Those to whom We have sent the Book study it as it should be studied-yatlunahu haqqa tilawatih: They are the ones that believe therein: Those who reject faith therein- the loss is their own.” (The Qur'an 2:121).

Reading the Qur'an proficiently means the following: first, reciting it in a melodious voice. A truly beautiful reading of the Qur'an is “that which depends on correct pronunciation and perfect application of the tajweed rules.”^{lix} It is compared to “the beat of drums, to the echoes of nature and to the chants which are common in all early societies” and “it possesses the ability to arouse its hearers to ecstasies of faith.”^{lx} It is reported that Labid ibn Rabi'ah (560-661 CE), one of the famous poets of the Seven Odes (*al-Mu'allaqat al-Sab'*) whose ode is said to have been honoured by having it hung at the Ka'bah, stopped composing poetry after embracing Islam.^{lxi} When asked about the reason for his discontinuity, he replied, “What! Even after the revelation of the Qur'an?”^{lxii} This shows the sublime beauty and grandeur of the Qur'an, and its supremacy over poetry.

Being Allah's speech, the Qur'an should be read “clearly”, “slowly” or “letter by letter” (The Qur'an 73:4; 25: 32). It is reported that the Prophet (peace be upon him) used to pause at the end of every verse, which means he used to recite verse by verse. To have a slow and clear reading of the Qur'an, its short letters have to be shortened and the long ones lengthened. Also to be proficient in Qur'an reading one has to study and practice the rules of Qur'an reading or *tajwid* under someone who has mastered them.

It is also worth noting that wrong reading of the Qur'an can distort its meaning. Hence, one has to strive to read the Qur'an the way it was revealed.

C. Understanding the Qur'an

Muslims' responsibilities to the Qur'an are threefold: to read it, to understand it and to act upon its teachings. Acting upon the teachings of the Qur'an is the objective of its recitation and study. In the early days of Islam these three responsibilities were strictly observed. Today, however, individuals, families and many Muslim institutions concentrate on *tahsin qira'at al-Qur'an* (the mastery of the Qur'an reading)

rather than its understanding and embodiment. In other words, they are more concerned about the means but not the end. It has to be noted that only when the Qur'an is understood it transforms one's life.

Understanding the Qur'an is so vital that it requires thorough investigation and discussion. While failure to understand this final complete revelation is one of the causes of deviation from divine guidance and Muslims' political and economic backwardness, and *taqlid* or unquestioning acceptance of religious teachings and social disintegration, it is also the cause of false accusations against Islam and Islam phobia. Understanding the Qur'an is crucial because all the Islamic sciences are routed and derived from it. Also in order for one to act upon the teachings of the Qur'an and embody the traditions of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), one has to understand the Qur'an.

People all over the world have laboured to learn Qur'anic Arabic so that they are able to understand its message.^{lxiii} Moreover efforts have been rendered to have the Qur'an translated into different languages so that the non-Arabic speaking Muslims and non-Muslims are able to understand it. It is worth noting that the more one reads the Qur'an with understanding the more one have his knowledge increased. As a Book of knowledge, the Qur'an has been described as:

“an infinite ocean into which all people with knowledge and ability can dive deeply and, according to their capacity, find its pearls and coral. The passage of time only rejuvenates its scientific wisdom. Every generation discovers its wisdom anew, and its secrets continue to be revealed over time.”^{lxiv}

Therefore, it is compulsory upon every Muslim to make efforts to understand the Qur'an. This may be done on one's own, or in a group of friends. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the best and easiest way to understand the Qur'an is to read in a study circle. This is how the companions of the Prophet (peace be upon him) used to read it. They used to read ten verses from the Qur'an, study *iman*, *halal* and *haram* from them before memorizing them or shifting to other verses.

