

# **SHARING WISDOM**

## **A MUSLIM PERSPECTIVE**

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### **WHAT IS WISDOM?**

How does the Islamic tradition conceive of wisdom? Are there different kinds or modalities of wisdom? Is it possible to share any or all of this wisdom with others? Why would or should Muslims be interested in doing this? How should they? These questions, like all questions in the realm of Islamic spirituality, practice, and religious thought, lead to a living encounter between the historical, political, and even existential forces that shape us, on the one hand, and an ancient, Arabic text, on the other, a “book” that is believed to be timeless in its relevance and authority for life. This paper will seek to be conscious of both sides of this encounter as it explores these questions and their implications for Muslims and their religious cousins and neighbors.

Turning then first to the Qur’ān, the “book” believed to be the collected recitations of the angel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad some 1400 years ago, the text that serves as the fountainhead for all traditional Islamic knowledge and guidance, we begin.

And do not take the signs of God in a frivolous spirit; and remember the blessings with which God has graced you and all that he has revealed to you of the Book and the wisdom in order to instruct and admonish you thereby; and remain conscious of God and know that God has full knowledge of everything.

In the Arabic of the Qur'ān, Wisdom (ḥikmah) is expressed in the trilateral root Ḥ + K + M ( ح + ك + م ), a three letter equation that carries a range of meanings, from a kind of supra-sensible and super-rational knowing to more pragmatic notions of discernment, judgment, governance, and right living. As a concept, or collection of interrelated concepts, Wisdom cannot be conceived apart from God and revelation (indeed, Wisdom is rarely mentioned in the Qur'ān apart from revelation,<sup>1</sup> and the Qur'ān itself is described as the "Wise Book"<sup>2</sup>) and these essential associations bring Wisdom into close contact with other terms that relate to the revelation, terms such as knowledge,<sup>3</sup> guidance, discernment, and light.

Insofar as Wisdom itself is one of God's attributes or qualities, it is understood to be connected intimately to the Divine Essence, which is eternally beyond (akbar) all natural human understanding. Wisdom, then, like knowledge and the other Divine qualities, cannot ever be naturally "acquired" or "possessed" by a human being. It can be, however, imparted by God upon a person, just as the Qur'ān describes God's bestowal of wisdom upon Lot,<sup>4</sup> Luqmān,<sup>5</sup> David,<sup>6</sup> Jesus,<sup>7</sup> John,<sup>8</sup> and others to whom God wills to give it.<sup>9</sup> In the form of revelation, Wisdom can also be said to be imparted upon whole communities, although the Qur'ān frequently reminds its readers that most people do not recognize the Truth laid before them and turn away...<sup>10</sup> The ones who do recognize it and do not turn away are the elect few, referred to in the Qur'ān by such descriptions as "those who are endowed with insight"<sup>11</sup> (ulū 'l-albāb), "those endowed with knowledge" (ulū 'l-'ilm), and "the well-grounded in knowledge"<sup>12</sup> (al-rāsikhūna fī'l-'ilm). These, then, would be the ones who recognize and reshape their lives around the Wisdom bestowed upon them, while others may have the book but no share in the Wisdom it offers.

He is the God (Allāh), the Creator, the Maker, the Fashioner. To Him belong the Most Beautiful Names; everything in the heavens and on the earth proclaims His glory, and He is the Mighty, the Wise. (59:24)

*Question 1:*

*Is there a wisdom outside of God that we can appreciate or is all wisdom an expression of the divine?*

From God's perspective, then, the sharing of Wisdom is not a sharing between equals, each having a wisdom to share with the other; rather, it is the sharing between an all-knowing, all-powerful, solitary possessor of knowledge and Wisdom<sup>13</sup> and a servant who has nothing to offer in return save his or her self. Individually, this one-way "sharing" of the Divine quality or attribute is believed to be possible when the servant struggles to make his or her way out of the trappings of self-delusion (self-importance, independence, pride, judgment, etc.) and shed all his/her ungodly attributes (ultimately even shedding personal will). As the heart gradually empties of these impediments, it is said to grow in its purified desire for true Wisdom and Knowledge and so embody the Qur'anic supplication, "My Lord! Increase me in knowledge!"

The nearer the servant comes, the more God is said to love him or her, and – in the context of that love – the more transformed the servant becomes. Some have called this transformation the "exchanging of attributes" or qualities, and so Wisdom does not come alone as a separate grace or charisma but comes rather as part of a larger host of qualities and virtues that come to perfect the soul and restore her to her original and true nature, which the Qur'ān describes as being the very best form or constitution ("fi aḥṣani taqwīm")<sup>14</sup> – which stands above even that of the angels.<sup>15</sup>

There are many Qur'ānic passages and Prophetic traditions that speak of the love and transformation God bestows upon individuals, including the prophets. In sūra(t) Ṭā Hā (20), we see God speaking directly to the baby Moses,

I have cast over you [the garment of] love from Me in order that you may be reared under My eye... (20:39)

Here God's love is given to the baby Moses, who is assured of God's protection, care, and guidance as he grows. Nothing of course is required in response to this gift, but that seems to change when the address is directed toward adults. In sūra(t) āl-'Imrān / the family of 'Imrān (3), we see the adult Prophet Muhammad addressed with a command to proclaim a different love equation:

Say: 'If you love God, then follow me. God will love you and forgive your sins.' For God is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful. (3:31)

Here, we see the promise of God's love and forgiveness in response to the individual's love and obedience. The transformative implications of this love are, however, left unaddressed and so wait for another revealed word to be explained.

