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## **‘There is many a slip betwixt the Text and the Translation’**

### **A comparative analysis of selected Qur’ānic verses**

#### **Bismi’llāhi’r-Raḥmāni’r-Raḥim**

Islam, as a global faith of more than one billion Muslims, is spread across the planet and impacts the lives of one-fifth of the world’s population consisting of a rich plurality of cultures, languages, historical and geographical contexts.

One reality of the contemporary Muslim world is that large numbers of Muslims everywhere access their holy Book not in its original language of Arabic but in translation. Similarly the vast majority of English speaking peoples also read the Qur’ān in its various English translations.

It was therefore felt that a comparative analysis that follows would be of interest and use to the many who are interested in the correct meaning of the message of Islam. Five popular English translations have been selected to demonstrate the danger of mistranslation and misunderstanding of the contents of the Scripture of Islam. For each verse (*āyat*) the transliteration is given, followed by the five different translations and finally the analysis. The verses are analysed in a numerical sequence.

#### **1. Sūratu’l-Baqarah (Chapter 2), āyat 2:**

##### **Transliteration:**

*Dhālika’l-Kitābu lā rayba fīhi, hudān li’l-muttaqīn;*

**That** Book, wherein is no doubt, a guidance to the godfearing; (Arberry’s Translation)

**This is** the Book (the Qur’ān), whereof there is no doubt, a guidance to those who are *Al-Muttaqīn* [the pious believers of Islamic Monotheism who fear Allah much (abstain from all kinds of sins and evil deeds which He has forbidden) and love Allah much (perform all kinds of good deeds which He has ordained)]. (Muhammad al-Hilali’s Translation)

**This is** the Book; in it is guidance sure, without doubt, to those who fear God; (Yusuf Ali's Translation)

**This is** the Scripture whereof there is no doubt, a guidance unto those who ward off (evil); (Mohammed M. Pickthall's translation)

**This is** the Book; there is no doubt in it, (it is) a guidance to those who safeguard themselves with full awareness of divine laws, (Mir Ahmed Ali's Translation)

#### **Analysis:**

As can be seen in the above five translations, where the critical word "*dhālika*" has been highlighted, it is translated correctly only in the first example, which is the translation of Arberry. The other four all translate it as "this", which, in Arabic, is the word "*hādhā*". "*Hādhā*" can be found in the Qur'ān a number of times in relation to the word '*kitāb*' and to the word 'Qur'ān'. For example in Sūrah 6, āyats 92 and 155, it is said: "*Wa hādhā Kitābun anzalnāhu mubārakun*" (And this is a blessed Book which We have revealed). "*Hādhā*" can also be found in seventeen different verses where it is used in relation to the word 'Qur'ān' (see: 6:19; 10:15, 37; 12:3; 17:9, 41, 88, 89; 18:54; 25:30; 27:16; 30:58; 34:31; 39:27; 41:26; 43:31; 59:21).

In the context of the above discussion it is relevant to ask why such well-known scholars mistranslate a simple word like "*dhālika*" when it can be easily checked in any basic Arabic dictionary?

It is also important to note that to mistranslate one single word in this verse changes its meaning totally. Serious students of the Qur'ān will want to reflect on this verse carefully to understand the divine message.<sup>1</sup>

## **2. Sūratu'l-Mā'idah (Chapter 5), āyat 55:**

#### **Transliteration:**

***"Innamā waliyyukumu'llāhu wa rasūluhū wa'lladhīna āmanu'l-ladhīna yuqīmūna'ṣ-ṣalāta wa yu'tūna'z-zakāta wa hum rāki'un"***

Your friend is only God, and His Messenger, and the believers who perform the prayer and pay the alms, and bow them<sup>2</sup> down. (Arberry's Translation)

Verily, your *walī* (Protector or Helper) is none other than Allah, His Messenger, and the believers, - those who perform *Aṣ-Ṣalāt (Iqamataṣ-Ṣalāt)*, and give *Zakāt*, and they are *Rāki'un* (those who bow down or submit

themselves with obedience to Allah in prayer). (Muhammad al-Hilali's Translation)

Your (real) friends are (no less than) God, His Apostle, and the (fellowship of) Believers, - those who establish regular prayers and regular charity, and they bow down humbly (in worship). (Yusuf Ali's Translation)

Your friend can be only Allah; and His messenger and those who believe, who establish worship and pay the poor due, and bow down (in prayer). (Pickthall's Translation)

Verily, verily, your guardian is Allah and His messenger (Muhammad) and those who believe and establish prayer, and give the poor-rate while they are (in the state of *rukū'*) bowing down. (Mir Ahmed Ali's Translation)

### **Analysis:**

In the five translations given above of Sūrah 5, verse 55 the controversial last phrase is underlined to demonstrate that the first four translations are different from the last one. In the first four “*wa hum rākī'ūn*” is translated as “and they bow down”, whereas in the last translation it is “while they are bowing down”.

Why is there such a distinct difference in these translations? In Arabic grammar there are a number of different ways of using the particle “*wāw*”. In the context of the above verse the first four translators have chosen to consider this as the ‘*wāw* of coupling’ that is, a conjunction which joins two phrases. The fifth translator namely Mir Ahmed Ali has understood the “*wāw*” as the ‘*wāw* of the state, condition or circumstance’. Why has he chosen to do so? In the verse God has already spoken of those who establish *ṣalāt* (prayers) and since *rukū'* (bowing down) is a part of the ritual of *ṣalāt*, it is illogical and tautological to translate as the first four have done.

The correct translation would be to say ‘while they are bowing down’ as Mir Ahmed Ali has done. This is considered by Shī'ī authorities unanimously and by many Sunnī authorities as a reference to a famous historical incident in which Imām 'Alī stretched his hand out during the *rukū'* for a beggar to take the ring on his finger. In Shī'a'h Islam this verse is therefore also referred to as the “Verse of *Walāyat*” and indicates to the succession of Imām 'Alī as the *walī* and *waṣī* (legatee) of Prophet Muhammad.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. Sūratu'l-A'raf (Chapter 7), āyat 52-53:

#### Transliteration:

*“Wa laqad ji'nāhum bi-Kitābin faṣṣalnāhu ‘alā ‘ilmin hudan wa rahmatan li-qawmin yu'minūn.*

*Hal yanẓurūna illā ta'wīlahu? Yawma ya'ti ta'wīluhu yaqūlu'lladhīna nasūhu min qablu qad jā'at rusulu Rabbīnā bi'l-ḥaqq. -”*

And We have brought to them a Book that We have well distinguished, resting on knowledge, a guidance and a mercy unto a people that believe.

Do they look for aught else but its interpretation? The day its interpretation comes, those who before forgot it shall say, 'Indeed, our Lord's Messengers came with the truth'. (Arberry's Translation)

Certainly, We have brought to them a Book (the Qur'ān) which We have explained in detail with knowledge, - a guidance and a mercy to a people who believe.

Await they just for the final fulfilment of the event? On the Day the event is finally fulfilled (i.e. the Day of Resurrection), those who neglected it before will say: "Verily, the Messengers of our Lord did come with the truth". (Muhammad al-Hilali's Translation)

For We had certainly sent unto them a Book, based on knowledge, which We explained in detail - a guide and a mercy to all who believe.

Do they just wait for the final fulfilment of the event? On the day the event is finally fulfilled, those who disregarded it before will say: "The apostles of our Lord did indeed bring true (tidings)". (Yusuf Ali's Translation)

Verily We have brought them a Scripture, which We expound with knowledge, a guidance and a mercy for a people who believe.

Await they aught save the fulfilment thereof? On the Day when the fulfilment thereof cometh, those who were before forgetful thereof will say: The messengers of our Lord did bring the Truth. (Pickthall's Translation)

Indeed We have brought to them a book, which We expound with knowledge, a guidance and a mercy for a people who believe.

Do they wait for anything but the final fulfilment? On the day the final fulfilment comes, those who neglected it before will say: Indeed the messengers of our Lord came with the truth. (Mir Ahmed Ali's Translation)

#### **Analysis:**

Verses 52 and 53 of Chapter 7 or Sūratu'l-A'rāf of the holy Qur'ān have been correctly translated by Arberry, who conveys the link between the Book and its interpretation. Three of the translations are completely off the mark because they use phrases such as "final fulfilment" and "fulfilment of the event", which totally negate the link between the two verses and leave the reader in confusion about what this fulfilment or event can be! Pickthall's translation of *ta'wīlahu/ta'wīluhu* in the question as "fulfilment thereof" indicates a link between the two consecutive *āyats* but does not add to the clarity of the content.

Arberry's translation preserves the relationship between the two verses and correctly translates the word "*ta'wīl*" as the interpretation of the Qur'ān, which continues, whereas its "*tanzīl*" (exoteric) was completed in the time of the holy Prophet Muhammad.

This particular set of verses is a key to understanding that the glorious Qur'ān, as the final message of God to humankind, is universal and eternal. It should be read in conjunction with at least two other sets of verses on the subject of "*ta'wīl*", namely: Sūrah 3, āyat 7 and Sūrah 10, āyats 38-39. The topic of "*ta'wīl*" in the Qur'ān assures the believers that it is a dynamic source of guidance, which God intended for all times and places. Further, this assurance is fortified by the *Ḥadīth* of Prophet Muhammad that every verse of the Qur'ān has a *ẓāhir* and a *bāṭin* and every *bāṭin* seven or even seventy *bāṭins*.<sup>4</sup>

#### **4. Sūratu Ibrāhīm (Chapter 14), āyats 24-25:**

##### **Transliteration:**

*“Alam tara kayfa ɗaraba'llāhu mathalan kalimatan ṭayyibatan ka-shajaratin ṭayyibatin asluhā thābitun wa far'uhā fi's-samā’;*

*tu'ti ukulahā kulla ḥinin bi-idhni Rabbihā. Wa-yaḍribu'llāhu'l-amthāla li'n-nāsi la'allahum yatadhakkarūn.*

Hast thou not seen how God has struck a similitude? A good word is as a good tree - its roots are firm, and its branches are in heaven;

It gives its produce every season by the leave of its Lord. So God strikes similitudes for men; haply they will remember. (Arberry's Translation)

See you not how Allah sets forth a parable? A goodly word as a goodly tree, whose root is firmly fixed, and its branches (reach) to the sky (i.e. very high).

Giving its fruit at all times, by the leave of its Lord and Allah sets forth parables for mankind in order that they may remember. (Muhammad al-Hilali's Translation)

Seest thou not how God sets forth a parable? - A goodly Word like a goodly tree, whose root is firmly fixed, and its branches (reach) to the heavens,

It brings forth its fruit at all times, by the leave of its Lord. So God sets forth parables for men, in order that they may receive admonition. (Yusuf Ali's translation)

Seest thou not how Allah coineth a similitude: A goodly saying, as a goodly tree, its root set firm, its branches reaching into heaven,

Giving its fruit at every season by permission of its Lord? Allah coineth similitudes for mankind in order that they may reflect. (Pickthall's Translation)

Do you not see how Allah sets forth a parable? A goodly word is like a goodly tree, whose root is firmly fixed and its branches are in the heaven,

It yields its fruit in every season by the permission of its Lord. And Allah sets forth parables for mankind so that they may reflect. (Mir Ahmed Ali's Translation)

**Analysis:**

Verses 24-25 of Sūrah Ibrāhīm are an example of the highly allegorical nature of many of the *āyats* of the holy Qur'ān, about which God says in Sūrah 3, verse



7 that the “*ta’wīl*” of the allegorical verses nobody knows save Allah and the “*rāsikhūn fī l-‘ilm*” (those who are firmly grounded in knowledge).

In the above five translations we can see that let alone its *ta’wīl*, the ordinary translation of such allegorical verses is a great challenge. The two words that pose a challenge to the translators are “*aṣṭ*” (pl. *uṣūl*) (root(s)) and “*far*” (pl. *furū’*) (branch(es)).

In four of the translations above the first word is translated correctly in the singular according to its lexical meaning, however Arberry translates it in the plural. Had it been in the plural the Arabic word would have been “*uṣūl*”.

All five translators fail to translate “*far*” correctly as “branch” according to its lexical meaning. All of them put it in the plural as “branches”. Had it been so, the Arabic word would have been “*furū’*”.

In its correct translation the tree mentioned in this verse is not an ordinary physical tree – it is an allegory and therefore not only does it have a single root, but also a single branch that reaches the heaven. Further this allegorical tree, unlike worldly trees, gives fruit at all seasons by the permission of its Lord. Little wonder then that God urges the readers of the Qur’ān to reflect on the similitudes that He coins!

## 5. Sūratu Bani Isrā’īl (Chapter 17), āyat 71:

### Transliteration:

*“Yawma nad’ū kulla unāsīn bi-imāmihim: faman ūtiya kitābahu bi-yamīnihi fa-ulā’ika yaqra’ūna kitābahum wa-lā yuzlamūna fatīlā.”*

On the day when We shall call all men with their record, and whoso is given his book in his right hand - those shall read their book, and they shall not be wronged a single date-thread. (Arberry’s Translation)

(And remember) the Day when We shall call together all human beings with their (respective) Imām [their Prophets, or their records of good and bad deeds, or their Holy Books like the Qur’ān, the Taurat (Torah), the Injil (Gospel), or the leaders whom the people followed in this world]. So whosoever is given his record in his right hand, such will read their records, and they will not be dealt with unjustly in the least. (Muhammad al-Hilali’s Translation)

One day We shall call together all human beings with their (respective) Imāms: those who are given their record in their right hand will read it (with pleasure), and they will not be dealt with unjustly in the least. (Yusuf Ali's Translation)

On the day when We shall summon all men with their record, whoso is given his book in his right hand – such will read their book and they will not be wronged a shred. (Pickthall's Translation)

(Remember) the day when We will summon every people with their leader (Imām); then whosoever is given his book (of deeds) in his right hand, then these shall read their book (joyfully), and they shall not be dealt with (even the breadth of a thread) unjustly. (Mir Ahmed Ali's Translation)

### **Analysis:**

Arberry and Pickthall have chosen to translate “*Imāmihim*” as “their record”, because the rest of the verse 71 of Chapter 17 speaks about the book, which will be given to some human beings in their right hands.

