THE PROBLEM OF THE RELEVANCE OF TIME AND SPACE TO THE QURʾĀNIC TEXT

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Abstract

In the classical ages of Islamic thought, the problem of the relevance of time and space to the Qurʾānic text was generally understood in terms of cosmology and ontology, which assumed a division between matter and intellect (soul), earth and heaven, the symbolic and the rational, and the signifier (expression) and the signified (concept). Most classical Muslim thinkers took time and space at the level of the signifier to be a kind of prison to be escaped and at the level of the signified as a moment and place of the self-presence of metaphysical truth. In our global age, constant changes in the semantics/creations of new times and spaces force us to view the problem of the relevance of time and space to the Qurʾānic text from a different perspective. This paper attempts to first analyze the classical formulations of the above problem, and then to briefly delineate a way of poetical thinking that tries to grasp time and space as a form of revelation of new opportunities (*kairos*) and potentialities, which interpreters can discover in front of the text as a realm of signifiers.

Key Words: Time and space, relevance, Qurʾānic text, Islamic theology, Islamic philosophy, Islamic Sufism, *logoi*, *kairos*

The relevance of time and space to the Qurʾānic text has been one of major problems of the tradition of Qurʾānic interpretation. This problem has been brought to light by different communities of inter-

preters, according to their handling of the notions of 'time' and 'space.'

The majority in the early Muslim community appears to have considered 'time' and 'space,' in their social and historical senses, as a sort of horizon or field where human desires, will, actions, and hopes take shape. Interpretation has the task of finding a point of relevance of the constantly changing social and historical aspects of time and space to the Qurʾānic text. The word 'relevance' signifies here a form of immediate address of the Qurʾānic text, as the early Muslim community received the Qurʾān as an immediate historical and social address (*khiṭāb*) of God. For the early Muslim community, the Qurʾān was a "phenomenon" in its fullest sense that 'speaks to/demands something from the people here and now.' In this context, interpretation is a kind of hearing/responding to the voice of the Qurʾān; specifically, it is a form of turning consciously toward the speaking phenomenon and receiving it in its immediate sense within the experienced time and space.

The development of Islamic theology looks to have radically changed the meaning of 'interpretation' by considering 'time' and 'space' in their theological sense. Islamic theology, as a 'discourse (*kalām*)' on the Qurʾānic text, has attempted to elevate/transfer 'time' and 'space' from their social and historical senses to a rationally elaborated conceptional sense. In this latter sense, they are fundamentally related to the universal life and laws of *logos* (*ʿaql*, *kalām*). Put differently, Islamic theology has aimed to satisfy pure human rationality by disclosing the world of logical and metaphysical reason (*asbāb*, *ʿilla*) behind the social and historical senses of the Qurʾānic text. Muslim theologians have hoped to show the perfect correspondence between pure human rationality/existence (*fiṭra*) and rationally explored Qurʾānic revelation.[1] Therefore, they created a closed circle between human reason and revelation in terms of their basic assumption of 'correspondence.'

Accordingly, time and space, in their theological sense, appear to be a horizon/field of the disclosure of reason (*asbāb*, *ʿilla*) as the

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[1]   For general orientation on Islamic notion of *fiṭra*/'innate human primordial nature,' see Yasien Mohamed, "The Definition of *Fitrah*" at http://www. angel-fire.com/al/islamicpsychology/fitrah/fitrah.html (10.03.2011).

'unsaid' in what is said in the Qurʾānic text. In other words, time and space gain their relevance to the Qurʾānic text as the moment and place of the satisfaction of human rationality regarding the revelation. From this perspective, time and space, in their social and historical senses, are empty to a certain degree simply because human rationality cannot be fulfilled there with appropriate logical and metaphysical meaning. The social and historical senses of time and space are semi-opaque, which prevents human reason from bringing the universally/theologically valid meaning of the Qurʾānic text into view.

Hence, Islamic theology has focused mostly on the 'spoken side' (rational content) of the Qurʾānic text by putting its 'speaking activity' to immediate social and historical time and space at a lower level. This change of view has resulted in the 'de-contextualization' of the Qurʾānic text so that it can be 're-contextualized' within a new horizon, to use the notions of Paul Ricoeur. This movement from 'de-contextualization' to 're-contextualization' was actually a transformation of the Qurʾānic text from 'being a *khiṭāb*' (*immediate address, speech, rhetoric*) to 'being a sign' (*āya*, signifier). In short, this movement was a 'categorical transformation' of the Qurʾānic text.