In one of the sacred traditions (ahādīth qudsīyah), the extra-Qur'ānic theopathic sayings through which God is believed to have spoken directly to the people through the Prophet Muhammad, we read

Whoever shows enmity to someone devoted to me, I shall be at war with him. My servant does not draw nigh unto me by anything more beloved to Me than that which I have enjoined upon him [i.e., the religious duties], and My servant continues to draw nigh unto Me by [performing] superogatory acts [of devotion] so that I [come to] love

him. And, when I love him, I am his hearing by which he hears, his sight by which he sees, his hand by which he strikes, and his leg by which he walks. Were he to ask Me [for something], surely I would give it to him; were he to ask Me for refuge, surely I would grant it...

Here again we see love and devotion expressed in the form of obedience, and God's promise of love, protection, and transformation in return. Such texts, taken together with the notion of the soul's perfection in the Divine qualities, seem to suggest a mysterious identification of the soul with or within God. While traditional Muslim scholars and sages, such as Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111 CE), have piously maintained that there must always be a formal distinction between Creator and creature and have thus cautioned Muslims to understand that they will only ever be able to acquire something resembling God's attributes (not the Divine attributes as they truly are in relation to the Divine),<sup>13</sup> there is no doubt that the psycho-spiritual process of coming into one's full nature – as a human being – mysteriously involves the taking on of God's qualities: the Merciful, the Wise, the Compassionate, the Clement, the Forgiving, the Knowing, the Living, the Powerful, the Forbearing, the Subtle, etc.<sup>16</sup> In this way, the tradition says the heart becomes a polished mirror in which the Divine qualities are reflected rather than an independent possessor of the Divine qualities.

To this end, we find a number Muslim spiritual sages, including al-Ghazālī, citing an unconfirmed tradition in which the Prophet is reported to have coached his companions to "put on the qualities of God Most High." In a more widely accepted tradition, the Prophet is reported to have said, "God has ninety-nine attributes, i.e., one hundred less one; whosoever believes in them and acts accordingly will enter the Garden."<sup>17</sup>

*Question 2:*

*How are love and wisdom related? How does this find expression in your tradition? What are its practical expressions?*

To sum up our findings thus far, then, Wisdom is Qur'ānically understood to be a Divine quality in which humans can share, on account of God's love and mercy and in accord with the mystery of God's design and decree. The possibility that it can be bestowed upon a person or that each human being has a potential share in this Divine aspect does not help us define what it is, however. So we come back, full-circle, to the basic question: how exactly does the Islamic tradition describe this quality or attribute, to the extent that it can be described or, at least, pointed to?

### **Knowledge and Wisdom**

The Qur'ānic sense of the term seems to span between practical advice for living, on the one hand, and esoteric knowledge, on the other. In both cases it seems to indicate the way we live in relation to knowledge or Truth. In the sūrah devoted to the discourses of the wise prophet Luqmān, we read the advice to avoid associating anyone or anything with God, to be respectful of one's parents, to keep up a life of prayer and patience, and to walk humbly through life.<sup>18</sup> Here Wisdom seems to be the practical extension or application of knowledge – not knowledge in the sense of information or discursive, deliberative knowledge, but God's "knowledge of the unseen [aspects] of the heavens,"<sup>19</sup> a knowledge that is secret, esoteric, and beyond conventional rational processes. This is the knowledge bestowed upon Adam but barred from the angels, the knowledge of "the names" or true essences of things.<sup>20</sup> This is also the knowledge that penetrates into the hidden meanings that underlie the seemingly random and perplexing events of life.

In another passage, making reference to a special kind of knowledge (ilm) that comes from the "presence of" or "proximity to" God, the Qur'ān offers a parable that helps us better grasp what this knowledge may be. This story finds the prophet Moses and a young servant pursuing an elusive fish. As they do so, they run into a most enigmatic person, described simply as "one of Our servants to whom We had given a Mercy from Ourselves and whom We had taught a [special] knowledge from Our own presence." Moses recognizes the profound knowledge in this person and asks him to teach him something of what he knows:

So they found one of Our servants, on whom We had bestowed Mercy from Ourselves and whom We had taught knowledge from Our own Presence.

Moses said to him: "May I follow thee, on the footing that thou teach me something of the (Higher) Truth which thou hast been taught?"

[Our servant] said: "Verily thou wilt not be able to have patience with me!"

"And how canst thou have patience about things about which thy understanding is not complete?"

Moses said: "Thou wilt find me, God willing, (truly) patient: nor shall I disobey thee in aught."

The other said: "If then thou wouldst follow me, ask me no questions about anything until I myself speak to thee concerning it."