Muhammad al-Hilali retains the word “Imām”, but chooses to explain in brackets that it means several things such as Prophets, Books and leaders whom the people followed in the world. Yusuf Ali translates the word “Imām” in its plural form prefixed by the word ‘respective’ in brackets. If the word in the original Arabic had been in the plural it would have read “*a’immah*” and not “*Imām*”.

Mir Ahmed Ali translates correctly as “their leader (Imām)”. This is corroborated by the translation of verse 124 of Surah 2 by all the above translators who, in the context of Ḥaḏrat Ibrāhīm, translate the word “Imām” as ‘leader’. This discussion therefore raises the interesting question of why the translators give a variety of meanings to the same word in the Qur’ān?

## **6. Sūratu’l-Fāṭir (Chapter 35), āyat 10:**

### **Transliteration:**

*“Man kāna yurīdu’l-‘izzata fa-li’llāhi’l-‘izzatu jamī’ā. Ilayhi yaṣ’adu’l-kalimu’ṭ-ṭayyibu wa’l-‘amalu’ṣ-ṣāliḥu yarfa’uhu.”*

Whosoever desires glory, the glory altogether belongs to God. To Him good words go up, and the righteous deed - He uplifts it; (Arberry's Translation)

Whosoever desires honour, power and glory then to God belong all honour, power and glory [and one can get honour, power and glory only by obeying and worshipping God (Alone)]. To Him ascend (all) the goodly words, and the righteous deeds exalt it (i.e. the goodly words are not accepted by God unless and until they are followed by good deeds), (Muhammad al-Hilali's Translation)

If any do seek for glory and power, - to God belong all glory and power. To Him mount up (all) Words of Purity: It is He Who exalts each Deed of Righteousness. (Yusuf Ali's Translation)

Whoso desireth power (should know that) all power belongeth to Allah. Unto Him good words ascend, and the pious deed doth He exalt; (Pickthall's Translation)

Whosoever desires honour (should know) that all honour belongs to Allah. All good words go up to Him, and it is He who exalts each deed of righteousness. (Mir Ahmed Ali's Translation)

#### **Analysis:**

In the above five translations of āyat 10 of Sūrah 35, only the translation of Muhammad al-Hilali is accurate according to the grammatical construction that "the good" is the subject and it is the good deeds that lift up the good words or prayers of human beings up to the Divine court. However, in his translation the pronoun 'it' is singular whereas its subject 'good words' is plural.

The other four translations have attributed the lifting up of the good deeds to God, which is incorrect.

### **7. Sūratu'sh-Shūrā (Chapter 42), āyat 52:**

#### **Transliteration:**

*“Wa-ka-dhālika awḥaynā ilayka rūḥan min amrinā: mā kunta tadrī ma'l-kitābu wa-la'l-īmānu wa-lākin ja'alnāhu nūran nahdī bihi man nashā'u min 'ibādinā; wa-innaka la-tahdī ilā ṣirāṭin mustaqīm.*

Even so We have revealed to thee a Spirit of Our bidding. Thou knewest not what the Book was, nor belief; but We made it a light, whereby We guide whom We will of Our servants. And thou, surely thou shalt guide unto a straight path (Arberry's Translation)

And thus We have sent to you (O Muhammad) *Ruḥan* (an Inspiration, and a Mercy) of Our Command. You knew not what is the Book, nor what is Faith? But We have made it (this Qur'ān) a light wherewith We guide whosoever of Our slaves We will. And verily, you (O Muhammad) are indeed guiding (mankind) to the Straight Path (i.e. God's religion of Islamic Monotheism). (Muhammad al-Hilali's Translation)

And thus have We, by Our command, sent inspiration to thee: thou knewest not (before) what was Revelation, and what was Faith; but We have made the (Qur'ān) a Light, wherewith We guide such of Our servants as We will; and verily thou dost guide (men) to the Straight Way, (Yusuf Ali's Translation)

And thus have We inspired in thee (Muhammad) a Spirit of Our command. Thou knewest not what Scripture was, nor what the Faith. But We have made it a light whereby We guide whom We will of Our bondmen. And lo! Thou verily dost guide unto a right path: (Pickthall's Translation)

Thus did We reveal to you Our guidance by Our command. You did not know what the book was, nor the faith, but We made it a light by which We guide whomsoever We will of Our servants. Verily you guide to the right path, (Mir Ahmed Ali's Translation)

### **Analysis:**

In this very important verse, the word *rūḥ* is correctly translated as 'Spirit' by Arberry and Pickthall, whereas the other three translators translate it variously as 'inspiration, mercy and guidance'. Secondly, the word *ja'alnāhu*, which means "We made it" refers to the Spirit. Arberry and Pickthall and Mir Ahmed Ali have all translated it as the pronoun 'it'. However, the other two translators have ascribed this word to the Revelation and put the word Qur'ān in brackets to give the meaning that the word light refers to the Qur' ān. This is incorrect because as we see the book is not mentioned on its own, it is accompanied by 'faith' therefore the pronoun would have been *ja'alnāhumā* since the object would be dual. The object, however is *rūḥ* and it is in the singular. The verse therefore talks about the *rūḥ* that was revealed or sent to Prophet Muhammad, which God made into *nūr* or light. It is this very *nūr*, also mentioned in Sūrah 33, āyat 46, which God promises in Sūrah 9, āyat 32 and Sūrah 61, āyat 8 that the disbelievers will never be able to extinguish.

## 8. Sūratu't-Taḥrīm (Chapter 66), āyat 12:

### Transliteration:

*“Wa Maryama’bnata ‘Imrāna’llatī aḥṣanat farjahā fa-nafakhnā fihī min rūḥinā wa-ṣaddaḡat bi-kalimāti Rabbihā wa kutubihī wa kānat mina’l-qānitīn.”*

And Mary, Imran's daughter, who guarded her virginity, so We breathed into her of Our Spirit, and she confirmed the Words of her Lord and His Books, and became one of the obedient. (Arberry's Translation)

And Maryam (Mary), the daughter of ‘Imran who guarded her chastity. And We breathed into (the sleeve of her shirt or her garment) through Our *Rūḥ* [i.e. Jibrail (Gabriel)], and she testified to the truth of the Words of her Lord [i.e. believed in the Words of God: "Be!" and he was; that is ‘Isa (Jesus) - son of Maryam (Mary) as a Messenger of God], and (also believed in) His Scriptures, and she was of the *Qānitūn* (i.e. obedient to God). (Muhammad al-Hilali's Translation)

And Mary the daughter of ‘Imran, who guarded her chastity; and We breathed into (her body) of Our spirit; and she testified to the truth of the words of her Lord and of His Revelations, and was one of the devout (servants). (Yusuf Ali's Translation)

And Mary, daughter of ‘Imran, whose body was chaste, therefore We breathed therein something of Our Spirit. And she put faith in the words of her Lord and His Scriptures, and was of the obedient. (Pickthall's Translation)

And Mary the daughter of ‘Imran, who guarded her chastity; and breathed We into her Our spirit, and she testified the truth of the words of her Lord, and His scriptures, and she was of the obedient (servants). (Mir Ahmed Ali's Translation)

### Analysis:

This particular verse is a real test for the translators! It is also one of those verses of the Qur’ān, which is impossible to do justice to without the help of *ta’wīl*.

All five translators have side-stepped the word underlined in the transliteration, that is *farjahā* and translated it as her body, or ‘therein’ or qualified it with ‘sleeve of her shirt or garment’. Any basic Arabic to English

dictionary shows that the word means 'her pudendum or sexual organ'. Without *ta'wīl* it is extremely difficult to do a literal translation of this *āyat*.

In *ta'wīl*, as has been explained in the *Shish Faṣl* of Ḥakīm Nāṣir-i Khusraw, the pudendum symbolises the ear into which the Spirit of God was breathed and which led to Ḥazrat Maryam's spiritual development and progress. The endnote given by Professor Ivanow in his translation of *Shish Faṣl* is very interesting in this regard. It reads: "Early Christian Gnostics who denied Christ's physical nature, often taught that Christ entered the Virgin Mary through her ear (and was born from the other). The ear was considered the natural entrance for the Word of God (Christ), probably symbolically, but such entry was often depicted on early Eastern Christian icons."<sup>5</sup>

## 9. Sūratu'l-Mulk (Chapter 67), āyats 3-4:

### Transliteration:

*Alladhī khalaqa sab'a samāwātīn ṭibāqā: mā tarā fī khalqī'r-Raḥmānī min tafāwut. Fa'rjī'il baṣara hal tarā min futūr?*

Who created seven heavens one upon another. Thou seest not in the creation of the All-merciful any imperfection. Return thy gaze; seest thou any fissure? Then return thy gaze again, and again, and thy gaze comes back to thee dazzled, aweary. (Arberry's Translation)

Who has created the seven heavens one above another, you can see no fault in the creation of the Most Gracious. Then look again: "Can you see any rifts?" Then look again and yet again, your sight will return to you in a state of humiliation and worn out. (Muhammad al-Hilali's Translation)

He Who created the seven heavens one above another: No want of proportion wilt thou see in the Creation of (God) Most Gracious. So turn thy vision again: seest thou any flaw? Again turn thy vision a second time: (thy) vision will come back to thee dull and discomfited, in a state worn out. (Yusuf Ali's Translation)

Who hath created seven heavens in harmony. Thou (Muhammad) canst see no fault in the Beneficent One's creation; then look again: Canst thou see any rifts? Then look again and yet again, thy sight will return unto thee weakened and made dim. (Pickthall's Translation)

Who created the seven heavens one above the other. You do not see any flaw in the creations of AR-RAḤMĀN. Then look again. Do you see any fissure? Turn your eyes again and again. Your gaze shall turn back dulled and tired. (Mir Ahmed Ali's Translation)

### **Analysis:**

The word '*tafāwut*' in the above verse has been translated as imperfection, want of proportion, fault (twice) and flaw. However a quick reference to an Arabic-English dictionary shows that this word simply means: difference, disharmony, disparity and dissimilarity.

Why have the translators ignored the real lexical meanings? Could it be that they have seen that the creation of God is full of differences and could not reconcile this verse to the actual reality?

The holy Qur'ān as a Book of revelation encompasses both the world of creation (*'ālam-i khalq*) as well as the world of command (*'ālam-i amr*)<sup>6</sup>. The *āyats* under discussion are referring to the world of command or the spiritual world, which is the world of oneness. This is indicated by the fact that here the creation is mentioned as being that of AR-RAḤMĀN or the Beneficent One. In the world of command there is unity and therefore there are no differences, unlike the physical or created world, which is full of differences because it is the realm of multiplicity.

The second word underscored in the transliteration is "*futūr*", which again has been translated as fissure or rift. This again is very far from its dictionary meaning, which is listlessness, languor, lassitude.

### **Conclusion:**

A comparative study of only nine references from the holy Qur'ān has amply demonstrated that students of the Scripture of Islam in translation must be aware of the constraints involved.

The noble Qur'ān is the final and consummate revelation of God. It encompasses both the world of creation, that is, the physical world as well as the world of command or the spiritual world. If the translators are not aware of this basic fact, they are likely to confuse one for the other, leaving the readers/students confused and misled.

The Qur'ān also covers all the stages of knowledge, namely *sharī'at*, *ṭarīqat*, *ḥaqīqat* and *ma'rīfat* and therefore readers must be fully aware that it speaks at different levels and it is not helpful to mix one level with another.

Finally, God speaks in the language of allegory and parable in the Qur'ān. He says in Sūrah 17, āyat 89 that He has used every kind of similitude in it. God further says in Chapter 3, verse 7 that “nobody knows the *ta'wīl* of the Qur'ān save Allah and the *rāsikhūn fi'l-ilm*”. Thus, for an authoritative interpretation of the holy Book we need to refer to them. The *tanzīl* or *zāhir* of the Qur'ān, which is couched in similitudes and parables, may be apparently contradictory and confusing, but its *ta'wīl* or *bāṭin* is logical and easy to understand. However, to understand the *ta'wīl* of the *rāsikhūn fi'l-ilm* it is a pre-requisite to have the correct literal meaning of the Qur'ān.

Thus, the lesson that emerges from the above discussion, to repeat the title of this paper is that “There is many a slip betwixt the Text and the Translation” and we should all in the interest of truth follow the motto of: “Handle translations of the Qur'ān with care!”

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<sup>1</sup> *Life and Lectures of the Grand Missionary al-Mu'ayyad fi'd-Dīn al-Shirāzī* trans. Prof. Jawad Muscati & Khan Bhadur A.M. Moulvi (Karachi, 1966), pp. 96-98.

<sup>2</sup> “Them” is obviously a typographical mistake for the word “they”.

<sup>3</sup> Mir Ahmad Ali, S.V., *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary* (New York, 1988), p. 472.

<sup>4</sup> Badī'uz-Zamān Furūzānfar, *Aḥādīth-i Mathnawī* (Tehran, 1968), p. 83.

<sup>5</sup> Nāṣir-i Khusraw, *Shish Fasl*, ed. & trans. W. Ivanow (Bombay, 1949), p. 90, footnote 20a.

<sup>6</sup> See Sūrah 7, āyat 54.



## The Holy Qur'ān in the Ginānic Literature – An Initial Exploration

This paper seeks to demonstrate the underlying teachings of the holy Qur'ān in the Ginānic Literature, therefore it is essential, first of all to describe the nature of the Qur'ān, as well as that of the Gināns in order to understand better the relationship between them.

