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*Vicegerency in Islamic Thought and Scripture:
Towards a Qur'anic Theory of Human
Existential Function*

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This book by Chauki Lazhar, Assistant Professor in Islamic Sciences at Qatar University, is based on a thesis of Islamic Law and Theology defended in 2020 at University of Aberdeen. Through a theological lens, the author examines the concept of vicegerency and its use in contemporary Muslim thought in the light of the Qur'anic text, prophetic tradition and, to a lesser extent, classical religious literature. The theme is part of contemporary debates among Muslim scholars and intellectuals on the fragmentation of the Islamic sciences and their epistemological and methodological overhaul. The book is divided into six chapters, the first of which serves as an introduction. The chapters are more or less equal in length, with the exception of chapters 5 (58 pages) and 6 (69 pages), which add up to almost half the book.

The introduction (pp. 1-22) opens with a historical review of the crisis of contemporary Islamic thought in the context of modernity. Three main reasons for the decline of Islamic civilization and science are identified. Firstly, the fragmentation of the Islamic sciences which, even in the modern era, "had lost their connection with Revelation and reality" (p. 23), reproducing the rules already laid down by the medieval ulama without adding any value. In other words, a blind *taqlid* (imitation). The second reason was the crisis in the Islamic sciences, which the Tanzimat reforms exacerbated by reopening the "old wounds", namely the fragmentation of the Islamic sciences and the lack of epistemological and methodological renewal. The third reason is independence and the emergence of a multitude of nation-states from the 1960s onwards, one of the consequences of which was to further marginalize

the role of clerics in states that, unlike in the medieval and modern periods, no longer saw themselves as the "guardian and guarantor of world and religion" (p. 26).

In Chapter 2, *Islamic Worldview in the Context of Modern Reformism* (pp. 23-45), the author explains that the issues and changes that Muslims encountered during the medieval period were "atomistic or partial (*juz'ī*)" (p. 26) and required a low level of *ijtihād* based essentially on an extrapolation of the corpus of jurisprudence. Everything changes at the beginning of the contemporary era with the arrival of European modernity, which brought global issues and changes affecting models, systems, perceptions and postulates alike. The epistemological model of the traditional method was not adapted to these upheavals and, consequently, was deficient in meeting the challenges imposed by modernity. The ulama who tried to deal with certain issues using the traditional method did not, according to the author, perform an act of *ijtihād* in the holistic sense of the term but rather a procedure "of tinkering, concocting and accumulating that ultimately leads to an adaptation to reality in order to maintain a minimum level of religiosity" (p. 26).

This clash with modernity highlighted the main problem residing within the Islamic sciences, namely their fragmentation and lack of integration of knowledge and, ultimately, the inability of scholars to deal with the problems and challenges faced by Muslims through holistic approach. This sense of inability gave rise to the need for an Islamic worldview, which several intellectuals and ulama attempted to develop from the second half of the twentieth century onwards. One of the most serious attempts was the creation of the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) and the project for the Islamisation of knowledge by a group of intellectuals including Ismail al-Faruqi, Anwar Ibrahim and Taha Jabir al-Ulwani. Despite its originality and an approach that was intended to be innovative and ambitious the IIIT's approach had its limitations. The main one is that it attempted to develop a worldview in order to answer, with precision, contemporary questions that concerned the Muslim community, and not to deal with Islamic thought and science from within (p. 36). Yet, according to the author, the development of an Islamic worldview must necessarily have an internal basis founded on the Islamic corpus before it is then oriented outwards, i.e. in order to be able to provide answers to Muslims faced with the challenges of modernity (p. 37).

The presence of the concept of *khilāfa* in the classical corpus is the subject of chapter 3, *The Concept of Istikhlāf in Islamic Heritage* (p. 46-87).