So they both proceeded: until, when they were in the boat, he scuttled it. Said Moses: "Hast thou scuttled it in order to drown those in it? Truly a strange thing hast thou done!"

He answered: "Did I not tell thee that thou canst have no patience with me?"

Moses said: "Rebuke me not for forgetting, nor grieve me by raising difficulties in my case."

Then they proceeded until, when they met a young man, he slew him.

Moses said: "Hast thou slain an innocent person who had slain none?"

Truly a foul (unheard of) thing hast thou done!"

He answered: "Did I not tell thee that thou canst have no patience with me?"

(Moses) said: "If ever I ask thee about anything after this, keep me not in thy company: then wouldst thou have received (full) excuse from my side."

Then they proceeded: until, when they came to the inhabitants of a town, they asked them for food, but they refused them hospitality. They found there a wall on the point of falling down, but he set it up straight.

(Moses) said: "If thou hadst wished, surely thou couldst have exacted some recompense for it!"

He answered: "This is the parting between me and thee: now will I tell thee the interpretation (al-ta'wīl) of those matters over which you were unable to hold patience.

"As for the boat, it belonged to certain men in dire want: they plied on the water: I but wished to render it unserviceable, for there was after them a certain king who seized on every boat by force.

"As for the youth, his parents were people of faith, and we feared that he would grieve them by obstinate rebellion and ingratitude.

"So we desired that their Lord would give them in exchange (a son) better in purity and closer in affection.

"As for the wall, it belonged to two youths, orphans, in the town; there was, beneath it, a buried treasure, to which they were entitled: their father had been a righteous man: So thy Lord desired that they should attain their age of full strength and get out their treasure - a mercy from

thy Lord. I did it not of my own accord. Such is the interpretation of (those things) over which you were unable to hold patience.”

Surah of the Cave / al-Kahf 18:65-82

One of the lessons learned here is that there is always more involved in human affairs than meets the eye, and only God understands the full picture. Conventional knowledge or wisdom fails when it tries to judge events and situations by its own standards, and patience (al-ṣabr), which in Arabic involves a sense of self-restraint, becomes an essential virtue for transcending the limitations of human knowing and for opening up a space in which Divine knowledge can be imparted. This patience must be accompanied by a disposition of humility, more specifically an epistemological humility, which is understood here and in other passages to be an essential characteristic of the wise person. Indeed, if we read this story in the spirit of sūra(t) Luqmān (31), Wisdom here is manifest in the twin virtues of patience and humility.

So, in the parable, Moses – the great prophet who spoke with God directly, who stood against Pharaoh, led the Israelites out of Egypt, and brought forth the Torah – assumes the position of a humble disciple when providence brings him into contact with a person of greater knowledge. True knowledge, then, makes the practical virtues its prerequisites; humility, self-restraint, and patience, along with moral rectitude and the other qualities of the virtuous believer, lead to gnosis. And, even when – like Moses – the virtuous believer fails in those virtues, a flashing of gnosis may be still given, and this gives rise to wisdom.

*Question 3:*

*What is the role of epistemological humility in acquiring wisdom? How can it be applied to relations between religions?*

So we see the interdependence of Truth and Wisdom, of coming to know and being wise. Within the human heart, wisdom seems to include the transformation of one's intellectual and attitudinal disposition after having witnessed Truth, just as we are left to assume that Moses' disposition was radically transformed after this encounter. In other words, embodied, living wisdom comes as a result of witnessing, and this "witnessing" often comes through a personally destabilizing experience. This destabilization of worldview (and the wisdom that comes after) may be one of the secret reasons why getting to know people of other faiths and ethnicities is, as we will see, nothing less than a Divine imperative clearly voiced in the Qur'ān.

*Question 4:*

*What is the relationship between wisdom and the witnessing of truth?*

## **WHY SHARE WISDOM?**

*In particular, why should Muslims seek to "share" or seek wisdom in this way? What are some of the obstacles to sharing? What are the benefits?*

In the Qur'ānic accounts of Luqmān and Moses, we see the importance of both teaching and receiving wisdom. The experience of Truth makes teaching and modeling wisdom imperative, and the call to epistemological humility in the face of the grandeur of Truth makes being humble, patient, and open to instruction equally imperative. The fact that Muslims believe that both Wisdom and Truth have been given to them – through the dispensation of the Qur'ān and the recording of the Prophet Muhammad's words and deeds – does not exempt them from being humble and open to instruction any more than being a prophet exempted Moses from being humble and open to instruction. All Muslims are called to seek Truth, which is a quality of God and thus ever beyond one's current grasp, no matter how brilliant. All Muslims

are called to be seekers of Wisdom, which is similarly a quality of God Most High and is thus infinitely within and beyond our reach.

Building upon this interdependence of Truth and Wisdom, the keys to the esoteric, Divine knowledge are said to be found in the identification and deciphering of God's signs (āyāt), which are everywhere: in the natural world, in history and the events of our times, in ourselves, and in the sacred texts revealed to humankind throughout history. The Islamic concept of scripture, then, is expansive and all-encompassing, and so the door is left wide open for Muslims to seek God's signs everywhere, even within religious texts and traditions that are foreign to us.