The holy Qur'ān is the Divine revelation to the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.s.) and unites the entire Muslim *ummah*. In its own words in Sūrah 26, verses 192 to 195: “It is a revelation of the Lord of the worlds, which the True Spirit has brought down upon your (i.e. Prophet Muhammad's) heart that you may be of the warners in plain Arabic speech.” We further learn from the Qur'ān in Sūrah 56, verses 77-80 that: “This is indeed a noble Qur'ān in the *Kitāb-i makhnūn* or the hidden Book, which none touches except the purified, a revelation from the Lord of the worlds”. *Kitāb-i makhnūn* is also described as the *Kitāb-i munir* (35:25) or the Luminous Book, which is the source of the Books of all the previous Messengers of God, about whom God says: “And We never sent a messenger save with the language of his people or nation (*qawm*), that he might make the message clear for them.” (Sūrah 14, verse 4). These scriptural references establish that the Prophets through their spiritual elevation, which in the case of Prophet Muhammad (s.a.s.) is described as the *Mi'rāj*, have access to the *Kitāb-i munir* or the *Kitāb-i makhnūn* and then they express their spiritual experiences in the language of their people. The transition from the luminous spiritual dimension to people's language requires that such sublime experiences be couched in the language of parables and allegories, thus the Prophets have to “teach the wisdom of the Book”, technically known as the *ta'wil* or esoteric interpretation. In Shia Imami Ismaili Islam this function of giving the *ta'wil* or inner meaning of the allegories and parables of the Qur'ān is done by the *rāsikhūn fi'l-'ilm* (i.e. those who are firmly grounded in knowledge). When Imam al-Baqir was asked the identity of the *rāsikhūn fi'l-'ilm* mentioned in (3:7), he replied: “The foremost of them is God's Messenger, for God taught him all that was revealed to him of the *tanzil* and the *ta'wil* and he knew the *ta'wil* of everything that was revealed to him, with no exception. After him, the legatees (i.e. his successors, the Imams) are the *rāsikhūn* who know its *ta'wil* in its entirety.”<sup>1</sup>

To turn now to the Gināns, the focus of this Conference, in Christopher Shackle and Zawahir Moir's words: “... the word Ginān itself is quite clearly a local phonetic realization of the familiar Sanskrit word *jnana* – ‘knowledge’. In the hymns themselves, the term Ginān is in

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<sup>1</sup>Qazi Nu'mān, *Da'ā'im al-Islām*, I, 22-23.

fact most frequently used in the basic sense of the higher knowledge to which Ismaili teachings give access.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, Gināns are a corpus of esoteric literature the main aim of which is to teach *ma`rifat* or Divine recognition. This assumes great significance in the context of the fact that as “*Bāṭiniyyun* or esotericists” Ismailis throughout their history have emphasised the esoteric or *bāṭini* aspect of their faith, harking back to the well-known saying of Hazrat Mawlana Ali (s.a.): “*Man `arafa nafsahu faqad `arafa Rabbahu* = The one who recognises his/her soul recognises his/her Lord”.

At this juncture a few words on the Ismaili *da`wat* may be appropriate. During the course of its history, under the guidance of the Divinely designated hereditary Ismaili Imams, there has been a system of *da`wat*, which at times was openly active and at other times secretly active depending on the historical context. The main purpose of this *da`wat* or system of conversion was to bring people into the fold of the Ismaili *tariqah*, through recognising the Imam of the time in the light of the holy Qur`ān. Thus this *da`wat* was highly sensitive to the cultural and intellectual environment in which it took place. For instance in the Fatimid times, the *da`is* used the language of Neo-Platonism to convey their beliefs whereas in the Persian period Ismaili terminology uses Sufi terms such as Pir, Shah and Jama`at khanah but which have a specifically Ismaili meaning. Similarly, in the Indian sub-continental *da`wat*, the Pirs and Sayyids used the languages, cultures and the religious mythology of the Hindus to convert them to the Ismaili *tariqah*. A very apt reference to this is in the Ginān “*Eji dei gurke vacha heje thir na rahena*” where Pir Tajdin says:

*Varan chhatris sur bayetali bhakhiya*

*Berda kane na sunan ho jirebhai*

O brother! Though we have composed Gināns in 36 musical modes and 42 dialects,

The deaf will not listen.

This method of proselytization continued right up to the early times of the 48<sup>th</sup> Imam, Mawlana Sultan Muhammad Shah (s.a.) who later on brought conversion to an end. The Ismaili system of *da`wat* spanning more than thirteen centuries, in which the essence of the Qur`ān was expressed in diverse languages and different modes, created a rich heritage of diversity within the unity of the faith of Islam. The Pirs and Sayyids mostly of Persian origin were extremely well versed not only in the *tanzil* or *zāhir* of the Qur`ān, but also in its *ta`wil* or *bāṭin*. Inspired by love and devotion for the Imam and confident of the truth of the Ismaili faith, they travelled on foot or animals across high mountains and vast deserts to reach the

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<sup>2</sup> Shackle C. & Moir Z., *Ismaili Hymns from South Asia – An Introduction to the Ginans* (London, 1992), p. 17.

various parts of India to bring the *da`wat-i haqq* or ‘invitation to the truth’, which is the original name of the Ismaili *da`wat*. *Da`wat-i haqq* translates beautifully into *Sat-panth*, the true path or *ṣirāt-i mustaqīm*, “the strait way traced by God’s finger for the eternal happiness of the humblest as of the greatest – Abraham, Jesus, Mohammed” as Mawlana Sultan Muhammad Shah (s.a.) says in his Memoirs.<sup>3</sup> In Ismaili belief the pure genius of the Pirs, the equivalent in Arabic is *Hujjats*, is also due to the fact that they are the highest personnel in the *ḥudud-i dīn* or religious hierarchy after the Imam and as such they receive *ta`yīd* (spiritual help) from him, as an Ismaili poet says:

“Az dil-i hujjat ba-hadrat rah buwad;  
 Ū ba-ta`yīd-i dilash agah buwad,  
 From the heart of the hujjat to the Imam there is a path;  
 the Imam is [always] aware of sending ta`yīd to his heart.”<sup>4</sup>

This concept is also expressed in various Gināns. For example in the Ginān “*Bindrare van man sukh chare re gavantri*” Pir Sadardin recounts the story of a cow, who is caught by a lion, but succeeds in persuading him to let her go because her young calf is waiting to be fed. The lion agrees and the cow goes to feed her calf, who enquires why its mother is so pre-occupied and worried. She tells the calf her reason for wanting to return quickly to fulfil her promise to the lion. The calf insists on accompanying the mother and faced with the lion, tells the latter to first eat him. The lion impressed by the impeccable ethical behaviour and the zest for sacrifice of the calf and the cow asks: Who has instructed you thus? They replied: “*Etli re sudh budh chaande suraje didhi*”, that is, they had learnt this lesson from the sun and the moon. Here in this Ginān the sun stands for the Shah or the Imam and the moon stands for the *Hujjat* or Pir who receives the light of the sun of Imamāt directly. This example also demonstrates how the sequence of words in various languages differs. In Arabic and Persian it would be Shah followed by Pir, which is also correct conceptually, that is, sun and moon or *suraj ane chaand*, but in the Indian languages it is contrary to this. In the Ismaili *Jama`at* we are also familiar with the phrase ‘*mata ane pita*’ in the translations, whereas in the English communications of the Imam to the *Jama`at* the sequence is ‘paternal and maternal’. Interestingly, the Qur`ān in Sūrah Qiyāmah (75), verse 9 states: “And the sun and the moon are united”. Whereas the exoteric people await the uniting or joining of the physical sun and moon, which is impossible because the sun’s extreme temperatures would simply consume the moon if by any cataclysm it were to go near the sun, in the esoteric Ismaili *ṭarīqah* in the light of what has been mentioned earlier, it can be interpreted as the joining of the institution

<sup>3</sup> Mawlana Sultan Muhammad Shah, *The Memoirs of Aga Khan – World Enough and Time* (London, 1954), p. 177.

<sup>4</sup> Allamah Nasir Hunzai, *Silsila-yi nur-i Imamāt* (Karachi, 1957), p.49.

of *Piratan* with the institution of Imamāt in the time of Mawlana Sultan Muhammad Shah. Subsequently, the Imam gave the status of Pir only posthumously to his loyal *murids*, such as Pir Sabzali.

The topic of this paper “The Holy Qur’ān in the Ginānic Literature” was inspired by the *farmans* of Mawlana Sultan Muhammad Shah (s.a.) as well as the resonance of both the Qur’ān and the Gināns in my personal practice of faith over the last three decades. There are some amazing insights in the 48<sup>th</sup> Imam’s *farmans* regarding the relationship of the Qur’ān and the Gināns. On 5<sup>th</sup> July 1899 at Zanzibar he said:

તમને પીર સદરદીને જે ગીનાનો રચી આપ્યા છે તેમાં.  
કુરઆનનું સાર તત્વ કાઢીને, હિંદુસ્તાનની ભાષામાં સંભળાવ્યા છે.

Which translates as: “Pir Sadardin has composed for you Gināns by extracting the essence of the Qur’ān and stating it in the language of Hindustan.”<sup>5</sup>

On the 13<sup>th</sup> July 1899, he said:

પીર સદરદીને તમને હકીકતી દીન દેખાડ્યો તે, તરત નહિ  
દેખાડ્યો હતો. પહેલા હિંદુ ધર્મની નમ્નિહતો કરી અને ત્યાર બાદ  
સતપંથ દીનનો રસ્તો, તેઓના દીન સાથે જોડી દેખાડ્યો, ત્યારે આ  
દીનનો ફેલાવો થયો છે.

That is: “Pir Sadardin did not show you (the path of) the *haqiqatī* religion all at once. First he explained the counsels of the Hindu faith and subsequently he conflated the path of the *Satpanth* with it, because of which this religion spread.”<sup>6</sup>

In the same *farman* he also said:

તમે જાણો છો કે, પીર સદરદીન કયા ગામના હતા? તમે  
તેમની તવારીખ પઠો તો તમને ખબર પડે. તમે હિંદુ હતા, પીર  
સદરદીને કુરઆને શરીફની તફસીરભાષી ગીનાનો રચીને તમને  
સંભળાવ્યા.

“Do you know which city Pir Sadardin came from? You will know if you read his history. You were Hindus. Pir Sadardin composed Gināns from the exegesis of the Qur’ān-i Sharif for you.”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *Kalam e Imam e Mubin*, (Mumbai, 1950), Part 1, p. 85.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

And again:

તમારામાં એવા ઇમાનદાર માણસો જોઈએ, જે, કુરઆને શરીફ  
પડ્યા હોય, તેમજ ગીનાનમાં પણ બરાબર વાકેફગાર હોય તો, અમે  
તેઓને ગીનાનની એકએક કડી, કુરઆને શરીફમાંથી કાઢી આપીએ,  
જે તે, તમને કહી સંભળાવે; પણ એવો કોઈ નથી !

“Were there among you such faithful people who had studied the Qur’ān-i Sharif and who were also familiar with the Gināns, I would have shown them each verse of the Gināns in the Qur’ān, which they could reiterate to you, but there is no such person!”<sup>8</sup>

This brings us to the point of discussing some highly instructive affinity in the verses of the holy Qur’ān and the Gināns:

In the Ginān “*Dur deshthi ayo vanjaro*”, Pir Sadardin states: ‘*Eji sute bethe bhai rah chalanteji Naam Sahebji lijiyeji* = Sleeping, sitting O brother or walking along the way, take the Name of the Imam’.

In his composition, Pir Hasan Kabirdin says: ‘*Eji khadiya padiya letiya bethiya mede bhaive, hardam sami rajo sambhariye* = O my brother! Standing or lying down, reclining or sitting, remember Mawla all the time’.

Let us look at the Qur’ānic verses 190-191 in Chapter 3 or *Sūrah Al-i Imran*, which reads: “The men of intellect are those who remember Allah standing, sitting and reclining (*Uli’l- albāb allazina yaz-kurūnallāha qiyāman wa qu’ūdan wa `alā junūbihim ...*).

The similarity in the words is obvious, perhaps what is not so obvious is the fact that the emphasis after the declaration of *qiyāmat* at Alamut was on the esoteric practice of the faith, one pillar of which was to encourage followers to be *da`āimu`z-zikr*, that is to remember God constantly. This is a recurring theme of the Gināns and many will instantly recall Imam Begum’s “*Har dam zikr karna*” and “*Har dam jamo Pir Shah nun jaap, japanta rahiye*”.

Another theme is in the Ginān of Sayyid Imam Shah: ‘*Uth baythere kiya suta, tera sona bhalera nahin, tera Shah Pir kadi na sove, tuje sona kyun bhava, tera Mawla kadi na sove, tuje sona kyun bhava* = Get up and sit (in meditation/*bandagil`ibādat*), why do you sleep? Sleeping is not beneficial. Your Shah Pir never sleep so why does sleeping please you? Your Mawla never sleeps, so why does sleeping please you?’

This immediately reminds us of the *Āyatu`l-Kursi* which is universally known as the greatest of the Qur’ān’s verses, that is the *a`zamu`l-āyāt*, which runs as follows: “*Allāhu lā ilāha illā*

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

*hū al-Ḥayyū'l-Qayyūm, lā ta'khuzuhu sinatun wa lā nawm* = Allah! There is no God save Him, [He is] the Everliving, the Everlasting, neither slumber nor sleep overtake Him.” (Sūrah 2:255)

The key word *Kursi*, which translates as Pedestal, and in Ismaili *ta'wil* symbolises the Universal Soul is in the above verse. The Qur'ānic word *'Arsh*, which translates as the Throne, symbolising the Universal Intellect, is mentioned twenty-two times in the holy Qur'ān. These purely Arabic words, filled with esoteric meanings appear in the Ginān of Pir Sadardin entitled “*Sakhi maha pad kerī vaat ke ko'ik janere*”, where vernacularising these two words he says: ‘*Sakhi Aras Kurasna kot, ke joya nirkhire, Eva sapt dip navkhand, ke joya parkhire* = Friend, I beheld the place of the lofty Throne and the Pedestal, I recognised the seven islands and nine continents’.