Medieval ulama did not pay particular attention to the concept of *khilāfa* or *istikhlāf* (vicegerency) as an existential function and did not study it as an independent object. The term *khilāfa* was mainly used in reference to a political function and institution. The concept of *istikhlāf* as existential function of the human being is common in the classical Islamic heritage without having received significant theoretical attention, which explains why it has remained a vague concept. The few scholars who have given it more attention, such as al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī (d. 502/1108) and Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240), have done so within an epistemological framework that, according to the author, departs from the epistemology of Revelation. Others, like Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406), took a different approach. For the Maghrebian scholar, *al-istikhlāf* is an existential fact and not an existential task. Ibn Khaldūn treats the subject rather superficially and sparsely and does not establish a theory of *istikhlāf* as such. He refers to the term *istikhlāf* only when outlining his theses on human existence and civilisation (pp. 64-65).

Contemporary Muslim scholars have considered the concept of vicegerency in the name of God as having no origin either in the prophetic tradition or in the first three generations of Salafs. They consider it to be a religious innovation whose origins are found with Muḥammad Abduh and his disciple Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (pp. 50-51). The author refutes this view by highlighting the existence of a good number of sayings attributed to the Prophet, Companions and Successors on the subject of vice stewardship. Contemporary Muslim scholars and intellectuals have proposed a theorisation of the concept of vicegerency as an existential function, to which chapter 4, *Vicegerency as Existential Function in Contemporary Reformism* (p. 88-146), is devoted. In the author’s view, this theorisation breaks with classical thought and is explained by the fact that contemporaries have tried to root the concept of vicegerency in the Qur’an and Islamic theology, creating distortions and shortcuts which have hindered the development of a coherent theory. The author classifies the different conceptions of vicegerency in Islam developed by contemporary scholars and intellectuals into several categories: 1) building, populating and using the Earth’s resources (*‘imarāt al-ard*); 2) vicegerency and worship; 3) lordship and worship; 4) adherence to God’s will and orders and their implementation on Earth; 5) responsibility for Man’s choice; 6) manifestation of divine attributes and ethics on Earth.

Most intellectuals subscribe to the first conception reducing the concept of vicegerency,

as an existential function, to building, populating and using the Earth’s resources (*‘imārat al-ard*). This assumption is poorly established, according to the author, since it contradicts the Qur’anic text which suggests that the primary purpose of Man’s creation goes beyond the mere function of building and populating the Earth and using its resources. Qur’an 51:56 explicitly mentions that the reason for the creation of jinn and man is for the worship of God (p. 91). Other reasons exist and are explained by the author.

Apart from a reductive approach which does not take into consideration aspects of the Qur’anic text relating to the existential rights of man (p. 100), the major problem of studies which have dealt with the concept of vicegerency in the sense of the deputation of Man in the name of God is linked to the distortion at the level of theological and ontological roots. These studies maintain that Man is a vicegerent of God to use the resources of the Earth, to take care of it, to profit from it or to dominate it. However, the Earth and its laws exist at God’s command and do not need man’s work; a human being cannot therefore act as God’s vicegerent in this area. On the other hand, the construction, settlement and use of the Earth cannot be considered an act of vicegerency. Did God use the Earth’s resources and take advantage of its riches so that Man could be his vicegerent in this? This is one of the many aspects of the distortion and confusion in the rootedness of the concept of vicegerency, as the author explains in detail later in his study. If the meaning of *istikhlāf* on behalf of God had been ontologically and theologically controlled, it would have been impossible to argue that Man is God’s vicegerent in this sense (pp. 100-101).

In addition, contemporary literature is responsible for the emergence of new ideas that were not discussed by the medieval ulama. These include the division of vicegerency into two types (one Islamic and one cosmic), and the consideration of the concept of vicegerency in relation to man’s responsibility for his power of choice (p. 113). The main problem with these different theorizations is that the concept of vicegerency is not “ontologically rooted” and often incorporates everything that is considered Islamic, making the concept ultimately too ambiguous. The concept is often treated in the light of isolated Qur’anic verses presenting the author’s positions, without a clear methodology.