In sūra(t) āl-'Imrān / the family of 'Imrān (3), we read:

Say: "We believe in God, and in what has been revealed to us and what has been revealed to Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the Tribes, and in that which was bestowed upon Moses, and Jesus, and the Prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between anyone among them, and to [God] we surrender." (3:84)

Far from claiming exclusive access to Divine Truth and Wisdom, the Qur'ān celebrates the fact that God, in His mercy benevolence for humankind, has broadcast the message all over the world from the time of Adam on. Indeed, the Qur'ān goes so far as to say that every nation has been sent a messenger.<sup>21</sup> And no message is believed to be complete or exhaustive, for all revelations emanate from a "protected tablet" or "mother book" that resides with God.<sup>22</sup> Even as it proclaims the universal reach of the message in various languages and forms, the Qur'ān also bemoans the fact that humans have repeatedly ignored, resisted, and opposed the teachings of God's messengers; even within the ranks of the believers, it warns that many have turned around and "sold" the priceless signs of God for a miserable gain in the world. For our discussion, the positive side of this oft-repeated Qur'ānic/Biblical story is that God's Truth and Wisdom are believed to be

present within the extant remains of the innumerable prophetic dispensations, both oral and written, that have touched every part of the globe.

The most familiar and recurring examples of these authentic teachings can be found in Qur'ānic references to the Torah and the Gospels. For example, in sūra(t) āl `imrān / the family of `Imrān (3), the Qur'ān says of Jesus:

And [God] will teach him the Book and the Wisdom and the Law ("al-taurāh" or Torah) and [make him] a messenger to the Children of Israel...3: 48-49

Also, in sūra(t) al-mā'idah / the table (5), the Qur'ān says,

It was We who revealed the Torah; therein is guidance and light, and by it the Prophets, who surrendered [to God], and the Rabbis made judgments for the Jews...

And in their footsteps We sent Jesus the son of Mary, confirming the Law (Torah) that came before him, and We gave him the Gospel, in which [is] guidance and light and confirmation of the Torah before it, a guidance and an admonition to those who are conscious of God. 5:46

*Question 5:*

*Can we recognize a common core in the wisdom teaching of all traditions?*

We find many passages attributing guidance and light and wisdom to the Gospels and the Torah. While a long-standing discussion continues among Muslim scholars over which portions of the existing Torah and Gospels are authentic and which portions show signs of alteration or tampering

(tahrīf), there can be no overturning the Qur'ānic insistence that these books contain a guidance and a light that endure, and, by extension, so do all of the existing teachings left from God's prophets, who are believed to have been dispersed among the various nations and throughout unnumbered historical periods. The core of what they left behind, according to the Qur'ān, is a belief in God and the last day and a call to upright living, and those who hold fast to the essentials of their message are included among the blessed, the saved:

Whosoever surrenders himself to God and is [also] a doer of good, he has his reward with his Lord. [On such people] no fear overshadows them, nor shall they come to grief. 2:112.

*Question 6:*

*What strategies or sources within your tradition could be used to legitimate recognizing wisdom in the teachings of other religions?*

To boil it down to a simple question, then, we pose: can truth and wisdom be sought in other religious texts, traditions, and cultures? The simple Qur'ānic answer seems to be clear.

In this spirit, then, we can note many Muslim intellectuals and wisdom-seekers throughout the centuries, scholars and seekers who made the study of other religions and cultures the defining work of their lives. One of most celebrated of these was the 12th century theologian, historian of religious ideas, independent thinker, and theosopher, Muhammad Al-Shahrastānī (Tāj al-Dīn Abū'l-Fath Muhammad ibn `Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī, d. AH 548 or 1153 CE), who wrote a massive book on the different religious communities and sects known in his day, including all the various intellectual and doctrinal divisions within Islam up to his time. Known in English as The Book of

Religious and Philosophical Sects,<sup>23</sup> this fascinating text marks an attempt to document and describe, without any detectable bias, condescension, or disrespect of any kind, the religious diversity of humankind. Written many centuries before the rise of Religious Studies as an academic field in the West, his work may just be the very first attempt to undertake the scientific study of religion. More, his work marks a genuine desire to study and learn from religious experiences and histories that were outside of his experience.

In the quest of pursuing God's signs, it can be argued that we too should seek truth and wisdom anywhere and everywhere, including in the perplexing mystery of our religious and ethnic diversity. In sūra(t) al-mā'idah, a chapter that stresses the presence of Guidance and Light within the scriptures of the Torah and the Gospel traditions, the Qur'ān states quite clearly that religious diversity and constructive, mutual striving are part of the Divine plan. In āyah 48, following a description of how the Qur'ān confirms the scriptures that came before, we read,

For each [community] have We made a Law (shir'ah) and a Way (minhāj); if God had so willed, He could have made you a single community (ummah), but [He did not] in order that He might test you in what He has given you. Therefore, race with one another [to do] good works. To God is the return of all of you, and He will make known to you [the truth] of those matters in which you differ.