Another theme is the falsity and temporality of this world, both in the Gināns and the Qur'ān. Pir Sadardin says “*Juthire dunya tame kani bhulo* = this world is false, a delusion, do not forget”. Sayyid Muhammad Shah describes the limited nature of this world and says: “*Ugamiya sohi din athamiya, hanre phuliya sohi karmae, chuniya mindar dhali pade, hanre janamiya sohi marjae* = The day which dawns will end, the blossoming flower will wither, the buildings will crumble and everyone who is born will die”. This is mirrored in the Qur'ān in Sūrah Ḥadid, 57, verse 20:

“Know you (all), that the life of this world is but play and amusement, pomp and mutual boasting and multiplying, (in rivalry) among yourselves, riches and children. Here is a similitude: How rain and the growth which it brings forth, delight (the hearts of) the tillers; soon it withers; you will see it grow yellow; then it becomes dry and crumbles away. But in the Hereafter is a Penalty severe (for the devotees of wrong). And Forgiveness from God and (His) Good Pleasure (for the devotees of God). And what is the life of this world, but goods and chattels of deception?”

In the Ginān “*Jirewala Satgur sathe gothadi kije*” Pir Sadardin uses the refrain: ‘*Re wala aaj Hari (Ali) mare angane aaviya, sathe anant karod dev laviya; chaud loke vadhaviya* = Ali has come to my threshold accompanied by countless elevated souls”. The holy Qur'ān's equivalent is in Sūrah 89, āyat 22: “*Wa jā'ā Rabbuka wa'l-malaku ṣaffan ṣaffā* = And your Lord shall come with angels rank upon rank.”

Similarly in Pir Hasan Kabirdin's Ginān “*Kalpat jalpat maya e mohi*”, the refrain runs: “*So Allah gun tera, piya gun tera, saheb gun tera, Ya Shah avgun bahot hameraji, sab gune bandeke fazal karo mora Saheb* = O Allah! O Beloved! O Mawla! All praise is due to you,

my faults are innumerable, my sins many, O Lord! Have mercy. Let us juxtapose this with the cry of Hazrat Dhu'n-Nun, better known as Hazrat Yunus: "*Lā ilāha illā anta Subḥānaka, innī kuntu mina 'z-zālimīn!*" = There is no God but You who is free from all attributes, indeed I am among the wrong-doers" (Sūrah 21:87).

The Qur'ān is mentioned by its name in several Gināns. One important reference is Pir Sadardin's "*Eji Allah ek khasam sabuka*" in which verse two reads: '*Eji Nabi Muhammad bujo bhai, to tame pamo Imam, mushri(a)k man to kaffir kahinye, moman dil Qur'ān*'. This resonates in the Qur'ān as "But it is clear revelations in the hearts of those who have been given knowledge and none deny our revelations save the wrong-doers." (Sūrah 29, verse 49).

An extremely interesting example of the affinity of the Qur'ān with the contents of Gināns is to be found in Pir Shams Ghazi's Ginān "*Ek tirath vend-da*" in verse 5 he says: "*Esa dar mede Saheb rajeda sendada, suide dafe vich hasti mavna, vira mavna* = My Lord Mawla's door is as if the elephant passes through the eye of the needle". Here the Pir uses the common animal of India, the huge elephant passing through the needle's eye to demonstrate how hard it is to follow the *Satpanth*. This is no doubt an allusion to the Qur'ānic verse 40 in Sūrah 7, where it states: "Lo! Those who deny Our revelations and scorn them, for them the gates of heaven will not be opened nor will they enter the Garden until the camel goes through the needle's eye." Remaining with the theme of animals, in *Man samajani* (Edification of the self) it is stated: "The great pundit reads everything. Just like an ass carrying a load of fragrant sandalwood, what can he know of the precious cargo hoisted upon him?"<sup>9</sup> In the same vein, the holy Qur'ān in Sūrah 62, āyat 5, God says: "The likeness of those who are entrusted with the Law of Moses, yet apply it not, is as the likeness of the ass carrying books."

All the examples I have cited so far show that many themes and teachings of the Qur'ān, if not exactly copied word for word, are reflected in the content of the Gināns. However there is scarcely any mention of the *shari'a* practices of Islam such as *ṣalāt*, *ṣawm*, *ḥajj* etc. Where the Persian equivalents *namāz* and *roza* are used they are very much in the esoteric sense of inner purification and prayer. For example, in the Ginān of Pir Shams, he says: "*Man mera musalla, Allah mera qazi; kaya meri masita. Eji andar beth men namaz gujarun; murakh kiya jane ta`at hamari* = My heart is my prayer carpet, Allah is my judge; my body is my mosque. I sit and perform my *namāz* inside; how can the ignorant understand my *ta`at* or obedience." Similarly in *Man samajani*, Pir Shams describes the *roza* or fasting of all the organs of the

<sup>9</sup> Virani, Shafique N. "Symphony of Gnosis – A Self-definition of the Ismaili GinĀn Tradition" in *Reason and Inspiration in Islam*, ed. T. Lawson (London, 2005), p. 511.

body, starting with the head, the eyes, nose, mouth, tongue, ears, heart, *nafs* (soul), hands and feet. He says: “*Das roja je dhare bhai, te chhe moman vir re bhai* = Whoever achieves the ten fasts, he/she is the valiant *mu'min*”.

It is important to point out that during the Alamut period of Ismaili history, the most significant event of *Idu'l-Qiyāmat* transformed the religious practices of the Ismailis who have always been called the *Bāṭiniyyun* or esotericists. The Ismaili *da'wat* emphasised its esoteric or *ta'wili* form, after the declaration of the *qiyāmati* teachings by Imam Hasan *‘ala dhikrihi’s-salam* (d. 561/1166).

Comparing the difference between the two periods of *tanzil* or *shari‘at* and *ta'wil* or *qiyāmat*, Nasir al-Din Tusi (d. 672/1274) says that in the former period, obedience is performed within the confines of set timings, and worship is immersed in fixed timings, whereas in the latter time, obedience is performed with the removal of the fixed timings and the entire time is immersed in [a state of] obedience.<sup>10</sup>

This difference in the nature of worship and obedience is clearly explained by Imam al-Mustansir bi’llah al-Husayni (d. 885/1480) in his *faramin*. He says:

“The whole year you must fast, just as the *zāhiris* (the literalists) fast one month. The meaning of this fast is *riyazat* (spiritual exercise). Watch yourselves, keep yourselves away from bad qualities, evil and indecent actions and devilish acts, so that the mirror of your hearts may be gradually polished.

Also know that in those thirty days during which the *zāhiris* fast, the *‘id* is only for one day. They fast thirty days in order to attain that one day and that again is a symbol. Just as they fast thirty days in order to attain one day, so you must undergo the entire life of difficulties, pain, have patience, do *riyādat* and keep fasting internally in order to attain the beatific vision (*liqā’/didār*) of your Lord.”<sup>11</sup>

The Imam then explains the *ta'wili* or esoteric fasting. He says:

“The fast of the head means to treat one’s own head as the feet of the people, casting out from one’s head the desire for superiority, greatness and pride, because these attributes befit only God, Who is everlasting and the Master of

<sup>10</sup> Nasir al-din Tusi, *Rawḍatu’t-Taslim*, p. 102.

<sup>11</sup> Imam Mustansir billah al-Husayni II, *Pandiyāt-i Jawānmardi*, ed. and trans. W. Ivanow (Bombay, 1950), p. 96.



the kingdom. The fasting of the eye is that he must not cast covetous looks at women who are not lawful to him. The fasting of the ear is that he should abstain from listening to slander. The fasting of the tongue is to avoid uttering abuse or slander. The fasting of the heart is to keep it free from doubt. The fasting of [his] foot is to hold it back from wrong steps. Fasting of [his] hand is to keep it away from treachery. Thus, a *mu'min* (believer) should keep all his body parts in a state of fasting, so that he may not be a wrong-doer (*zālim*).”<sup>12</sup>

Another very significant characteristic of the post-Alamut period, as pointed out in Dr. Steigerwald’s paper<sup>13</sup>, was the emphasis on the role of the Imam and particularly as explained by Sayyidna Nasir al-Din Tusi in *Rawḍatu’-Taslim* (Paradise of Submission), the *uluhiyyat* or the Divinity of the Imam. This message runs throughout the Ginānic corpus and in one Ginān Pir Sadardin warns the believers: “*Eji ek feekar munivar tamari chhe aamane, maanas roope Saheb jano ho bhai ji* = We have one concern about you *mumins*, that you will know Saheb as a human being”. Such a discussion of the humanity of the Prophet is also clear in the Qur’ān, where the disbelievers challenged his human attributes of eating and walking about the markets (see Sūrah 25, āyats 7 and 20). In Sūrah 18, āyat 110, God commands the Prophet to respond and say: *Qul innamā anā basharum mislukum yūḥā`ilay-ya* = Say: I am only a mortal like you. My Lord sends me the *wahy*/revelation.”

To draw together all the points covered so far, the Ginānic Literature reflects both the *tanzili* and the *ta’wili* aspects of the holy Qur’ān. The messages of the Qur’ān are seamlessly woven into the vernacular forms of India and use the local idioms which are familiar to the people. The symbols and similes may be contextual to the environment of India but the Pirs and Sayyids were very faithful to the message of the Shia Ismaili *tariqah*. Mawlana Sultan Muhammad Shah (s.a.) says in a *farman* dated 13<sup>th</sup> October 1903 at Ahmedabad: “Just as there are the teachings of Pir Sadardin, in the same way there are the meanings of the Mathnawī, but it is in Fārsī, therefore you should learn the meanings.”<sup>14</sup>

Further about the meaning of the Qur’ān Mawlana Jalallu’d-din Rumi says in his *Diwān*:

“*Mā zi Qur’ān barguzīdim maghz-rā*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 96-97.

<sup>13</sup> Steigerwald, D. “Gināns in Ismaili Theosophical History” presented at International Ginān Conference, London, 29-30 October, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> *Kalam e Imam e Mubin*, Part I, p. 154.

*Ustukhwān pīsh-i sagān andakhtin*

Which means: “We have extracted the kernel or essence of the Qur’ān  
We have thrown the bones to the dogs”.

To conclude this paper and quoting a Persian poet: “*Mathnawī li’l-Mawlawiyi’l-Ma’anawī; Hast Qur’ān dar zaban-i Pahlawī*”, that is, the *Mathnawī* of Mawlana Rumi is the Qur’ān in Persian, it would not be inappropriate if we say that the Gināns are the Qur’ān in the Indian languages. In fact we can look forward to such esoteric poetry within the Ismaili global *Jama`at* in languages such as Burushaski, Khwar etc.

One very final word is that we often hear members of the Indian sub-continental *Jama`at* say that since the essence of the Qur’ān is included in the Gināns it dispenses them of learning the Final revelation to humankind, the Qur’ān. Such a statement does not hold in the present globalised pluralistic world, where we do need to know the Qur’ān in its original language as well as in translation, both to communicate with the general *ummah* as well as demonstrate the true principles of pluralism by sharing a common heritage of the diverse groups in the Ismaili *Jama`at*. Moreover, if we are today living in a Knowledge Society and we have access to all sorts of technology to help us to learn, we should take every opportunity to learn the foundational Book of the faith of Islam, which as demonstrated in this article will only help the *Jama`at* of the Indo-Pak background to appreciate the Ginān Literature more.

- ❖ *This paper was presented at the International Ginan Conference of the Association for the Study of Ginans in London on 30<sup>th</sup> October 2011.*
- ❖ *The topic of this paper has necessitated the use of transliteration in three languages. Time constraints have made it impossible to use diacritical marks consistently.*
- ❖ *Special appreciation is due to Dr. Shahsultana Rafiq Jannatali and Nasiruddin Khanji for their help in identifying examples from the Gināns which echo Qur’ānic verses.*

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London.

*Man `arafa nafsahu faqad `arafa Rabbahu*

**Eternal Teachings in Changing Cultural Contexts:**

**An Analysis of Kesari Sinha by Pir Shams (*qaddas`llāhu sirrahu*)**

At the very beginning of this paper it would be appropriate to set out the Qur'ānic vision of inviting people to the faith of Islam. In the Sūrah of Nahl, chapter 16, verse 125, Allāh says: "Call to the way of your Lord with wisdom (*hikmat*) and goodly exhortation (*maw`izati`l-hasanah*), and argue with them in a manner which is the best." And in another verse, Sūrah of Al-Kahf, verse 54, He says: "And indeed We have displayed for humankind in this Qur`ān every kind of similitude (or example)".

This paper will examine how the Ismaili Hujjats/Pirs and Dā`is put into action the directive of these two verses of the holy Qur'an in the process of converting people to the Ismaili Tariqah of Islam.

The very first verse of this short, five verses only Ginan, establishes that Pīr Shams was working in the Indian sub-continent, because the phrase 'Kesari sinha' refers to the particular breed of the Asiatic lion only found in the forest of Gir in Junagadh, Gujarat and which is famous for its saffron-coloured mane. This unique breed of lion and other rare species make the Gir National Park a well-sought tourist hotspot in present times. However in the context of this paper, this lion has inspired an ancient tale in Indian folklore, the exact origin and date are not known. The research I did for this article shows that several important figures like Shri Vivekananda, Shri Ramkrishna and in contemporary times Yogiji Maharaj have used this story to instruct their followers about the hidden reality of the human soul and the need for a true guide to unveil it.

The story in telling and re-telling has a few slight variations. The common elements are that a lion cub finds itself amongst a herd of goats, and growing up with them behaves in exactly the same way as goats do, that is, it eats grass and bleats and jumps and runs around. One day a fully grown lion spots the cub and is perplexed by its behaviour and manages to separate it from the herd and taking it to a river or pond shows it its reflection. The lion cub recognises its real identity, that it is a lion and not a goat and immediately stops all its goat-like behaviour.