It is evident from the author’s view that such works are primarily set in the context of the search for an Islamic alternative to the Western materialistic view of human civilization, as emphasized by the title of many of the studies reviewed. By comparing what

they consider to be an Islamic view of civilization and its equivalent, modern Muslim scholars attempt to justify the superiority of the former over the latter. This explains, according to the author, why the majority of contemporary intellectuals and scholars have concentrated on the material aspect and reduced vicegerency to the concept of building and settling the land and using its resources, all sprinkled with a few spiritual and religious elements.

In Chapter 5 *The Object of Vicegerency. Identifying Human Existential Function* (pp. 147-193), the author sets out to fill the gaps in the work he has presented, which have prevented him from developing a coherent theory of the concept of vicegerency. To this end, he proposes to follow a methodology that respects eight criteria that can be used to propose a theorization of the concept on an ontological-theological basis (p. 148). But before any attempt at theorization, the author insists, the first condition for identifying the object of vicegerency is its identification "on sound and holistic Qur'anic deductions and on a consistent correlation between the object of vicegerency and the issue of deputisation (*khilāfa*)" (p. 155).

From the analysis and comparison of various Qur'anic verses, the author deduces that the idea of *khilāfa*, as defended by several researchers, is flawed. Rather, an examination of the Qur'anic text indicates that *khilāfa* is an ethical mission as shown by verse 2:30, in which God showed the angels the qualities of Man that characterize him as a *khalīfa* and make him superior to them. These qualities include the linguistic faculties that God granted to Adam after his creation by teaching him "all the names", as the Qur'an 2:30 makes clear; human beings know things, can name them and act on them. This faculty, which specifically characterizes Man and which the angels do not possess - as the rest of the verse suggests - is the argument given by God to the angels to demonstrate the aptitude and suitability of the human being for vicegerency (p. 224). Malek Bennabi had already drawn attention to this scene described in the verse, which he described symbolically as "the first essential act of the human spirit mastering things by giving them names"⁽¹⁾.

The succession of generations is not specific to humans and existed long before the creation of Man with other creatures. This succession does not require the summoning of angels according to the Qur'anic tradition. In short, reproduction and succession in different generations is a cosmic fact (p. 156-157). This cosmic phenomenon of succession through

the sequence of generations is not a function, unlike *khilāfa* (deputization on behalf of God). The fact that God has given Man the title of *khalīfa* indicates that *khilāfa* is far more important than the reproduction of a species and its succession in generations (p. 160).

The analysis of the Qur'anic verses and their confrontation leads the author to say that the key point here is that the object of vicegerency is not something exogenous that the human being introduces into the universe. Rather, it is something through which the human being joins cosmic harmony. The primary function of the human being and the universe is the same, namely worship; the goal of the human being and the universe are also the same, namely cosmic Islam; the overall means by which the human being and the universe accomplish their respective goals are the same, namely divine guidance (p. 172). All this leads the author to say that vicegerency is the particular worship of the human being. In other words, vicegerency is what Man must adhere to in order to join cosmic Islam (p. 173).

According to the author, an analysis of several verses that raise the issue of vicegerency, notably Qur'an 2:30 and 1-13:55, highlight a clear link between Revelation, the cosmic order and human nature (*fiṭra*). Of thirty-two suras that open with a reference to Revelation, eighteen combine mention of Revelation and the universe and its cosmic order, with occasional mention of man and his *fiṭra* (natural disposition). For the rest of the suras opening with mention of Revelation, the author notes that they combine both Revelation and the conditions of people, except for one sura. Twenty-five suras begin by talking about the universe, its cosmic order and/or the creation of Man and his *fiṭra* (p. 178). In concluding this chapter, the author conceives vice stewardship as the harmony that God has placed in the universe which is cosmic Islam. The aim of vicegerency is not to create this harmony but rather to maintain it. Revelation is one of the means by which man can maintain cosmic balance (p. 178-179).