“The number of participants should be 3-10; with no great divergence in the levels of their knowledge and intelligence. Anything less will make it a dialogue, anything more may hinder the active participation of everyone.”^{lxv}

D. Contemplation and Reflection

Contemplation and reflection on the meaning of the Qur'an is essential to understanding its message. The Prophet (peace be upon him) is reported to have said that groups of people would emerge from his *ummah* that will drink the Qur'an just as they drink milk.^{lxvi} Commenting on this, Al-Munawi says in his *Fayd al-Qadir*, "they will raise their voices with their tongues without contemplating and reflecting on its meaning and pondering over its rulings; instead it (the Qur'an) passes over their tongues as milk passes over them (tongues) quickly".^{lxvii} In his *Akhlaq hamalat al-Qur'an*, Al-Aagri remarked that "studying a small part of the Qur'an with careful reflection and due contemplation is better than reading large portions of it without such contemplation".^{lxviii}

Only when the Qur'an is read or listened to with understanding and reflection it is able move one's heart and affect one's deeds. The Prophet, his companions and the great *imams* of the four *mazhab* used to be moved by emotions when listening to the Qur'an. Suffice to mention are the following:

"'Abdullah ibn Mas'ud (may Allah be pleased with him) narrated: 'Allah's Messenger said to me, 'Recite (the Qur'an) to me,' I said: 'How shall I recite it to you while it was revealed to you?' He said, 'I like to hear it from others.' So I recited chapter four till I reached (what means): 'How then if We brought from each people a witness, and We brought thee as a witness against these people!'" (The Qur'an 4:41). So the Prophet (peace be upon him) cried until his tears flowed down his cheeks. "'^{lxix}

'Abdullah ibn Shaddad said, "I heard the sobbing of 'Umar from the last rows while he was reciting the verse from the Qur'an: "I only complain of my grief and sorrow to Allah" (The Qur'an 12:86). (Al-Bukhari).

Umar became ill as a result of his reciting the verse (*ayah*), "Verily, the Torment of your Lord will surely come to pass. There is none that can avert it." (The Qur'an 2:7-8).

On another occasion, 'Umar wept when he was reciting the Ayah, "I (Prophet Jacob) only complain of my grief and sorrow to God." [The Qur'an 12:86]^{lxx}

It is reported that Imam al-Shafi'i once listened to the recitation of the verse "On that day they shall not speak, nor shall it be permitted to make excuses" (The Qur'an 77:35-36). Thereafter his face changed, cried terribly and fell unconscious. After regaining consciousness he was heard repeating "O Lord,

through the grace of Thy countenance, forgive me my shortcomings."^{lxxi}

Al-Hasan al-Basri reports that early scholars used to reflect on the Qur'an in the night and embody it during day. It is understood from this that reflection on the Qur'an is a pre-requisite for its embodiment and that the best time for reflection on the Qur'an is when people are sleeping or when there is no noise.

In many verses of the Qur'an Allah mentions that His signs are only understood by '*ulama*', knowledgeable (sing. '*Alim*'); "those who use their reason," "who reflect". They are the ones who remember Allah in all conditions and circumstances.

"Behold! In the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the alternation of night and day,- there are indeed Signs for men of understanding. Men who celebrate the praises of Allah, standing, sitting, and lying down on their sides, and contemplate the (wonders of) creation in the heavens and the earth, (With the thought): 'Our Lord! not for naught Hast Thou created (all) this! Glory to Thee! Give us salvation from the penalty of the Fire.'" (The Qur'an 3: 90-91).

E. Observance of the Rules of Etiquette and Manners while Reading or Listening to the Qur'an

The Qur'an is the most revered Book. Before and during the recitation of the Qur'an Muslims are required to observe certain rules of etiquette and manners which include *taharah*, purification, facing the *Qiblah* (direction of the Ka'bah), *isti'adhah*, to seek Allah's protection against the accursed and rejected *shaytan* (Satan) and to observe silence.

Observance of silence while listening to the Qur'an is so vital because listening to the Qur'an means listening to Allah's Speech. While not every Muslim knows how to read the Qur'an, everyone has the opportunity to listen to it. The etiquette of listening to the Qur'an is to pay attention so that one receives Allah's mercy (The Qur'an 7: 204). Listening to the Qur'an relaxes the mind and makes better use of one's time.