The purpose of this presentation is to demonstrate how Pīr Shams uses a familiar indigenous story in the spirit of the Qur'ānic instruction quoted at the beginning, to convey the eternal

teachings of the Ismaili Tariqah. In the refrain he says: *Bharam sab chodi bhai Ali Ali karana, hai bhi Ali ne hoeshe bhi Ali, esa vachan tame dil manhe dharana = Forsaking all delusions, brother keep reciting the name of `Alī. `Alī is [present] now and will always be, keep such words in your heart.* In these sentences which recur at the end of each of the five verses are encapsulated two fundamental teachings of the holy Qur`ān:

- In *hai bhi Ali ne hoeshe bhi Ali = `Alī is [present] now and will always be* is reiterated the belief that the Light of `Alī which is always present in the Imam of the time continues in this world. It is very clearly stated in the Qur`ān that Allāh’s light cannot be extinguished<sup>1</sup> and that the chain of the Prophets and Imams is a continuing chain as expressed in the concept underlying the phrase “*nūrun `ala nūr*” (or Light upon Light) in the famous Verse of Light in Sūrah of Nūr, which is the 24<sup>th</sup> Chapter of the holy Qur`ān, as well as in the Verses 33-34 of Sūrah of Āl-i `Imrān, which read: “Verily Allāh chose Ādam and Nūḥ and the descendants of Ibrāhīm and the descendants of `Imrān above all creatures. Off-spring one from the other; and Allāh is hearing, knowing.”
- Secondly in *Bharam sab chodi bhai Ali Ali karana= Forsaking all delusions, brother keep reciting the name of `Alī* is the guidance to do constant *zīkr* or remembrance of the name of the Light of God. The holy Qur`ān states in Sūrah 3, āyat 191: “Those who remember Allāh standing, sitting and reclining and reflect on the creation of the heavens and the earth, say: ‘Our Lord! You have not created all this in vain! ...’”. Standing, sitting and reclining are the three different positions of a human being in the course of his or her daily activities and this verse advises the believers to do *zīkr* in whatever situation they find themselves, that is, all the time.

Two other verses of the Qur`ān are very pertinent to the teachings of this Ginan, particularly bearing in mind the warning Pīr Shams gives in the third verse where he says: *Eji avidiya man avi padiyo sab jive, apa-pana man khooyo hathe piv, ocinto avine kare re ghirabh = Every soul [born in this world] has fallen into ignorance. In their egoism they have lost the Beloved by their own doing. It is seized suddenly by arrogance.* Here three very great barriers to spiritual progress are highlighted, namely ignorance, egoism and arrogance. The remedy for all these spiritual diseases is the constant remembrance of Allāh and thus the holy Qur`ān says in Sūrah 29, āyat 45: “Recite (O Muḥammad) what has been revealed to you of the Book, and establish

prayer/*ṣalāt*. Verily prayer/*ṣalāt* keeps you away from the obscene and detestable and verily remembrance of Allāh is greater (*wa la zikru'llāhi Akbar*). ...” The second Qur'ānic reference is Sūrah 13, āyat 28: “Those who believe and whose hearts find satisfaction in the remembrance of Allāh. Truly in the remembrance of Allāh do hearts find satisfaction (*alā bi zikri'llāhi taṭma'innu'l-qulūb*)”. The phrase ‘*taṭma'innu'l-qulūb*’ in this verse resonates the Divine welcome that awaits the *naḥsu'l-muṭma'innah*, the Satisfied Soul in Sūrah 89 verses 27 to 30, in which God says: “O you the Satisfied Soul, return to your Lord well-pleased (with him) and (He) well-pleased (with you): Enter among My servants, enter My Garden”.

The entire Ginan is obviously in the language of those who were being invited to the Ismaili Tariqah. Without having done a thorough philological analysis of it, it would be safe to say that Kesari sinha is a blending of Indic languages such as Gujarati and Hindi. However, we can with certainty say that the phrase in Verse 4 ‘*murshid kāmīl*’ is in Arabic, which means the ‘Perfect Guide’. In Ismaili literature through the ages we find the use of *Insān-i muṭlaq* (Absolute or Perfect Man), *Insān-i kāmīl*, *Shakhs-i waḥdat* (Single Man) and *murshid-i kāmīl* to refer to the “living, hereditary Imam in direct descent from the Prophet”, a phrase which has been used twice recently by Mawlana Shah Karim al-Husayni (s.a.) in his address to the Canadian Parliament last year 2014 and in his The Samuel L. and Elizabeth Jodidi Lecture at Harvard University in Massachusetts, U.S.A. on 12 November 2015. As pointed out earlier, the belief in a hereditary Imam or Divine Guide is central to the Ismaili Tariqah.

In Ismaili books the Imam of the time is described as “*Kāmīlun fī dhātihī wa mukammilun li-ghayrihī*”, that is, “He is perfect in himself and he perfects others”. The 4<sup>th</sup> verse of the Ginan says: *Eji murshid kamil ko sang karie, ave avidya sab jae visarie, tab to suje dil ki gali* = Keep the company of the Perfect Guide to dispel ignorance and then you will realise or recognise the matters of the heart, that is, the realities free from delusion. The role of the Imam in the physical and spiritual lives of his *murids* is discussed in all authentic Ismaili literature, whether prose or poetry. It is best summarised in paragraph F of the Preamble of the Constitution of the Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims:

Historically and in accordance with Ismaili tradition, the Imam of the time is concerned with spiritual advancement as well as improvement of the quality of life of his murids. The Imam’s Ta’lim lights the murids’ path to spiritual

enlightenment and vision. In temporal matters, the Imam guides the murids, and motivates them to develop their potential.

At the beginning of this paper I said that in the Indian sub-continent context the story of the lion and the goat has been used to instruct followers about the reality of the human soul and the need for a true guide. In the Ismaili tradition the true guide can only be one and that is the Imam of the time, appointed by the previous Imam through *naṣṣ*, going back in history to the appointment and designation by the Prophet Muḥammad of Hazrat Mawlana `Alī. Further, the search for spiritual enlightenment is firmly tied to the institution of Imamāt as Mawlana Sultan Muhammad Shah (s.a.) says in his Platinum Jubilee Speech in Cairo in February 1955:

But, as I have explained in my Memoirs for the whole world to understand, there are two worlds – the world of material intelligence and the world of spiritual enlightenment. The world of spiritual enlightenment is fundamentally different from the world of material intellectualism and it is the pride of Ismailis that we firmly believe that the world of spiritual enlightenment has come as a truth from the inception of Islam to this day with the Imamāt ...<sup>ii</sup>

The final verse summarises the eternal teachings of the Ismaili Tariqah. It says: *Eji bharam ne talo to sanhi ne pichano, apano ap moman pichano* = If you expel the delusion you will recognise the Beloved; O believer recognise yourself. Pir Shams in ending this Ginan is reminding the listeners of the famous *ḥadīth* or saying of Prophet Muḥammad (s.a.s.) and of Hazrat Mawlana `Alī: *Man `arafa nafsahu faqad `arafa Rabbahu*, which means “he or she who recognises their soul indeed recognises their Lord”. This teaching has existed from the very beginning of Prophet Muḥammad’s mission and Pir Shams using the story of the lion cub who in the midst of the goats had forgotten his identity or real self, reinforces the Ismaili teaching of self-recognition in the light of the Imam’s guidance, which leads to the recognition of the Lord, the ultimate purpose of human life.

This paper has attempted to show that the physical, social, linguistic and cultural context described in Kesari sinha is undoubtedly that of the Indian sub-continent. However, the teachings are those of the Shia Ismaili Tariqah as rooted in the holy Qur`ān and the teachings of the holy Prophet, Hazrat Mawlana `Alī and all Imams including Mawlana Sultan Muhammad Shah and the present Imam Shah Karim al-Husayni (*`alayhimu` s-salām*). In the history of the Ismaili *da`wah* which has spanned some 1400 years, Ismaili Ḥujjats/Pīrs and Dā`īs have used the medium of local languages, ideas, music and folklore to convey the same message of the Tariqah. This

has resulted in a heritage of a wonderful pluralism in the global Ismaili Jamat, a pluralism at the heart of which is the unifying centrality of Imamate. This plurality and diversity, which the Imam of the time has publicly described as a strength and not a weakness, is beginning to be appreciated gradually within the scattered Ismaili community by the guidance of the Imam and under the influence of globalising forces, such as migration which results in different cultures and backgrounds rubbing shoulders together. It also equips Ismailis all over the world with the tremendous advantage of real empathy and respect for other cultures which is essential for true pluralism.

In the public domain many scholars have failed to understand this pluralism of the Ismaili community and taken a myopic approach of examining Ismaili history in a segmented fashion. Such scholars have therefore written much about the influence of neo-Platonism in Fatimid Ismaili literature, or the preponderance of Sufi terminology in the Persian Ismaili books or the abundance of references to Hindu mythology and philosophy in the Ginan literature. In the last case, the Ismailis of the Indian sub-continent have actually been described as Hindus by those who refuse to accept the unfolding story of the Ismaili *da`wah* history, where the Ḥujjats or Pirs and Dā`is were sent by the Imam of the time from a different part of the world to invite the inhabitants of a new geographical area to the Dīn-i Ḥaqq (True Religion) which is the original name of the Ismaili Tariqah.

In the case of the Ginan just analysed, the composer Pīr Shams was of Iranian origin. He hailed from Sabzwar in Iran. In coming to India he would have had to learn the languages and the culture and traditions of the people he had to convert. In this endeavour he would have been inspired by the special luminous help of the Imam, which is technically known as *tā`yid*. Thus he, as other Pīrs, was able to convey the eternal teachings of the Ismaili Tariqah through the medium of Ginans. In other parts of the world, in other cultural and linguistic contexts the Ḥujjats and Dā`is used the local medium but retained the same message, namely that the Divine Light is always present in the world to guide human beings to recognise themselves and thus recognise God.

Finally, I wish to thank the Association for the Study of Ginans for giving me the opportunity to participate in this annual event. I had access to four English translations, all of which were done by learned individuals who have published books about Ginans. However, I was humbled to see that their translations of Kesari Sinha

differed substantially, proving to me that Ginans are spiritual knowledge composed by enlightened beings and they must be studied deeply and very carefully. I am very conscious that my effort has only scratched the surface!

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Markaz-I Ilm-u Hikmat, London

November, 2015

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<sup>i</sup> See Surah 9:32 and 61:8

<sup>ii</sup> "Aga Khan III – Selected Speeches and Writings of Sir Sultan Muhammad Shah", ed. K.K. Aziz (Kegan Paul International, London, 1997), Vol. II, pp. 1408-09.



## Ḥazrat Khadījatu'l-Kubrā, 'alayha's-salām

Imām-i zamān, Mawlānā Shah Karīm al-Ḥusaynī gave the following guidance in September, 1960 to the Tariqah and Religious Education Board, then called the Ismailia Association, at Karachi, Pakistan:

“Now to some of the work which the Association has ahead of it. The most important problem by far for us today is to create students who are capable of going back and of reading these texts in Arabic, of reading them in Persian, of reading them in Urdu, of reading them in Gujrati, of reading them in any language in which they have been written. More than ever today we must be able to publish authoritative documents based on primary sources. There is no point in us rereading and rereading and rereading third hand or fourth hand documents. We can only get tied up in other peoples' interpretations, get further and further away from the original concept and thoroughly muddle and cloud what should be the truth.”

The profound wisdom of this *farmān* has become more and more evident as the years have gone by and the academic world has become more aware of the biases and misrepresentations that are present in the books available on Islam. The matter becomes even more serious and urgent in the context of the esoteric interpretation of Islam. The following article is a humble attempt to demonstrate the wide gap between the primary sources and the 'third hand or fourth hand documents', as well as the great difference in the exoteric and esoteric representations of historical events and personalities.

Pick up any book on the history of Islam and what do we learn about Ḥazrat Khadījah?

- That she was a very successful business woman who had been twice widowed
- That she was fifteen years older than the holy Prophet Muḥammad when they married and that she proposed marriage to him through an intermediary
- She was the first woman to convert to Islam

However, when the trouble is taken to refer to primary sources,<sup>1</sup> a very different picture emerges about Ḥazrat Khadījah's status and contribution to the history of our holy Prophet and Islam.

Ḥaẓrat Khadijah was the first life-companion<sup>2</sup> of Prophet Muḥammad Mustafā', the Chief of Messengers and the Seal of Prophets, may Allah's peace and salutation be upon him and his progeny. She is renowned in the history of the True Religion (*da'wat-i haqq*) for her great services. Her services impacted two cycles, namely the one before the advent of the Prophet Muḥammad and the one which he inaugurated.

She was the daughter of Ḥaẓrat Khuwaylid, the son of Asad, son of 'Abdu'l-'Uzzā, son of Mawlānā Quṣayy. Her mother was Fāṭimah who was the daughter of Zā'idah, son of al-Aṣamm, son of Rawāḥa, son of Ḥajr, son of 'Abd, son of Ma'īṣ, son of 'Āmir, son of Mawlānā Lu'ayy. Mawlānā Quṣayy and Mawlānā Lu'ayy are *mustaqarr* Imams of the fifth cycle, therefore her lineage is linked with the holy Prophet's on her father's side with the fourth ancestor and on her mother's side with the ninth ancestor. In other words, she shared the same blessed ancestry as the holy Prophet Muḥammad as both their families are the direct descendants of Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm, peace be upon him.