In this new category, the Qurʾānic text is not a 'phenomenon' in its full sense simply because it is a signifier that directs our attention beyond the text itself to something that is signified (the concept). That which is signified here (the concept) is a realm/kingdom of *logos* that discloses the rational structure of universe (*ʿālam*) and human destiny (*qadar*).[2] The Qurʾānic text as a signifier functions as a threshold (*dihlīz*)[3] that manifests itself by leading us toward the conceptual realm of *logos*. Accordingly, when reading the Qurʾān, human

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[2] For detailed information on the classical theological and philosophical evaluation of 'certain knowledge' (logos, *ʿilm al-yaqīn*), see Alparslan Açıkgenç, "İslam'da Bilgi Nazariyesi [Epistemology in Islam]," in Bünyamin Erul (ed.), *İslam'a Giriş – Ana Konulara Yeni Yaklaşımlar –* [*Introduction to Islam – New Approaches to Fundamental Issues –*] (4th ed., Ankara: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı Yayınları, 2008), 11-30.

[3] For this notion, see Toshihiko Izutsu, *Creation and Timeless Order of Things: Essays in Islamic Mystical Philosophy* (Ashland: White Cloud, 1994), 98-118; Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazālī and the Poetics of Imagination* (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 45-49.

rationality encounters what is already most familiar to it. Human rationality moves from what is semi-strange and opaque to the most familiar and transparent.

This movement is nothing other than an elevation (ascension, *miʿrāj*) of human rationality from bodily, earthly, and symbolic senses of the Qurʾānic text to intellectually, heavenly, and conceptually organized levels of meaning. In a sense, it is a form of transcending locality toward universality.

The words 'elevation' and 'transcending' above show us how the meaning of 'space' related to the Qurʾānic text has changed immensely in its theological application. In this new meaning of space, time appears to be at a 'standstill.' To use Aristotelian words, 'time' within theological sense of 'space' lays open to view as a moment of truth, an end of movement due to the disclosure of *telos* (*fiʿl*, *pure activity*, *energeia*).

However, the categorical transformation of the Qurʾānic text reflected in itself the divisions between 'earthly, symbolic sense and heavenly, conceptual sense,' 'signifier and signified,' 'locality and universality,' 'social/historical space-time and theological space-time,' mass (*ʿawāmm*), and eminent (*khawāṣṣ*), thus creating the problem of a nexus or watershed between these divisions. At a deeper level, this transformation gave rise to the problem of the status of the Qurʾān as a 'text.'

How is it possible to move from one side to another in these divisions? Is the latter side of these divisions a projection or implication of the former side? Alternatively, are they a construction of human rationality to be freed from the restriction of the locality of Qurʾānic speech? Because theological thought validates the movement from the former side to latter, it posits itself as a kind of mediation and translation between the divided realms. However, is the latter side a construction of a new text that satisfies the demands of human rationality more than the former?

What is the function of the Qurʾānic text when we move to/rest in the realm of the signified (the kingdom of *logos*)? Does not the Qurʾān lose its textual character in the sense of being a point of constant return in each moment of understanding when the conceptual realm is fixed and validated universally by theological thought? By

fixing the conceptual realm, does not theological thought assert itself as a meta-narrative of which the Qurʾān functions as a sub-narrative? Finally, does not theological thought approach the Qurʾān from the viewpoint of substitution (*iqāma*) theory in which the Qurʾān is taken to be a temporal substitution of rationally valid meaning, i.e., something sacrificed for the sake of the universal truth of Islam?

Ironically, Islamic Sufism seems to follow the same pattern of thought when severely criticizing Islamic theology. By replacing the theological sense of space and time with a spiritual and semi-mythic sense of space and time that moves from the external (physical) world to the internal (psychological) world without any discontinuance or interruption,[4] Islamic Sufism appears to be a form of the application of substitution (*iqāma*) theory. It also moves from the realm of signifier to the realm of signified (kingdom of love and spiritual experiences, union with God), and it aims to reach a world of meaning that satisfies the demands of human spirituality. Like Islamic theology, Islamic Sufism asserts itself as a mediation between social and historical space-time and spiritual and metaphysical space-time. Thus, it posits itself as a meta-narrative of the sub-narrative of the Qurʾānic text.