F. Mastery of Arabic Language

Every civilization has its distinctive characteristics. One of the characteristics of Islamic civilization is Arabic language. It is mentioned that the French government was advised to tear the Algerians from Arabic language and the Qur'an in order to colonize them.

"We will never be able to overpower the Algerians as long as they read the Qur'an and speak Arabic. Therefore we must remove the

Arabic Qur'an from their midst and abolish the Arabic language from their tongues."^{lxxii}

Arabic makes the Qur'an distinct. When one examines the Qur'an carefully, one is "forced to conclude that its literally style is such that it could not have originated except from God..."^{lxxiii} Qur'an Arabic is unique, immutable and comprehensive. It is the only language many people are able to read correctly without understanding its meaning.

Understanding Qur'anic Arabic is a requirement that must be met by anyone who wants to achieve a higher level of understanding the Qur'an. This is because, although the Qur'an has been translated into many languages, "it is always recited or chanted in Arabic."^{lxxiv} Only when one recites the Qur'an in Arabic one is rewarded ten times per letter recited.^{lxxv}

Conclusion

In view of what has been expounded, it is clear that the Qur'an was revealed to transform individuals and societies; to deliver them from darkness and lead them towards light. However, it is important to note that effective transformation of one's life by the Qur'an requires two things, namely; understanding the Qur'an and acting upon its message. A true understanding the Qur'an requires: Firstly, reflection upon its meaning. Al-Hasan al-Basri reported that early scholars used to reflect on the Qur'an in the night and embody it during day. Here it is understood that reflection on the Qur'an is a pre-requisite for its embodiment and that the best time for reflection on the Qur'an is when people are sleeping or when there is no noise. Secondly, reading the *ayah* more than once. Qur'an is defined as a book that is repeatedly read. This implies that understanding the Qur'an requires repeated reading. It is true that the more one reads the Qur'an with reflection the more one understands it. Since the Qur'an is a book of guidance it has to be read daily for daily guidance. Understanding the Qur'an is essential and should therefore be an urgent priority in the Muslim endeavors. Elevation of early Muslims to a higher level of culture was due to their embodiment of the Qur'an. Their admirable qualities were the prime factor behind the expansion of Islam.

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ⁱ Israr Ahmad Khan, *Qur'anic Studies: An Introduction* (Kuala Lumpur: Zaman Islam Media, 2000), p. 24.

ⁱⁱ Vincent J. Cornell "Teaching and Learning in the Qur'an" in http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/ssr/issues/volume5/number3/ssr05_03_e02.html Retrieved on April 11, 2013. The Qur'an is a verbal noun of the Arabic verb qara'a which means "he read".

ⁱⁱⁱ Mustansir Mir, *Understanding the Islamic Scripture: A Study of Selected Passages from the Qur'an* (Pearson Education, Inc., 2008), p.1.

^{iv} The Qur'an is a criterion to judge between right from wrong.

^v Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. C. B. Macpherson, Penguin Books, London, USA, Australia etc., 1985, Chap. 13, p. 186.

^{vi} <http://www.islamanswers.net/crossroads/quran.htm> Retrieved on April 10, 2014.

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^{viii} Khurshid Ahmad and Zaki Ishaq Ansari (eds.), *Islamic Perspectives: Studies in the Honour of Mawlana Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdudi* (U.K.: The Islamic Foundation, 1979), p.105.