The sixth and final chapter, *Vicegerency in the Qur'anic Worldview* (pp. 194-262), is the longest in the book. At the beginning of the chapter, the author highlights the two problematic points common to contemporary works that have approached the existential function of the human being from an Islamic point of view: 1) the use of certain verses to the exclusion of others; 2) the absence of any indication of the respective function in the verses cited. Both problems are attributed to the inability to integrate the concepts articulated by these verses into a conceptual framework capable of encompassing them and assigning them their proper

(1) Malek Bennabi, *Le problème de la culture*, Tawhid, Paris/Lyon, 2016, p. 54.

place in order to distinguish between the essence of the human function and its purposes, fruits, means, characteristics, etc. In other words, it is problematic to consider the existential function of the human being through isolated, fragmented verses, taken out of context, and not through a global vision of the world. For the author, establishing a link between these concepts can enable a holistic approach that goes beyond contemporary fragmented approaches.

In this chapter, the author attempts to enumerate the reasons for the creation of the human being, the advent of Revelation and the creation of the universe as mentioned in the Qur'an, and to place each of these reasons in its proper place in terms of its link with Man's delegation on behalf of God in maintaining the balance.

After reading the Qur'an "verse by verse" (p. 197), the author lists the most important Islamic concepts concerning vice stewardship that the Qur'anic text establishes as rational or presents as reasons explaining the existence of Revelation, the universe and its cosmic order, and human beings. Four types of reasons emerge from the analysis of the Qur'anic text: those explaining the coming of the messengers; the creation of the human being; the creation of Man with his specific forms and structures; the creation, organization, subjugation and adoration of the universe (reasons also related to the human being) (p. 198-200).

The second section of the chapter is devoted to an examination, again in light of the Qur'anic text, of the aspects of cosmic balance that human beings have been charged with maintaining and which form part of the existential function for which they were created. An analysis of the Qur'anic text shows that vicegerency involves three aspects for maintaining cosmic equilibrium: spiritual equilibrium, social equilibrium and environmental equilibrium (p. 247). The author defines the vicegerency that God entrusts to human beings as acting on His behalf in striving to preserve the balance that God has established in the human soul, in society and in this natural environment, and in striving to restore any deficiencies that affect it. The author's examination of the Qur'anic text, which is intended to be holistic, shows that vicegerency in the name of God is the external function for which man was created and established on Earth and for which Revelation was sent to him. This function is in accordance with the natural disposition (*fiṭra*) found in Man, and it is through its fulfillment that he can join cosmic Islam.

Despite its normal size, the book is dense and very erudite, with endnotes that are sometimes very long (extending over several pages) but prove

indispensable for clarifying the author's statements in the body of the text. A bibliography appears at the end of each chapter. There is no doubt that the author has an excellent command of the classical and contemporary Islamic corpus and a profound knowledge of the thought of numerous and complex authors from various schools and currents. These include al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī (d. 502/1108), Ibn 'Arabī (d. 638/1240), Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406); Muḥammad 'Abduh (d. 1905), Muḥammad Rashid Ridā (d. 1935), 'Abd al-Ḥamīd b. Bādīs (d. 1940), Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1966), Malek Bennabi (d. 1973), Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988) or Muḥammad Ṭāhir b. 'Ashūr (d. 1973). The list goes on and on. Western historiography is not to be outdone, and the author mobilizes it and puts it into perspective with the theme studied on numerous occasions. The author's concern to take as holistic an approach as possible to the concept of *istikhlāf* is palpable throughout the text, particularly in the methodology applied but also confirmed by the large corpus used for this study.