She was born in 555 AD. From her very childhood she displayed signs of greatness and leadership. In recognition of her purity, nobility and qualities of leadership, she was popularly known as “*Tāhirah* (pure)” and “*Sayyidatu'n-nisā'* (Chief of the ladies)”. In addition to her ethical attributes God had endowed her with material plenty. According to the author of *Nāsikhū't-tawārikh*, Mīrzā Muḥammad Taqī Sipehr, she possessed 80,000 camels! She was the chief of the successful businesswomen of Makkah, which at the time of the Prophet's birth, was a flourishing trading city and a centre of pilgrimage, etc. She was endowed with an even more significant attribute: her religious character. She was among the *ḥudūd-i dīn* (religious hierarchy) of the fifth cycle of the True Religion, about whom the Qur'ān says: “Those whom We have given the Book, recognise him (the Prophet) as they recognise their children.” (2:146; 6:20)

This article relies heavily on a primary source for Ḥaẓrat Khadijah's religious status. This source, *Sarā'ir wa-asrāru'n-nuṭaqā'* is written by Sayyidnā Ja'far bin Mansūr al-Yaman, a great Fatimid scholar and writer. In it, he says that she was a highly elevated dignitary of religion. She was Mawlānā Abū Ṭālib's *hujjat*. Mawlānā Abū Ṭālib<sup>3</sup>, whose birth names were 'Abd Munāf and 'Imrān,<sup>4</sup> was the final *mustaqarr* Imam of the cycle of Prophet Jesus. His position was that of “*sābiq*” i.e., the

manifestation of the Universal Intellect and Ḥaẓrat Khadijah was “*tāli*” i.e., the manifestation of the Universal Soul. In other words she was *hujjat-i sāhibu’l-waqt*. This means that the Prophet progressed on the ladder of *hudūd* and received spiritual knowledge from Ḥaẓrat Khadijah before progressing to the stage of receiving it directly from Ḥaẓrat Abū Ṭālib, *‘alayhi’s-salām*.

In order to understand *da`wat-i haqq* and *hudūd-i dīn*, it is important to understand that the light of Imamāt has functioned in two positions from the time of Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm to the time of Ḥaẓrat Muḥammad: permanent (*mustaqarr*) Imamāt and temporary or entrusted (*mustawda`*) Imamāt. The line of permanent Imamāt worked secretly and the line of temporary Imamāt openly, for the True Religion. After Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm his elder son, Ḥaẓrat Ismā`īl was the *mustaqarr* or permanent Imam and *mustaqarr* Imamāt continued through his son, Mawlānā Qaydār till Mawlānā Abū Ṭālib. Their spiritual status is demonstrated by the well-known story of the miracle at the time of Mawlānā `Abdu’l-Muṭṭalib, when the Ethiopian general Abrahātu’l Ashram attacked Makkah. The miracle is also mentioned in Sūratu’l-Fil in the holy Qur’ān.

The chain of *mustaqarr* Imamāt is not mentioned in Isma`ili books only. It is also mentioned in other books, such as `Abdu’l-Karīm al-Shahrastānī’s *al-Milal wa’n-nihal*, in the second part of which he writes that the Light (*Nūr*) which descended from Ḥaẓrat Ādam to Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm, was split into two parts: one continued in the children of Israel (another name of Ḥaẓrat Isaac) and the other in the children of Ḥaẓrat Ismā`īl. The light in the children of Israel functioned openly and is usually referred to in history as the Prophets of Israel, whereas the light in the children of Ḥaẓrat Ismā`īl worked secretly. Shahrastānī further adds that in history Ḥaẓrat Ismā`īl’s progeny are known as “*Ālu’llāh*” or “*Ahlu’llāh*” and Ḥaẓrat Isaac’s descendants are “*Ālu Ya`qub, Ālu Mūsā, Ālu Hārūn*”. The hidden work of *mustaqarr* Imams is also highlighted by the following *Ḥadīth* of the holy Prophet, in which he says:

“*Yā `Aliyyu kunta ma`al-anbiyā’i sirran wa ma`i jahran* (O `Ali you were hidden with all the Prophets but with me you became manifest)”.

To revert to the main focus of this paper, the holy Prophet and Ḥaẓrat Khadijah by virtue of their ancestry belonged to the True Religion of God, as He says in the Qur’ān: “Verily Abraham was an *ummah* (nation) obedient to Allah, by nature

upright, and he was not of the polytheists; thankful for His bounties. He chose him and guided him unto a straight path. And We gave him good in the world, and in the Hereafter he is among the righteous. And afterward We inspired (*awḥaynā*) you (Muḥammad) that you follow the religion of Abraham, as one by nature upright (*ḥanīf*) and he was not of the polytheists.” (*Sūrah* 16, āyats 120-123)

Further He says in the Qur’ān: “And they say: Be Jews or Christians, then you will be rightly guided. Say (unto them, O Muḥammad): Nay, but (we follow) the religion of Abraham, the upright, and he was not of the polytheists.” (2:135)

It should be understood from the above discussion that the Arabian peninsula was home to a number of beliefs and practices – there were certainly some Jews and Christians as well as pagans and idol worshippers. But there were also the *ḥanīfs* who were following the religion of Ḥaḏrat Ibrāhīm with its belief in the Oneness of God. It was this religion, which continued in his direct descendants, the families of the *mustaqarr* Imams, and these are the families of the holy Prophet and Ḥaḏrat Khadijah.

In esoteric literature, Ḥaḏrat Khadijah is not simply an ordinary *ḥanīf*, but among the spiritually elevated *ḥudūd-i dīn* who could see both the physical and spiritual worlds, whom God describes in the Qur’ān as those who could recognise the Prophet as they recognised their own children. She could judge the holy Prophet’s spiritual position and his destiny as the next *nāṭiq* or the speaking Prophet, as mentioned in *Nāsikhū’-t-tawārikh* that when the holy Prophet after receiving the first revelation returned home, she looked at him and enquired about the light, which she saw on his face. He replied: “This is the light of Prophethood, say: *Lā ilāha illa ’llāh, Muḥammadu’-r-Rasūlu ’llāh.*” Ḥaḏrat Khadijah replied: “It is years since I know you as a Prophet.” Then she recited the *shahādah*.<sup>5</sup>

In this context, very different from the usual story, Ḥaḏrat Abū Ṭālib arranged her marriage to the Prophet physically and spiritually, and in the *khutbah* he recited he indicated to the Prophet’s future position:

“Praise belongs to God, Who made us to be the off-spring of Abraham and of the seed of Ismā’īl and of the stock of Ma’add and of the race of Muḏar. He made us the caretakers of His House and administrators of His Sanctuary, which He made for us a house to which [people] make pilgrimage and a secure Sanctuary. He made us rulers of the people and blessed us in our country in which we dwell. Then this my nephew,

Muḥammad, the son of my brother ʿAbdu’llāh is not weighed against a man of Quraysh but weighs more than him in eminence, nobility, excellence and intellect, nor is compared with anyone but [proves to] be greater than him. He has no equal among the people, even though in terms of wealth he is in straitened circumstances. However, wealth is indeed a vanishing shadow, an ever-changing thing and something borrowed which demands to be returned. And Muḥammad is the one whose kinship you know. He has a desire for Khadijah and Khadijah too, has a desire for him. We have come to ask you for her hand in marriage in accordance with her consent and decree. And the dowry that you have asked for now and in the future is upon me in my property. And henceforth, by the Lord of this House, he has great news, a universal religion, a perfect opinion and a majestic and grand importance.”<sup>6</sup>

The phrase in the *khuṭbah* “he is in straitened circumstances” shows that economically speaking the Prophet was not strong. However, marriage to Ḥaḏrat Khadijah solved this problem and he could concentrate entirely on his spiritual progress, attaining the position of the sixth *nāṭiq* and the Seal of the Prophets. This is referred to in the Qur’ān: “Did He not find you destitute and enrich you?” (93:8). The holy Prophet started his mission of inviting people to the True Religion and in this Divine mission he had the unfailing support, understanding and love of Ḥaḏrat Khadijah, who was the first to support his mission and declare her faith in him.

At this point it is important to rectify a wrong concept, that is, that Ḥaḏrat Khadijah was first among those who used to worship idols and then she became the first woman to accept Islam. This wrong concept, as has already been indicated, is based on a superficial understanding that before the Prophet’s advent all the people in the Arabian peninsula were idolaters in the time of *Jāhiliyyah* or Ignorance. As has been discussed earlier, there was a diversity of beliefs and practices in Arabia of that time. More important from the point of view of this article, the *daʿwat-i ḥaqq* or the invitation to the True Religion had continued under the *mustaqarr* Imams and was known as the *millat-i Ibrāhīma* or *dīn-i ḥanīf* (cf. 16:120-23; 2:135). Therefore, although the majority of the Arabs were idol-worshippers, there was a minority, who continued to follow the True Religion under the guidance of the *mustaqarr* Imams. Mawlānā Jaʿfar aṣ-Ṣādiq says: “The Ignorance (*jāhiliyyah*) is of two kinds: the ignorance of disbelief (*kufṛ*) and the ignorance of deviation (*ẓalāl*)”.<sup>7</sup> Sayyidnā al-Muʿayyad fi’ d-Dīn Shirāzī explaining this saying, says: “The ignorance of disbelief is

that which used to be prior to the advent of Prophet Muḥammad and the ignorance of deviation is not recognising the Imam of the time”. This is supported by the speech of God, as He says: “Bedizen not yourselves with the bedizenment of the time of the former Ignorance.” (33:33). The former is the ignorance of disbelief. Then the former necessarily requires a later, and that is the ignorance of deviation.<sup>8</sup> That is to say that, the term Ignorance is given on the basis of the majority and not that the true faith did not exist at all in Arabia.

In the context of the above explanation, there are two groups of people who declare their faith in the Prophet’s mission. The first is the group who do so in the light of recognition, that is, those who “recognise the Prophet as they recognise their own children”; the second group as idol worshippers to begin with, later came into the fold of Islam. There is a world of difference in the acceptance of Islam by these two groups. Thus, if somebody includes Mawlānā Abū Ṭālib,<sup>9</sup> Ḥaẓrat Khadijah or Mawlānā ‘Alī<sup>10</sup> in the second group, they invite the criticism of perpetrating a great injustice and stand accused of great deviation. The first group’s acceptance of Islam, when Prophet Muḥammad began his mission, was in the sense that they, despite great opposition and tribulations, assisted him in his mission with all the physical, spiritual and intellectual means at their disposal. For the second group, accepting Islam was a totally new thing. Mawlānā Abū Ṭālib, Ḥaẓrat Khadijah and Mawlānā ‘Alī indeed belonged to the first group.

Another popular misconception, which needs to be laid to rest, is that when Prophet Muḥammad began to receive the Divine revelations in the cave of Mt. Hira, outside Makkah, he sought solace and comfort with Ḥaẓrat Khadijah. In the exoteric books of history this time is always portrayed as though neither the Prophet nor Ḥaẓrat Khadijah were aware of what was happening to him. Let us look at a complete quotation from the book *Muhammad – A western attempt to understand Islam* by Karen Armstrong, which as stated by the author, relies heavily on the *Sira of Ibn Ishāq* translated by A. Guillaume as the *The Life of Muhammad*. The quotation in full is as follows:

“Khadija hastened to reassure him. God did not act in such a cruel and arbitrary way. Muhammad had tried honestly to live in the way that God required and in return God would never allow him to fail: ‘You are kind and considerate toward your kin. You help the poor and forlorn and bear their burdens. You are striving to restore the high moral qualities that your people have lost. You honour the guest and go to the assistance of those in distress. This cannot be, my dear.’ To reassure him further, she

suggested that they consult her cousin Waraqa, who was learned in the scriptures and could give them more expert advice. Waraqa had no doubts at all. ‘Holy! Holy! He cried at once: ‘If you have spoken the truth to me, O Khadija, there has come to him the greatest *namus* who came to Moses aforetime, and lo, he is the prophet of his people.’”<sup>11</sup>

The dimension given in the esoteric literature is very different. Ḥazrat Khadijah was the *hujjat* of the Lord of the time and as such she was in charge of 30 *dā'īs* who worked under her to spread the True Religion. Waraqah ibn Nawfal, her cousin was actually one of the *dā'īs* working under her supervision. Thus, the story as described in the exoteric books of history, which form the basis of much of the history written and available to us, does not do justice to the real status of Ḥazrat Khadijah. There seem to be grains of truth in such stories, but they seem to have been presented according to the respective author’s understanding of Islam. For instance, again in Shi‘i sources, Waraqah was informed, not to seek any guidance from him concerning the Prophet’s spiritual experiences, but only for the sake of information.<sup>12</sup>

Ḥazrat Khadijah was physically and spiritually a source of peace and happiness for the holy Prophet. Her spiritual elevation is evident by the many *Aḥādith*, for example: “There are four pre-eminent women in the world: Khadijah bint-i Khuwaylid, Fāṭimah bint-i Muḥammad, Maryam bint-i ‘Imrān and Asiyah bint-i Muzāḥim, wife of the Pharoah.” In another *Hadith*, the holy Prophet says: “God gave me fermented bread, silken clothes and married me to Khadijah for whom I bore love in my heart.” During her lifetime, the holy Prophet, contrary to the custom of the time, did not take another wife. She was his sole life companion and this proves the profound respect that he had for her. There are differences amongst historians regarding the number of their children, however they are unanimous about Ḥazrat Qasim and Ḥazrat Fāṭimah. Ḥazrat Qasim passed away in his childhood, but Ḥazrat Fāṭimah survived her father by about six months. She was part of his *nūrāni ahl al-bayt* (Qur’ān 3:61; 33:33) as well as his physical *ahl al-bayt*. Her greatest attribute is that she is the mother of our Imams, because the line of Imams continues through her progeny. Quoting Qur’ānic *āyat* (33:40): “Muḥammad is not the father of any man among you, but he is the messenger of Allah and the Seal of the Prophets; and Allah is aware of all things”, ‘Allāmah Naṣīr al-Dīn Naṣīr Hunzai says it is crystal clear that the cycle of Prophethood came to an end with the holy Prophet, but the cycle of manifest Imamāt started with Mawlānā ‘Alī and Ḥazrat Fāṭimah.

The holy Prophet used to stand up when Ḥaẓrat Fāṭimah entered the room and holding her hand would kiss her forehead and sit her down in her place. In another place, °Allāmah Naṣīr Hunzai does the *ta'wīl* of the same verse as: “it is a clear wisdom-filled allusion to the fact that his light had transferred to Ḥaẓrat Fāṭimah and Mawlānā °Alī (may peace be upon them both).” In view of the great spiritual and religious status of Ḥaẓrat Fāṭimah when her descendants, the pure Imams, ruled North Africa, Egypt and other parts of the Middle East they called it the Fatimid Caliphate. The worldly and spiritual achievements of Ḥaẓrat Fāṭimah’s progeny shed honour on Ḥaẓrat Khadijah, who is their illustrious forebear.