^{ix} The Prophet (peace be upon him) said in his address to his companions on the last day of Sha'ban: "O people! A great month has come; a blessed month in which is a night better than a thousand months; a month in which Allah has made it compulsory upon you to fast by day, and voluntary to pray by night. Whoever draws nearer (to Allah) by performing any of the (optional) good deeds in (this month), shall receive the same reward as performing an obligatory deed at any other time; and whoever performs an obligatory deed in (this month), shall receive the reward of performing seventy obligations at any other time. It is the month of patience, and the reward of patience is Paradise. It is the month of charity, and a month in which a believer's sustenance is increased. Whoever gives food to a fasting person to break his fast, shall have his sins forgiven, and he will be saved from the Hell-Fire, and he shall have the same reward as the fasting person, without his reward being diminished at all." (Reported by ibn Khuzaymah)

^x <http://muslimmatters.org/2008/09/06/reading-the-quran-in-ramadan/> Retrieved on November 2, 2011.

^{xi} Yakub Ahmed Patel, *Taqwa: The Core of Ramadan* (Chicago: Downtown Islamic Center, 1989), p.4.

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^{xv} Imam Ahmad, *Musnad*, 1/452, 391.

^{xvi} Shahid Athar, "Modern Stress and its Cure from Qur'an" in <http://www.quranicstudies.com/articles/quranic-psychology/modern-stress-and-its-cure-from-quran.html> Retrieved on April 19, 2011.

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^{xviii} Muslim, *Sahih*, Kitab salat al-Musafirin wa Qasiriha, Bab rajulun atahu Allahu malan....

^{xix} Nadwi, *Guidance from the Holy Qur'an*, p. 5.

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^{xxi} Hafiz Muhammad Adil's *Introduction to Qur'an* (Karachi: International Islamic Publishers Ltd., second edition, 1986), p. 23.

^{xxii} Muhammad Khan, "Rise and decline of Islamic Civilisation" in <http://www.whymuhammad.com/en/contents.aspx?aid=5326> Retrieved on July 28, 2011.

^{xxiii} Quoted in Muhammad Fazl-ur-Rahman Ansari's *The Qur'anic Foundations & Structure Society* (Karachi: Elite Publishers Ltd, vol.1, 2008), p. ix.

^{xxiv} Historians generally agree that Arabia before Islam was a primitive and disordered society. It was a society where immorality e.g. usury, female infanticide, exploitation of the poor, adultery and fornication were prevalent.

^{xxv} See Qur'an 3:103.

^{xxvi} <http://www.al-islam.org/restatement/3.htm> Retrieved on October 14, 2012.

^{xxvii} The meaning of the statement is not cannibalism. It simply refers to violation of the violation of people's honour; i.e. backbiting: "O ye who believe! Avoid suspicion as much (as possible): for suspicion in some cases is a sin: And spy not on each other behind their backs. Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? Nay, ye would abhor it. But fear Allah. For Allah is Oft-Returning, Most Merciful." (Qur'an 49: 12).

^{xxviii} Muhammad Zafrulla Khan, *Muhammad, Seal of the Prophets* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p.47.

^{xxix} Hanif (pl. Hunafa') is an Arabic term that refers to pre-Islamic non-Jewish or non-Christian Arabian monotheists.

^{xxx} Afzalur Rahman, *Islam: Ideology and the Way of Life*, p. 20.

^{xxxi} The Qur'anic message is addressed to the heart with the aim of reforming it.

^{xxxii} See Qur'an 91:1-10.

^{xxxiii} See Qur'an 62:2; 3:164 and 2:151.

^{xxxiv} All Messengers of Allah from Adam to Muhammad (peace be upon them) were commanded to establish the institution of salat. This is evident from numerous verses of the Qur'an: Ibrahim (14:37- 40); Ishaq and Ya'qub (21: 73); Musa (20:11-14); Zakariyya (3:39); Maryam, the mother of Prophet 'Isa (3:43); 'Isa (19:30-31).

^{xxxv} Muhammad Mahmud Al-Sawwaf, *The Muslim Book of Prayer* (n.d), p.15.

^{xxxvi} F.B. Artz, *The Mind of the Middle Ages* (The University of Chicago Press, third edition, 1980), p.140.]

^{xxxvii} The Prophet (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "*Salah* is the *Mi'raj* of the Believer."

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