In this day, dogged as it is with the darkneses of ignorance, prejudice, ethnic cleansing, genocide, terror, and other forms of needless violence and injustice, there can be no doubt that coming to know one another in order to promote healthy coexistence and constructive collaboration for good causes can certainly be counted among the good works intended here, for they are powerful antidotes to the chronic cancers of tumult and oppression in human affairs. More, the Qur'ān seems to allow for some sense of team spirit and

competition in the “race” to do good works, an allowance that seems to speak to an important aspect of our human nature.

If further proof or justification is needed to make a case for a hidden Divine purpose in learning about one another and sharing wisdom across traditions, we need only look again to the Qur’ān, this time to sūra(t) al-hujurāt / the chambers (49):

O people! Surely We have created you male and female and have made you [various] nations and tribes in order that you might come to know one another. Indeed, in God’s view, the most honorable of you is the most pious. Verily God is Knowing, Expertly Acquainted [with all you do].

From a Qur’ānic perspective, then, both coming to know one another and mutually striving to do good works are clearly part of God’s master plan for humanity. The task of getting to know one another comes very close to our contemporary understanding of intercultural and interfaith dialogue, and so – as a Muslim and life-long student of the Islamic tradition – I see dialogue as nothing less than a religious duty, which deepens and enhances my personal piety rather than polluting or diluting it. Racing to perform good works, particularly within a context of being tested with what God has given us, seems to be a broader, more general command that almost certainly encompasses the mutual sharing of the bounties God has bestowed upon us.

Quite apart from God’s “sharing” His Wisdom and other Divine qualities with us, this inter-religious or inter-ummah sharing implies a sense of equality, a sense that that each community has been given something of value to share. If done correctly, this should engender a spirit of mutual appreciation whereby by we can marvel at the various treasures of insight and wisdom bestowed upon the individual communities, even as we gain valuable insights into what we share in common.

## Examples of Sharing in Islamic History

As students of Islamic history, we know that one of the chief geniuses of Islamic Civilization was its willingness to learn from the Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and other communities living within the rapidly expanding Islamic empire. First, they had practical things to learn. Of course, the Arabs, coming out of the Arabian peninsula, knew little about running a vast empire, and so they turned to the Persian and Greek bureaucracies of the Sassanian and Byzantine empires to educate them. Along the way, as they learned about numismatics, taxation, irrigation, land management, city planning, and a thousand other things hitherto unknown, they also learned how to engineer expansive, dome-roofed buildings and high towers, the two quintessential elements of the emerging mosque standard, and they became enamored with tile manufacturing and a variety of “new” crafts. They also began collecting and translating the medical, astronomical, mathematical, botanical, philosophical lore of the ancient world, and this “new” knowledge empowered them to develop scientific academies and to advance human knowledge beyond any level humanity had ever seen. All this was because they were willing – no, wanting – to receive knowledge from other civilizations and communities.

The Muslims also realized that their non-Muslim counterparts had more profound kinds of knowledge to offer them. Even within the sensitive field of religious knowledge, we find a willingness to receive and learn from the Christians and the Jews. Indeed, an entire branch of Qur’ānic exegesis (tafsīr) literature – called the *Isra’īliyyāt* – emerged from such conversations. More, finding themselves surrounded by learned Jews and Christians who had been actively engaged in theological disputation for centuries helped the Muslims develop their own theology (kalām), by which they were able to answer theological questions and counter theological attacks. This, of course, helped the Muslims develop the classical creeds and the disciplines of Islamic

jurisprudence that have steered the course of Islamic theology and law ever since.

In short, the Muslims historically found themselves immeasurably enriched by the knowledge, experience, and wisdom of other communities and traditions, and the greatness of the civilization they built very much stood upon the shoulders of that sharing. In a way, then, we can see the Muslims actively manifesting the Qur'ānic command to come to know the "other" and to "compete" in the pious race to do good works. Theologically, there is no reason why the same cannot occur and be the norm today.

In this spirit, it is important to acknowledge that the profound richness of this sharing cannot be reduced to domes or minarets or specific scientific insights or theological methods of inquiry, concrete contributions that stand as byproducts rather than ends of coming to know one another. Indeed, the sharing encouraged in the Qur'an and fleshed out in Islamic history is something far richer, for it implies living in relationship with one another, a relationship of regular interaction, collaboration, mutual assistance, and even healthy-minded competition.

## **OBSTACLES TO INTER-UMMAH SHARING TODAY**

Al-Shahrastānī's work was appreciated in his time and has been held in esteem ever since as one of the great achievements of classical Islamic Civilization. Many Muslims today, however, question the need to seek anything – especially Divine Wisdom and Truth – outside the Qur'ān and the other authoritative foundations of the Islamic faith. This somewhat xenophobic attitude, which includes a tangible fear of cultural pollution by "foreign" or non-Islamic elements, has been unwittingly fueled by centuries of western economic, political, and cultural domination. Powerfully championed in the much-quoted works of Sayyid Qutb and others within the self-identified "Salafi" renewal tradition, this religio-political orientation has tremendous appeal in many parts of the traditionally Muslim world, where the West, with

its inescapable modernizing and globalizing influences, is viewed with anger and tremendous suspicion.