### **Ḥaẓrat Khadijah’s Companionship on High:**

In 619 AD Mawlānā Abū Ṭālib and Ḥaẓrat Khadijatu’l-kubrā joined Companionship on High one after the other. Both these personalities had helped the Prophet spiritually and physically and had protected him from his opponents and shared in his seven-year exile in the desert. The Prophet was greatly grieved by these sad losses and he named this year °*Āmu’l-ḥuzn*, that is, the Year of Sadness. After their departure from this world, the Prophet’s adversaries intensified their enmity and even plotted to assassinate him. However, according to the Divine programme, he migrated to Yathrib, later re-named *Madīnatu’n-Nabī* (City of the Prophet). Islam started to progress from here and became a universal religion, about which Ḥaẓrat Abū Ṭālib had prophesied in his *khutbah* at the time of the Prophet’s marriage to Ḥaẓrat Khadijah. The holy Prophet continued to remember these two extraordinary personalities for the rest of his life.

Rashida Noormohamed-Hunzai,  
March, 2008

### **Post-script:**

The following is an excerpt of the Publico Television, Lisbon, Portugal interview of Mawlana Hazir Imam, His Highness the Aga Khan IV on 23<sup>rd</sup> July, 2008:

**Q: In Islam, as in Christianity, the role of the female has been debated. There are people who say that they would like to see your daughter, Princess Zahra, as the next Imam. However, tradition claims it has to be the eldest son...**

**A:** As far as I know, there is no Muslim community in history that has had a woman as Imam.



**Q: In that case, we can never see a woman as Imam?**

**A:** Absolutely not. However, women in our society are capable of developing a leadership role. Zahra studied at Harvard, has worked in the sense of helping to create capacities in various parts of the world. She is the first woman in my family with a university education, and I would hope that the future generations will refer both to men and women.

*I do not want you to perceive that women are not valued. Women are very, very valued. If you look at the history of Islam, Khadija, the Prophet's first wife, had an extremely important role, both in his spiritual life, as in his worldly life. (author's emphasis)*

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on an Urdu article written by Dr. Faquir Muhammad Hunzai based on the primary source of Sayyidnā Ja'far bin Manṣūr al-Yaman's "*Sarā'ir wa-asrāru'n-nuṭaqā*".

<sup>2</sup> This epithet is preferred to the use of 'wife' to convey her exalted status in the life of our holy Prophet.

<sup>3</sup> Abū Ṭālib was his *kunyā*, that is, in Arab society after the birth of the first son, fathers and mothers customarily take an honorary title. Literally it means father of Ṭālib, who was his eldest son.

<sup>4</sup> See also Question 83 in *Hundred Questions, Part IV* by °Allāmah Naṣīr al-Dīn Naṣīr Hunzai, (Karachi, 1978), pp 22-24.

<sup>5</sup> Mirzā Muḥammad Taqī Sipehr, *Nāsikhu't-tawārikh: Ḥazrat °Isā* (a.s.), (Tehran, 1352 Solar), III, 380.

<sup>6</sup> *Nāsikhu't-tawārikh*, III, 332; °Abd Allāh al-Khanizī, *Abū Ṭālib: Mu'min Quraysh* (Beirut, 1978), p. 141.

<sup>7</sup> Al-Mu'ayyad fi'd-Dīn Shirāzī, *al-Majālisu'l-Mu'ayyadiyyah* (Oxford, 1407 A.H.), II, 5.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 5.

<sup>9</sup> This misconception about Mawlānā Abū Ṭālib can be found in the most respectable books of history. Martin Lings book "*Muhammad – his life based on the earliest sources*" (Islamic Texts Society, 1991) informs the readers that "This book was awarded a prize by the government of Pakistan and selected as the best biography of the Prophet in English at the National Seerat Conference held in 1983 at Islamabad. ... In 1990, after the book had attracted the attention of the Azhar University in Cairo, the author received a decoration from President Mubarak [of Egypt]." On page 50, it is stated: "Abū Ṭālib made no objection to the Islam of his two sons Ja'far and °Alī, but for himself he said he was not prepared to forsake the religion of his forefathers".

On page 52 is recounted the story of how the leaders of the Quraysh came to Mawlānā Abū Ṭālib to persuade him to bring pressure on the Prophet to stop his mission. "But the Prophet answered saying: 'I swear by God, if they put the sun in my right hand and the moon in my left on condition that I abandon this course before He hath made it victorious, or I have perished therein, I would not abandon it.' Then, with tears in his eyes, he rose to his feet and turned to go, but his uncle called him back: 'Son of my brother,' he said, 'go thou and say what thou wilt, for by God I will never forsake thee on any account.'"

On pages 96-97 is described the final moments of Mawlānā Abū Ṭālib, when the leaders of Quraysh had once again come to seek his help to stop the Prophet. It reads: "When they had gone Abū Ṭālib said to the Prophet: 'Son of my brother, thou didst not, as I saw it, ask of them anything out of the way.' These words filled the prophet with longing that he should enter Islam. 'Uncle,' he said, 'say thou the words, that through them I may intercede for thee on the day of the Resurrection.' 'Son of my brother,' he said, 'if I did not fear that Quraysh would think I had but said the words in dread of death, then would I say them. Yet would my saying them be but to please thee.' Then, when death drew near to Abū Ṭālib, 'Abbas saw him moving his lips and he put his ear close to him and listened and then he said: 'My brother hath spoken the words thou didst bid him speak.' But the Prophet said: 'I heard him not.'"

These long quotations have been included here to show how the misconceptions about Mawlānā Abū Ṭālib are being perpetuated by such histories based on the earliest sources in Islam. In the body of the article it has been shown by quoting Qur'ānic references that the close family of the Prophet were following the *dīn-i Ibrāhīm*, the central belief of which was the Oneness of God. When Mawlānā Abū Ṭālib is supposed to have stated (see above quotation of page 50) that he was not prepared to forsake the religion of his forefathers, he appears to be saying that the Prophet was bringing a new religion, whereas according to the Qur'ān itself, Ḥazrat Ibrāhīm was a "Muslim" (one who had surrendered to God).

The scenario of Mawlānā Abū Ṭālib's deathbed and his refusal to recite the *Shahādah* goes against the grain of esoteric teachings about the continuity of the True Religion through the *mustaqarr* Imams.

The lesson to be learnt is that the earliest sources, such as Ibn Ishāq (d. c. 767), Ibn Sa'd (d. 845), at-Ṭabari (d. 923) and al-Wāqidi (d. c. 820) were histories compiled during the time of the Umayyads or the Abbasids, who were the sworn opponents of the Prophet's successors from his *ahl al-bayt*.

Once again, reference to primary sources paints an altogether different picture. Mawlānā Abū Ṭālib is famous for his poetry and he himself writes: "*Wa laqad °alimtu bi-anna dina Muḥammadin, Min khayri adyāni'l-bariyyati dina* = Indeed I have known that Muḥammad's religion, as a religion is the best of the religions of the people." (Quoted in *Abū Ṭālib – Mu'minu Quraysh*, by °Abd Allāh Khanizī (Beirut, 1978), p. 161.

<sup>10</sup> See also Question 94 in *Hundred Questions, Part IV* by °Allāmah Naṣīr al-Dīn Naṣīr Hunzai, (Karachi, 1978), pp 47-50.

<sup>11</sup> Guillaume, A. (trans. And ed.), *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah* (London, 1955), p. 84.

<sup>12</sup> *Nāsikhu't-tawārikh*, III, 380.

## Is Pluralism a Practical Possibility?

Bismillahi'r-Rahmani'r-Rahim

I would like to begin with a personal anecdote. I was at University in Britain. As a student I visited Spain. In the city of Toledo we were being shown around a Jewish synagogue. Its architecture was so reminiscent of Islamic design that I asked the tour guide: Is this really a synagogue? Why is it so full of Muslim influences? She replied: It was built by the Muslims for the Jewish community during the long Muslim rule in the Iberian Peninsula. This experience has had a lasting impact on my life! Through my 4 years of under and post-graduate studies, far away from family and community, in a totally different clime and culture this example of the tolerance and open-mindedness of my faith, Islam, gave me pride and protection at an impressionable age in the midst of every kind of influence.

Later I read and learnt about many historical facts. Even those of minimum exposure to Islamic history know of the holy Prophet Muhammad (sallallahu `alayhi wa alihi wa's-sallam)'s Medina Constitution which respected and protected the rights of diverse communities and religions. The Ottoman Empire gave refuge to the Jews fleeing from the persecution of the Christian King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella after the fall of the Muslims in Spain. Today they are one of the oldest Jewish communities in the world. All educated and well-informed people know that Abbasid Damascus, Umayyad Cordoba and Fatimid Cairo were thriving centres of knowledge, learning and research which were fuelled by scholars of every religion, sect and nationality. Respect for diversity in their times has endowed a rich heritage of discovery and knowledge for later generations of scientists, doctors and academics to build upon.

In the context of this, the question therefore arises: Why are the conditions of our present time so different? The answer is complex and multi-dimensional. However in a seminar such as this where time is at a premium, we can only focus on selected dimensions: From the 17th Century to the Second World War in the last century, world history witnessed the long phase of colonialism and imperialism with its concomitant theories of the inferiority of certain races to justify their subjugation and oppression. Some scientific theories were propounded and books written to give such ideas so-called 'academic credibility'. Against this backdrop of discrimination and prejudice many derogatory expressions were coined which even today surface in the media, for example, the opponents of ex-President Barack Obama and his wife Michelle, circulated their photographs juxtaposed with pictures of monkeys to show that they were inferior because of their race! This of course is a demonstration of extremist sentiments. On an academic level, the word "Other" is more favoured and has found its way into common usage to describe people of another race or religion.

Human psychology too plays a very significant role - we know that when we describe ourselves we tend to emphasize what we are not, rather than our positive identity. We focus more on our differences than on our commonalities. Fear of differences makes us forget our common, shared human attributes. Similarly we see around us that it is easier to bring people together around a negative cause rather than a positive one.

However, since the collapse of Imperialism and later towards the end of the last century of the Cold War, the technological revolution that has occurred and is continuing, has completely and fundamentally changed our world. In 1969 when the American astronauts Armstrong, Aldrin and Collins went to the moon, looking back at the earth they were overwhelmed to see the reduced size of our planet. The realization dawned on them that it was indeed "One Earth" in contrast to the perception of earth-bound people who always think in terms of continents, countries and provinces, etc. In other words, narrow geographical divisions were gradually replaced by the One Earth concept. There are several such words and phrases in current popular use, such as 'Global Village', which appropriately describe our contemporary condition. Technology has eliminated geographical distance - far distant places and people are in front of us at the mere pressing of a computer key!

This process is supplemented by mass migration of human beings forced to leave their homes by wars and conflict or by economic necessity. People who were 'alien' to us are often now living in the same apartment blocks or across the street. In short, on the one hand we experience the centripetal forces of globalisation and its parallel interconnection and on the other there are centrifugal forces at work which are the cause of fragmentation and polarisation. In such an environment, the challenge for pluralism is to reconcile our distinctive identities with our common humanity. Pluralism does not mean that we efface our differences and erase our distinctions to become a monolithic mass. Rather as H.H. Aga Khan IV says: "Going beyond tolerance, simply being sympathetic or sensitive to others, we must be ready to study and learn about others to the point where we are able to see others as they see themselves. In learning about others we can also come to learn lessons about ourselves. This learning then contributes to our experience of the Cosmopolitan Ethic, an ethic of respect that values human diversity. It rejects division as a necessary outcome of diversity, seeking instead to identify the qualities and experiences that unite rather than divide us as people and to forge a shared stake in the public good."

To promote pluralism in our world is a worthy vision for all institutions of learning. Let us therefore reflect on some essential prerequisites to promote and embed pluralism as a state of mind in a constantly changing world:

- First, through dialogue and discussion at all levels of society, starting with Early Childhood education to post-graduate studies, we must cultivate the need to acknowledge our fear of difference. This was brought home to me recently in a speech made by Ms. Mehreen Farooqi who has been elected as a Senator of the Australian Parliament. She "unapologetically" stated to her parliamentary colleagues

that she was proud to be a "brown, Muslim, migrant, feminist woman and a Green [Party] Senator". She urged that we should eliminate the practice of stereotyping people or looking at them in a monolithic way, in other words, we should individualise people. Finally, switching to Urdu she said: "Mazrat chahti hun - magar afsos nahin. Yeh [ya`ni Australia] mera ghar hai awr men kahin nahi jaungi". She further added to the thunderous applause she received that she would struggle to eliminate racism and sexism wherever it occurred.

- Secondly, we must be aware that in promoting pluralistic thinking we must not expect universal agreement. In genuine dialogue there must be space for participants to agree to disagree, without closing the doors to research and learning.
- Thirdly, as mentioned in the quotation above of H.H. Aga Khan IV, pluralism requires not merely sympathy or tolerance but a genuine empathetic understanding - the ability to put oneself in the shoes of others. All Abrahamic Traditions and many other religions teach the Golden Rule: 'Do unto others what you would have them do to you.'
- Fourthly, it will be necessary to reinforce time and again that pluralism does not mean effacing difference or erasing distinctive characteristics. In predominantly Muslim societies this may be easier because the Final Revelation of Allah, the Glorious Qur'an speaks of God's signs 'ayat' in nature, which is full of diversity at every level of creation from the mineral kingdom, through the vegetative, animal and human realms. Such references will abound in the papers of the other participants of this seminar, however Surah 49, ayat 13 is explicit about Allah creating humankind from a male and a female and creating different tribes and races, that we may KNOW each other (li ta`arafu). Indeed, the noblest in the eyes of Allah is the one best in conduct (Inna akramakum inda'llahi atqakum).
- Fifth, pluralism is not an objective in itself which can be achieved overnight or in a short span of time. It is in fact a continuous process, which requires constant dialogue, learning, readiness to compromise and to be humbled by what we discover. Again all religious people will readily accept that the nature of human understanding is incomplete and we acknowledge without hesitation the immensity of the Divine.
- Sixth, the dire need to promote the understanding that in an ever-shrinking, ever more diverse world, a genuine sense of pluralism is the indispensable foundation for human peace and progress, the opposite of which we all know has brought misery and conflict and pain throughout human history.