Behind the concept of viceregency which is at the heart of the work, another equally important concept emerges from this study, namely that of cosmic Islam. Authors such as al-Mawdūdī (d. 1979) and Malek Bennabi (d. 1973) have already raised, briefly, the question of cosmic order in Islam⁽²⁾ or Qur'anic cosmogony.⁽³⁾ He ends his book by presenting religion "as a cosmic phenomenon governing human thought and civilization, just as gravitation governs matter and conditions its evolution".⁽⁴⁾

In his book, Chauki Lazhar proposes a theological-ontological orientation toward the concept of cosmic Islam, which is the contribution of each element to the unity and harmony of the cosmic order through the fulfilment of its existential function. Islam is not limited to humans and Revelation. Revelation is merely the scriptural aspect of a cosmic Islam that encompasses the entire universe. Moreover, Revelation enjoins human beings to join this cosmic Islam, as an analysis of several Qur'anic verses shows, as demonstrated by the author. Man, as a creature, has the same objective as all other creatures, namely the worship of a single God, the Creator of the universe. According to the author, Revelation came with the same guidance of

(2) Abū al-A'ḷā al-Mawdūdī, "Comprendre l'islam", *Africa for publishing and distribution*, 1973, Accra, p. 10-11.

(3) Malek Bennabi, *Le phénomène coranique*, Tawhid, Paris/Lyon, 2016, p. 168.

(4) Malek Bennabi, *Le phénomène coranique*, Tawhid, Paris/Lyon, 2016, p. 265.

Truth with which God created the universe, and it is the tool, as it were, for human beings to enable them to join cosmic Islam.

The author also roots his conceptualization of cosmic Islam linguistically from the triliteral root (*s-l-m*) whose meanings include surrender/submission (*istislām*), integrity (*salāma*) and peace (*salām*). These meanings are found both in cosmic Islam and in the Islamic religion as a human responsibility stemming from scriptural revelation. Surrender/submission to God (*istislām*) is intended to preserve the integrity (*salāma*) of the human being in his natural disposition (*fiṭra*), which in turn leads to the preservation of peace (*salām*), on the one hand, between the human being and his soul and, on the other hand, between the human being and his environment. This also applies to the universe: the surrender/submission of creatures to God's will guarantees their integrity, which leads to peace and harmony between all the creatures of the universe, i.e. the harmony of the universal order. This is the meaning worship as carried out by the universe itself (p. 172).

Interesting is the questioning of certain interpretations of Qur'an 2:30, in particular that of the settlement of the Earth by the jinn before the creation of Man. According to the author, there is nothing in Qur'an 2:30 or even in prophetic tradition to support such an assertion. Probably this is an influence of the narratives called *al-Isrā'iliyyāt* (p. 47, note 1 p. 73). The author thus joins the opinions of Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā and Muḥammad Ṭāhir b. 'Ashūr who considered this narrative contrary to the context of Qur'an 2:30 and an influence of Persian and Greek mythology (p. 160; note 38 p. 183). The author refers to "animals" or creatures that lived on Earth before man and caused greater destruction than man (p. 157). We would have liked the author to develop this point further and to cite sources.

This book is undeniably the first to study the Islamic concept of vicegerency in the light of the Qur'anic text, with a history of the issue, a review

of the state of the art and the author's proposed theories. It claims to be the first to focus on the role of the existential human function in the epistemological and methodological reform of the Islamic sciences and contemporary Islamic production. The book is part of a broader need, according to the author, in the field of Islamic studies. It aims to link contemporary religious and ethical reasoning and Islamic sciences to a global vision of the Qur'anic world in which studies can function to overcome fragmentation and atomistic approaches to the Qur'anic text.

The considerable mass of theological-historical information, coupled with the technical nature of the subject matter, can make some passages prolix. More diagrams, such as the one on p. 247 illustrating the relationship between the Islamic concepts linked to that of vice stewardship, would be welcome and would give the non-specialist reader a more concrete idea of the theories presented and discussed. In terms of form, it is true that the notes, especially the very long and extensive ones, located at the end of each chapter may hinder reading and cause the reader to lose track when he or she has to return to the body of the text.

Undoubtedly, this work will be a landmark and is becoming the reference to date on the subject of the concept of *al-istikhḷāf* in classical and contemporary Muslim thought. In addition to its substantial scholarly contribution, *Vicegerency in Islamic Thought and Scripture* participates in debates within contemporary Islam that seek to reinterpret and recast Islamic sciences and *ijtihād* in our time.

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