From such a vantage point, interfaith dialogue (not to mention sharing wisdom) – often seen wrongly as a scheme devised by western Christians and Jews – is frequently accused of being yet another way in which the dominant Western powers seek to impose their own rules and parameters (here relating to religious discourse) upon Muslims and fit Muslim voices into pre-designed roles, where the script is already more-or-less written and just waiting for an “authentic” voice to read it aloud. In this brief article, we cannot avoid acknowledging the mistrust many Muslims feel for interfaith dialogue efforts and the post-colonial political, military, social, and psychological factors that continue to enflame this mistrust. These are real and formidable factors that must be examined as we work out a respectful and mutually sensitive way to share with one another as equal partners in the race to do good works.

While overcoming these obstacles may require the work of many generations on all sides, we must do our part to get the process moving forward. The Qur’anic imperative makes this clear, and the deteriorating condition of the planet and the growing hostility between nations make the theological challenge all the more crucial at this moment.

## **HOW DO WE SHARE?**

Again, the close identification of Wisdom with God prevents us from speaking too casually about Wisdom as a commodity or a “something” that can be shared or imparted by one person upon another. The story of Moses and the spirit-guide, however, indicates to us that it is possible for a teacher to help open another’s mind or heart to wisdom, and this process seems to include breaking a person out of his or her “normal” way of seeing the world. In the case of Moses, who was repeatedly confronted with situations that could not be grasped with conventional thinking, he was left, perhaps, with the new knowledge that nothing is as it seems, that life cannot

be judged at face-value, that there is a deeper meaning or purpose to everything, and that wisdom involves beholding life with a pondering mind and an unwaveringly patient disposition. One will notice that his teacher did not tell him all this in explicit terms; rather, he opened a way for this kind of reflection.

Outside of the teacher-student paradigm, which usually takes place within a single tradition or sub-tradition, is there any sense in which Wisdom can be said to be shared across traditions? Given all that we have said up to this point, the assertion that God's creatures can "share" wisdom with one another may be viewed with suspicion of anthropocentric hubris if taken literally. The more Qur'anic formulation might be that Wisdom can be mutually sought, pondered, and cherished by the believers of all faith traditions, granted that they come together in all sincerity and with a unifying intention to seek with open minds and hearts. In my reading of the Qur'anic texts, this seems to be what our Creator intended for us to do in the first place.

*Question 7:*

*Can wisdom be mutually sought, pondered and cherished by believers of different faith?*

Active sharing: what does it mean for Muslims to share the wisdom they believe has been given to them? Why share?

Since its inception in the seventh century of the Common Era (CE), Islam has been an evangelical movement that actively sought the conversion of others to its simple and somewhat uncompromising monotheistic worldview. As it did so, it afforded a place of protection to the religious communities and traditions it recognized as its authentic forbears. Although it began as a small, unpopular, extremely disadvantaged movement within a dominant culture of polytheism and relative lawlessness within the Arabian

Peninsula, the movement rapidly grew powerful under the Prophet's leadership and went on to establish an impressive and vast empire soon after his death. Thus, one of the ways in which Muslims have actively shared and still share today is through the teaching of their faith to others and through the promotion of a general culture that champions the sanctification of the public sphere in addition to the theatres of our individual hearts and personal lives. This sanctification manifests itself, in part, through a Divinely-inspired legal tradition that seeks to protect religious minorities and provide for the disadvantaged as it sets an overarching moral and ethical standard for the marketplace and larger society.

This active sharing came easily and naturally when the Muslim empires were politically, economically, technologically, culturally, and militarily supreme, for the beauty of their cities, the civility of their societies, and the erudition of their academies proclaimed their wisdom to the wider world in very compelling ways. Indeed, during the "golden" centuries of Islamic Civilization, the Muslims were so confident and secure that they were able to share and collaborate with all kinds of cultures and religious groups.

*Question 8:*

*What is the relationship between sharing wisdom and active proselytization to one's religion?*

The situation today, however, is dramatically different, and Muslims are being forced to rethink their traditional modes of sharing. How can we share wisdom when we are politically, economically, militarily, and culturally compromised? Apart from converting everyone, what do we have to offer the wider world? Are there ways Muslims can share their wisdom humbly, as global partners with peoples of other faiths, or can such sharing only occur when Islam is recognized as the unrivalled superior in every sense? Are

there ways in which Muslims can actively enrich others with traditional Islamic wisdom without seeking to convert them?