Islamic philosophy can be taken to be the third form of the same pattern of thought that was followed by theologians and Sufis. When Islamic philosophers conceptualized the Qurʾānic text as the revelation of metaphysical truth via symbols, they posited a philosophical endeavor to gain '*logos*' as a metaphor in its original sense of 'transfer' (*metaphora*).[5] In this experience of *metaphora*, human reason (*ʿaql*) moves from its potential (*hayūlānī*) state to an actual (*fiʿlī*) state, where it assumes the true form (*ṣūra*, being) of what is encountered.

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4   This continuity can be observed, for instance, in the Sufi narratives concerning authentication of some ḥadīths in terms of dreams where a Sufi directly asks Prophet Muḥammad if a given ḥadīth was spoken to by Himself.

5   Henry Corbin employs the Arabic term *taʾwīl* for meta-phora as 'transfer' in order to reveal that what is actually transferred/transformed is the 'being' of a philosopher at the time of receiving a *ṣūra* (concept). See, Henri Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital* (trans. from French by Willard R. Trask; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 28-35.

From this perspective, what is externally surrounding human reason (i.e., external world) is merely a signifier that functions as an element in the course of the preparation of human reason for gaining true forms (*ṣuwar*) from Active Intellect. For Islamic philosophy, human rationality reaches its satisfaction in the time-space of disclosure of the metaphysical structure (light, *nūr*) of being. Accordingly, the Qurʾānic text represents a threshold leading toward the kingdom of light. From this perspective, it represents space-time of the occurrence of twilight. In the final analysis, Islamic philosophy invites us to cross the border between the divided worlds so as to reach the metaphysical level by leaving the level of earthly and bodily sense behind.

The above narrative shows how Islamic philosophy has approached the Qurʾānic text in terms of substitution (*iqāma*) theory. The Qurʾānic text, as a symbolic expression of metaphysical truth, performs its role in social and historical time-space as a signifier (*ishāra*) to a signified concept (*ṣūra*, being). Therefore, the Qurʾānic text substitutes temporally and spatially for 'real meaning,' which can be gained by philosophical thinking. Accordingly, the Qurʾānic text exists in the category of 'one for the sake of another.' As articulated above, it represents the time-space of occurrence of twilight, and demands that we wait for the full, shining space and time of sunlight.

It should be noted that the levels of the former and latter time and space are categorically different: while the former belongs essentially to the faculty of imagination, the latter belongs to the faculty of human rationality. Thus, there is a change of horizon in the time-space of the full disclosure of form. Time-space functions as different horizons of experiencing the truth of beings at the imaginative and rational levels. The task of each intelligent person is to prepare himself/herself for the elevation/ascension (*miʿrāj*) from the former horizon of time-space to the latter horizon. In the final analysis, time and space receive their meaning according to the degree of occurrence of the truth of beings. Specifically, time-space at the imaginative (social and historical) level relates more to possibilities, whereas at the rational (ontological) level, it relates more to actualities.

Nevertheless, Islamic philosophy, like theology and Sufism, posits itself as a meta-narrative of the sub-narrative structure of the Qurʾānic text. Thus, Islamic philosophy constructs another 'grand discourse,' one that does not take the speaking activity (*khiṭāb*) of the Qurʾānic

text into account. Because the Qurʾānic text is not something that reveals conceptual truth here and now, it is merely a 'matter' of philosophical discourse that aims at disclosing its *telos* or 'actual meaning.' The essential character of the Qurʾānic text, in the eyes of the philosophers, is not a 'speaking activity,' but merely a 'showing' or 'indicating.' For that reason, 'actual space and time' cannot be related to the Qurʾānic text simply because time and space gain their actual sense in terms of the occurrence or happening of the truth of beings. Unless they are fulfilled with the self-presence of metaphysical truth, time and space can be considered in terms of possibilities.

We can draw the following conclusion from what has been explored above: Muslim theologians, Sufis, and philosophers have approached the Qurʾānic text in terms of their notion of cosmology, assuming a line of division between matter and reason, earth and heaven, imagination and rationality, the sensible and intelligible, locality and universality, the physical and metaphysical, and the signifier and signified. Due to their assumption of the hierarchy between these two levels, they preferred 'vertical thinking,' which struggles to move from the lower level to the higher level. Accordingly, the problem of the relevance of time and space to the Qurʾānic text has been taken to be a problem of the ascension of the human being from the expression of the Qurʾān to the truth of the Qurʾān. Transcending the expression of the Qurʾānic text for the sake of reaching its truth is a form of 'flight from *logoi*' (word, speech, argument, *logos*) in its Socratic sense.[6] Thus, at the level of expression, time and space are a problem of flight, i.e., something to be escaped, a kind of prison, something to be sacrificed, a moment of anxiety; whereas at the level of truth, time and space are something to rest in, a real home, a promised land, a terminal point, a moment of happiness.