### **Receiving wisdom**

*How do we go about being instructed in wisdom? Are some wisdoms simply "unshareable" across traditions? Should there be boundaries? Is it OK to disagree or respectfully reject the "wisdom" we are offered?*

Of course, this process need not be understood as a homogenizing experience, where our uniqueness is compromised or threatened in any way. There will always be particular perceptions of Wisdom that do not – and cannot – transcend the boundaries of our faith traditions. This is certainly true for Muslims, who see the Qur'ān as abrogating all earlier sacred texts, no matter how esteemed and luminous, and understand the Prophet Muhammad to be the final messenger sent to humankind before the end of the world as we know it and the advent of Judgment Day. These beliefs are both unique and essential to the religion of Islam and so cannot be "shared" beyond an informational level. Other religious traditions likewise have their own examples of "unshareable" wisdoms, and we have to be comfortable with this. We should think, then, about the wisdoms we can share more fully. What can Islam bring to such a banquet?

For starters, I think Muslims can bring a reverence and a humility to this discussion, the reverence emanating from the awareness that wisdom truly is of God and from God, that we are seeking to share the gifts bestowed upon us from the Giver of Bounty (al-Wahhāb), and the humility arising from our remembrance of Moses, our awareness that our understanding of these treasures is incomplete and partial at best. These offerings are absolutely authentic to the Islamic tradition and may serve the overall spirit in which we, as peoples of different communities, share.

*Question 9:*

*How can we discern which wisdoms can be shared and which cannot be shared with people of other faiths?*

## **Love & Forgiveness: a Case Study in Sharing Wisdom**

As is the case with Wisdom itself, Love and Forgiveness are qualities of God, and so we are forced to wrestle again with transcendence as we attempt to enter into a theoretical and experiential discourse that can serve our situations and our needs. In the brief glimpses of love and forgiveness that we have already explored above, we see that these two Divine qualities are often connected with one another and also with the transformation of the individual (or community) involved. This aspect of transformation is crucial for understanding why the Qur'ānic texts stress forgiveness in human interactions; indeed, the Qur'ān even explains this in the story of Yūsuf (Joseph) and his brothers, as we will see below.

Of the ninety-nine attributes or "beautiful names" of God in the Qur'ān, at least six reflect different aspects of God's forgiveness and mercy, and these also happen to be among the most repeated names of God in the sacred text. It should be no surprise, therefore, that both the Qur'ān and the Prophetic traditions treat forgiveness, forbearance, clemency, mercy, and reconciliation as hallmark characteristics of the true believers.<sup>24</sup> The role models for these virtues are the prophets, and so we turn now to their stories in our search for Islamic wisdom concerning forgiveness.

One of the most beautiful and moving accounts of forgiveness in the Qur'ān is also a Biblical account. Called "the most beautiful of stories," the story of Yūsuf and his brothers stands apart from all other Qur'anic

chapters in that it is the only sustained narrative in the text; indeed, the entire sūrah is devoted to this one story. In essence, it is a heroic story of envy, violence, injustice, long-suffering, patience, and ultimate exaltation that climaxes with a finale of Divine and human forgiveness. Joseph's brothers, the very same who had thrown him into a well, sold him into slavery, and lied about the entire episode to their father, Jacob, stand before his throne in Egypt. They do not recognize him until he reveals his identity.

They said, "are you indeed Joseph?" He said, "I am Joseph, and this is my brother [Benjamin]. God has indeed been gracious to us! Behold, whosoever is God-conscious and patient, God will never suffer the reward of the righteous to be lost.

They said, "By God! God has indeed preferred you over us. Certainly we were sinners!"

[Then] he said, "Today there is no blame on you. God will forgive [everything] for you. He is the Most Merciful of all those who show mercy.

Liberated by Joseph's clemency and the promise of God's forgiveness, they go back to their father, Jacob, whose sight has been restored by the casting of Joseph's shirt over his face.

They said, "O our father! Ask [God] to forgive our sins, for verily we were sinners!"

[Jacob] said, "I will seek the forgiveness of my Lord for you, for He is indeed the Oft-Forgiving, the Merciful."

Then when they entered the presence of Joseph, he made a home for his parents with himself and said, "[I bid] you enter Egypt, by God's leave, with safety."

And he raised his parents high on the throne, and they [all] fell down in prostration before him. He said, "O my father! This is the meaning of my vision of old! God has made it true! He was indeed good to me when freed me from prison and brought you [all] here from the desert after Satan had put enmity between me and my brothers. Truly my Lord is Subtle [in unveiling] whatever He wills! Verily He is the Knowing, the Wise." (12:90-100)

The brothers, now absolved, experience a total transformation of situation, and they are reconciled with their brother and are finally able to accept his privileged status without envy. Satan (the whisperer) is blamed for having inspired their evil deeds. While a case could have been made for a harsher ruling by which justice might come close to vengeance, love and forgiveness are shown to be infinitely better, and in this light, then, we read other Qur'ānic passages stressing God's preference for forgiveness and reconciliation:

Hold to forgiveness; command what is right, and turn away from the ignorant. (7:199)

It is not righteousness that ye turn your faces Towards east or West; but it is righteousness- to believe in Allah and the Last Day, and the Angels, and the Book, and the Messengers; to spend of your substance, out of love for Him, for your kin, for orphans, for the needy, for the wayfarer, for those who ask, and for the ransom of slaves; to be steadfast in prayer, and practice regular charity; to fulfil the contracts which ye have made; and to be firm and patient, in [periods of] suffering and adversity, and throughout all periods of panic. Such are the people of Truth, the God-conscious.