If our above analysis is correct, then we can raise the following questions: Does the Qurʾān, as a text addressing the 'world of human being,' demand our flight from *logoi*? Alternatively, does it demand our flight into the *logoi*? In other words, does the truth of the Qurʾān reveal itself in front of or beyond its text? Moreover, when we wholly

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6   For a detailed discussion on the Greek word '*logoi*,' see P. Christopher Smith, *Hermeneutics and Human Finitude* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1991).

deny or reject the classical cosmological and ontological divisions as referred to above, what kind of relevance does time and space have regarding the Qurʾānic text?

Due to constant change in scientific, philosophical, and cultural views concerning matter, spirit, the universe, the physical world, history, and religious truth, among others, the problem of the relevance of time and space to the Qurʾānic text appears to have a different sense than that of its classical formulation. This different sense presents a new task for exploring new senses of time and space. Specifically, the course of globalization continually changes the semantics of the concepts 'time' and 'space' by creating new spaces and times. For this reason, the task above seems to be endless. We can propose some ideas only provisionally, tentatively, and sketchily.

In a sense, this new situation demands that we focus on the present time and, hence, the space we stand in. Constant global changes in the semantics of the concepts of time and space prevent us from formulating the problem of the relevance of time and space to the Qurʾānic text in a universal way, which is another way of saying that we cannot explore the full sense of the problem itself due to our limited and temporal reflectivity. Thus, in our contemporary period, the word 'relevance,' as stated above, would mean the temporal, semi-reflective relation between the Qurʾānic text and the present time-space. The semi-reflective character of the 'relation' indicates that we cannot take flight from the *logoi*. We are not able to witness the disclosure of Qurʾānic truth within universal and pure rational concepts due to the constant formation of our own concepts.

Therefore, time and space today are not something we relate to the Qurʾānic text in a fully conscious state. Rather, they continuously put our relation to the Qurʾānic text into question by temporalizing the 'relation' itself, that is, by destructing its metaphysical foundation, which the classical Muslim thinkers assumed paved the way to human relation to the Qurʾān. Briefly, we are in an age of temporal relation, deprived of a universal foundation. Thus, the problem of the relevance of time and space to the Qurʾānic text is not something we can neglect in the time-space of the self-presence of truth. Rather, as both a bridge and barrier between us and the Qurʾānic text, time and space establish themselves as a subject matter of constant thinking.

The temporality of our relation to the Qurʾānic text tears the schema of the classical division between signifier and signified and allows us to encounter it only with the realm of signifiers, which is a way of saying we can merely be in front of the text. Thus, the truth of the text can disclose itself not in a metaphysical conceptual time and space, but rather within our temporal relation to the text. Therefore, the truth of the Qurʾān is temporal and limited within the human world.

This new condition demands that we approach the problem of the relevance of space-time to the Qurʾānic text not from the viewpoint of conceptualizing/metaphysical thinking, but from the perspective of poetical thinking. By the term 'poetical thinking,' I mean the way of thinking oriented by the construction of poems. A poem has a special construction in which words have a unique relation to each other, so much so that human rationality is unable to apply its logical categories onto the poem. Accordingly, a poem displays unique and surprising relations between its words by which it reminds human thought that it is only a thought. Put differently, poems function as phenomena that force human thought to reflect on itself so that it cannot substitute anything other than itself. Therefore, poems perform an antagonistic role against substitution (*iqāma*) theory, which paves the way to representational thinking. Contrary to substitution theory, poems force human thought to experience signifiers in their unique relations. Finally, the poem indicates that human thought cannot substitute its concepts for beings or the truth of beings.

From this perspective, the relevance of space and time to the Qurʾānic text is not an epistemological problem; rather, it appears to be a problem of *kairos* in the sense of the revelation of time-space as the opportunity to say and do the right thing here and now. To understand the constantly changing times and spaces as a form of revelation of new opportunities would allow us, as interpreters, to discover new potentialities in front of the text. Hence, the word 'relevance' in this context would mean 'free space' for new discoveries, actions, and interpretations.

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