O ye who believe! the law of equality is prescribed to you in cases of murder: the free for the free, the slave for the slave, the woman for the

woman. But if any remission is made by the brother of the slain, then grant any reasonable demand, and compensate him with handsome gratitude. This is a concession and a Mercy from your Lord. After this whoever exceeds the limits shall be in grave penalty.

In the Law of Equality there is (saving of) Life to you, o ye men of understanding; that ye may restrain yourselves. (2:177-179)

In the biography of the Prophet Muhammad, we find a very close parallel to the story of Joseph. After years of supporting a war to exterminate Muhammad, his followers, and his monotheistic movement, the inhabitants of Mecca were finally cornered, powerless and completely at his mercy. Mecca had surrendered unconditionally. Fearing the worst as they watched him enter the ancient shrine town associated with Abraham, Ishmael, and Hagar, some of his most hardened enemies heard him ask, "what do you think I shall do to you now?" They begged him for mercy until again he spoke to them: "Today I shall say to you what Joseph said to his brothers: 'Today there is no blame on you.' Go, you are all free."

In the wake of this act of mercy and forgiveness, the people of Mecca embraced Islam, and the Ka'ba was cleansed and rededicated as the house Abraham and Ishmael had built for worshipping God. The mercy and forgiveness celebrated in the Qur'anic depiction of God and in the stories of the prophets (esp. Joseph), became manifest in their midst, and the immediate result was the reunification of families and the forward march of an expanded and united Muslim ummah.

*Question 10:  
What promise does forgiveness offer in the aftermath of conflict?*

What wisdom, then, can Muslims share regarding love and forgiveness? It would seem that human affairs, even in the aftermath of great injustices, offences, and many episodes of mortal combat, can only find resolution and renewal when they emulate the pattern that God has decreed for himself and celebrated in His books and His messengers. According to another of the sacred traditions, the Prophet is reported to have said, "When God decreed the creation He pledged Himself by writing in His Book, which is laid down with Him, 'My mercy prevails over my wrath.'" If we are to listen to the wisdom of the Islamic tradition, from the inter-relation of the Divine attributes to the stories of the prophets, including the life of the Prophet Muhammad, we hear a call to restrain our anger, however justified, to forgive those who have harmed us, and to step forward into a future of new and unforeseen possibility. This is what it means to be wise, to live in the transformed state of those who live in witness to Truth.

*Question 11:*

*How can forgiveness be understood as wisdom?*

## Notes:

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- <sup>1</sup> See, for example, 2:231; 3:48, 81; 4:113; 5:110; 10:1; 19:12; 31:2; 33:34; 36:2; 38:20; 43:4; 62:2.
- <sup>2</sup> See, for example, 31:2.
- <sup>3</sup> See 2:30, 35, 255; 16: 77; 18:26; 25:6; 49:18.
- <sup>4</sup> 21:74.
- <sup>5</sup> 21:12.
- <sup>6</sup> 2: 251; 27:15.
- <sup>7</sup> 3:48-49.
- <sup>8</sup> 19:12.
- <sup>9</sup> 2:269; 29:49; 58:11.
- <sup>10</sup> See, for example, *sūra(t) al-anbiyā'* / the prophets (21): 24.
- <sup>11</sup> 2: 269; 3:7.
- <sup>12</sup> 3:7.
- <sup>13</sup> 46:23.
- <sup>14</sup> 95: 4.
- <sup>15</sup> See, for example, 2:34 and following.
- <sup>16</sup> See Al-Ghazālī, *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God*, trans. with notes by David B. Burrell and Nazih Daher (Islamic texts Society, 1992, 1995), pp. 149-156.
- <sup>17</sup> From the *Sahīḥ* collection of al-Bukhārī (vol. 8, Book 75). Another tradition, also recorded in al-Bukhārī's catalogue, runs, "God has ninety-nine names, i.e., one hundred minus one; whoever recounts them will enter paradise."
- <sup>18</sup> See the entirety of *sūrah* 31.
- <sup>19</sup> 16:77; 49:18; 18:26; 25:6
- <sup>20</sup> Exactly what these "names" pertain to remains something of a mystery. In some Islamic texts, they are taken to be the Divine names or attributes, while, in others, they are seen as having to do with the essential natures of everything to be found within the created realm, of which Adam is seen as the primordial steward or vicegerent (*khalīfa*). See, for example, Ibn al-'Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. & intro. by R.W.J. Austin (Paulist Press, 1980), esp. pp. 50-59.
- <sup>21</sup> 10:47.
- <sup>22</sup> 13:39; 43:4.
- <sup>23</sup> William Cureton, ed. (Gorgias Press, LLC, 2002). A fully annotated French translation of the book, sponsored by UNESCO and undertaken by Daniel Gimaret, Guy Monnot and Jean Jolivet and can be found under the title, *Shahrastani: Livre des religions et des sectes* (Peeters: 1986, 1993).
- <sup>24</sup> See, for example, 42:37; 42:40; 16:126-127; 24:22.