In conclusion, as a Muslimah the challenges of pluralism are mitigated for us all by the Hadith of the holy Prophet Muhammad (s.a.s) Al-khalqu iyalu'llah: "People are God's household and the most beloved to God is the one who helps His household." We can all draw immense inspiration from such words and the strength to work for all of humanity, the cream of Allah's creation.

## The Concept of Nur (Light) in the Holy Qur'an and in Selected Ginans

*The word 'Nur' is such a familiar part of Ismaili terminology that it seems surprising that not more Ismailis are asking about its meaning and importance. This paper will seek to 'enlighten' the audience by examining the concept as presented in the Qur'an and the way our great Pirs of the Indian sub-continent da`wat conveyed those ideas in selected examples of the Ginanic tradition. Starting with the central ayat, the Verse of Light in the Surah Nur, a brief overview will be given of the 49 times the word 'Nur' is used in the Qur'an. In the context of this an attempt will be made to examine selected Ginanic examples.*

In the abstract for this paper it was pointed out that the Ayat-i Nur from the Surah-yi Nur or the Verse of Light from the Chapter of Light, Chapter 24, verse 35 of the holy Qur'an is the central or key verse of Light in the holy Qur'an. As we may all be aware the significance of this ayat to Ismailis is evident from the fact that it has been recited at some of the most historical events in our history, for example at the Takht Nashini of Mawlana Hazir Imam, important occasions such as the opening of the Ismaili Centre in London and more recently it was recited on every festival in our calendar during the prolonged Golden and then the Diamond Jubilee of the present Imam. What may not be common knowledge is that Mawlana Hazir concluded his very first speech on architecture at the Asia Society, New York in 1979 with this ayat. He said:

"I hope that in the years ahead we shall see Islamic cities representing to the world all that the city of God and man can be. Cities of which all Muslims can be proud, where our magnificent heritage and our firm place in this new age, are manifest. As we work towards that vision of the future we will remember the Surah of Light from the Qur'an. It tells us that the oil of the blessed olive tree lights the lamp of understanding, a light that belongs neither to East nor West. We are to give this light to all."<sup>1</sup>

To begin an analysis of this ayat, firstly of the 49 times the word 'Nur' is mentioned in the Qur'an, this ayat alone contains 5 mentions of the word 'Nur'. Mawlana Sultan Muhammad Shah (s.a.) quotes this verse of Light in the chapter 'The Islamic Concept and my Role as Imam' in his Memoirs and says: "I must warn all who read it not to allow their material critical outlook to break in with literal, verbal explanations of something that is symbolic and allegorical. I

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<sup>1</sup> H.H. The Aga Khan, "Islamic Architecture: A Revival", New York, U.S.A., September 25<sup>th</sup>, 1979.

appeal to every reader, whether Muslim or not, to accept the spirit of this verse in its entirety.”<sup>2</sup>

The transliteration and translation of the verse runs as follows:

Al-Lahu Nūru As-Samāwāti Wa Al-'Arđi Mathalu Nūrihi  
Kamishkāatin Fihā Mişbāñun al-Mişbāñu Fī Zujājatin Az-Zujājatu  
Ka'annahā Kawkabun Durrīyun Yūqadu Min Shajaratin  
Mubārakatin Zaytūniatin Lā Sharqiyatin Wa Lā Gharbiyatin Yakādu  
Zaytuhā Yuđī'u Wa Law Lam Tamsas/hu Nārun Nūrun `Alá Nūrin  
Yahdī Al-Lahu Linūrihi Man Yaşhā'u Wa Yađribu Allāhu Al-  
'Amthāla Lilnnāsi Wa Allāhu Bikulli Shay'in `Alīmun

“Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth; the similitude of His light is as a niche in which there is a lamp, and the lamp is in a glass, the glass is as though it were a glittering star; it is lit from a blessed tree, an Olive neither of east nor of west, the oil of which would well-nigh give light though no fire touched it, light upon light; Allah guides to His light whom He pleases; and Allah strikes out parables for men; and Allah all things doth know.”

Here Allah proclaims that He is the light of the heavens and the earth – Ismaili *Hujjats* and *Pirs* have understood by this that this is not material light, otherwise why would there be darkness in creation! In the esoteric or *batini* understanding this is akin to saying that the entire creation is immersed in Allah’s light – nothing is outside or beyond it. Everything is from this light, which is why Sayyidna al-Mu’ayyad fi’d-din Shirazi (q.s.), the great Fatimid *Hujjat* says in his *Al-Majalis al-Mu’ayyadiyyah*, Volume 2, p. 577: *An-nur aslu’l-wujud*, that is, ‘Light is the origin of the entire existence’. It is absolute, pure light which has been beautifully described in the *Ginans* as “*Jene na naam, na thaam, na rang, na roop* = The one who has no name, no place, no colour, no form”.

However, in the very next sentence of the *ayat*, God declares that the similitude or likeness of His light is as though there is a niche in which there is

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<sup>2</sup> “The Memoirs of Aga Khan – Word Enough and Time”, Casell & Co. Ltd., London, 1954.

a lamp (*misbah*) – in other words the absolute light is also now within the body of a lamp, in other words it is embodied light. This notion of a body is prominently mentioned in Surah 33, verse 46 where the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.s.) is described as “*sirajam munira* = the lamp that gives light”. Once again the *Pirs* of the Indian sub-continent *da`wat* have incorporated this fundamental concept of the embodied or manifest light in the *Ginans*, an example of which is Saloko Nano of Pir Sadardin (q.s.). In verse 10 he says:

“Satgur kahere nure mindar sama(a)riya,  
Ane nure rachio asman;  
Te nur manhethi nur pragatiya,  
Tenu Satgur nam re.”

He created the world from light  
and created the heaven from light  
Light manifested from light  
whose name is Satgur (the True Guide)

Ismaili scholars have reflected on Allah’s choice of a humble lamp as His similitude. Why did He not choose the blazing radiant orb of the sun, which might have conveyed His power and might more appropriately? The sun we know through modern science is 149.6 million kilometres from the earth – very distant indeed, whereas the lamp is to be found in even the most financially constrained of homes. The wisdom of choosing the lamp as Allah’s similitude is to convey the proximity and thus the possibility of attaining the light from His chosen vicegerents, the Prophets and Imams.

The verse continues with the statement that the lamp is kindled from the oil of a blessed Olive tree, which is neither of the east nor of the west – which shows the universality of this light, that it is not confined in time or space. The oil of which would well-nigh give light though no fire touched it – this sentence reinforces the notion that this is not material light – it does not need any fire to kindle it. Further if it had been kindled by a fire, it would mean a beginning whereas this light is eternal – it has no beginning and therefore it has no end. Then comes the phrase ‘Light upon light’ (*nurun `ala nur*) – conveying clearly and succinctly that the manifestation of this light is continuous and unbroken. This short phrase cannot be applied to the absolute light because even in physical light we see that where many lamps or bulbs



are switched on, their light merges and becomes one. The phrase is applicable to that light which is embodied, meaning that one Imam is succeeded by the next, that is, one bearer of the light is followed without an interval by the next bearer. Light upon light too, conveys powerfully the idea that there is no beginning or end to it. Pir Sadardin (q.s.) in his Ginan “Saheb kero bhed” says:

“E virabhai nur khalifa is jugmanhe aya, unki amar jot likhaiji” = “O brother! The *khalifa* (vicegerent) of nur has come to this world, his light is eternal.”

Finally the *Ayat* of Nur ends with the statements that Allah guides to His light whom He wishes and He strikes out parables and allegories for humankind to reflect on.

Having looked at the Verse of Light in some detail, a survey of some other verses is important. In Surah 5, ayat 15 Allah says: “Now has come to you from Allah a light and a manifest book.” Here it is important to note that the word ‘nur’ precedes the word ‘book’ because it is well known that the holy Prophet appeared first and then the book was revealed to him. We have already looked at the verse 33:46 in which a number of the holy Prophet’s attributes are described ending with the description “sirajam munira” – the lamp which gives light. In two different surahs of the Qur’an – 9:32 and 61:8 Allah states that the ‘*kafirun*’ (those who knowingly deny the truth) will try ‘to blow out’ the light of Allah but He will not allow them to do so, in fact He will perfect His light no matter how much they are averse to it. These two categorical verses affirm that the light of Allah is ever present and eternal in the world. At this point, keeping in mind the guidance of Mawlana Hazir Imam about the pluralism of the global Ismaili Jamat, such as in Nairobi, Kenya on 11<sup>th</sup> December, 1988 he said: “And this means that whereas the Jamats from the Indian sub-continent have, what you call, a Ginan, the Jamats in Iran or Afghanistan may have, what you call, a Qasida.” I will take two examples from the Central Asian tradition to show how these verses of the Qur’an on the subject of Nur are depicted in their qasidahs:

In the first example Pir Nasir-i Khusraw (q.s.) in his *Diwan* questions the formalist *ulama’* (scholars) of his time and referring to the verses of the holy Qur’an just discussed says: “Was it our fault that we were not born at the time of the Prophet; why should we be deprived of his guidance?” He quotes the verse 33:45-46 in his qasidah saying that the Prophet was a warner, a giver of glad tidings and a lamp giving light, which Allah has guaranteed nobody can

blow out! It was his earnest search for the truth as he studied the Qur'an that led him to eventually find the Imam of the time. The second example is more recent – it is the devotional poetry of Allamah Nasiruddin Hunzai, which Imam-i Zaman has described in a taliqah of 1961 as 'the Ginan Book in Hunza language'. Writing in his mother tongue Burushaski, he says: "Belete mumkin bila zamana Nur-i Yazdan omanas, tautotang thaplu musafir ganalu laltin tham juwan = It is impossible for the light of Allah to disappear – do you think it is like a traveller's lamp which a gust of wind can extinguish?"

The light of the Imam is mentioned in verses, such as Surah 7, ayat 157 where Allah says: "... so those who believe in him (the Prophet) and honour him and help him and follow the light which has been sent down with him" and in Surah 13, ayat 43: "Those who disbelieve say: 'You are not the messenger sent (by Allah)'. Say (O Muhammad): 'Allah is sufficient as witness between me and you and the one who has knowledge of the book.'" In other words Allah and the one who had knowledge of the book were the two witnesses to testify to the truth of his mission. Both these ayats refer to the light of Mawlana Ali (a.s.), which since he was *abu'l-a'immah* (the father of the Imams in the present cycle) would continue in his progeny forever.

One more example of the word Nur are the verses where the light of mu'mins is mentioned specifically, namely in Surah 57:12: "On the day when you will see the mu'min men and the mu'min women, their light running in front of them and on their right hand sides and will hear it said unto them: Glad news for you this day: Gardens underneath which rivers flow, wherein you are immortal. That is the supreme triumph." In Surah 66:8, the mu'mins pray: *Rabbana atmim lanaa nuran-na wagfir lanaa. Innaka `alaa kulli shayin Qadir* = O our Lord, perfect our nur/light for us and forgive us. Indeed you are powerful over everything."

To summarise some of the verses of light in the holy Qur'an, we have seen that Allah is light, the Prophet is light, Imams are light and mum'ins have light. So the question may well arise: are these different lights or are they the different manifestations of the same light? The answer in the Ismaili Tariqah is very clear. Mawlana Sultan Muhammad Shah (s.a.) in his Memoirs has informed the world about the amazing concept of Monoreality – that there is but one Reality, however, its manifestations are many and varied.

Can we find any corroboration in the Ginanic tradition of the different manifestations of light? I have taken the Anant Akhado of Pir Hasan Kabirdin (q.s.) only, given the time constraints, and my findings are:

- In verse 75 he says: “Ashaji jampudipe shaha takhat rachave, Nur Nabi tiyan aveji = O brother! The Imam will establish his throne in the Indo-Pak sub-continent and the light of the Prophet (s.a.s.) will come there.” This verse prophesies the advent of the seat of Imamat in the Indo-Pak subcontinent.
- In verse 135 he says: “Ashaji nurna pagla zaher ditha, betha te Kahekne duarji = O brother! We saw the blessed feet of that zahir (manifest) nur who lives in Kahek, Iran.” Pir includes historical detail about the whereabouts of the Imam in his time.
- In verse 153 he says: “Ashaji sahu jugthi kaljug utam, te manhe narji bethaji, Nabi nur a jugmanhe aviya, aviya aad avtar = O brother! Kaljug is the best of all the eras, in it the Imam is present. The light of the Prophet (s.a.s) has come in this era who is the manifestation of the eternal nur.” Here it is necessary to point out that prior to Mawlana `Ali, the Imams worked behind the scenes as mentioned in a Hadith: O Ali you were hidden with all the Prophets before me, but you have become manifest with me.)
- In verse 380 he says: “Ashaji Nasirdin nur ja paya, hua so din raheman ji = O brother! Pir Nasirdin attained the light and brightened the religion of the Merciful.” This verse is a reminder of the qasidah of Pir Nasir-i Khusraw who after the Didar of Imam Mustansirbillah says:  
*“bar jan-i man chu nur-i Imam-i zaman bi-taft, laylu’s-sarar budam-u shamsu’z-zuha shudam.*  
When the light of the Imam shone upon my soul, even though I was like a pitch dark night, I became the shining sun.”
- In verse 399 he says: “Ashaji nur piyala nabiun dese, rikhisar ubha pive ji = O brother! The Prophets will offer the cups of light and the mu’mins will stand and partake of them.”
- In verse 400 he says: “Ashaji amrate meva rikhisar mane, rikhisar gher vadhayun ji; nurani buraq tene gher angane, te karse ape asvari = O brother! The mu’mins will enjoy the delicious fruits and there will be rejoicing in their homes. The luminous buraq will be at their thresholds and they will ride it.” Buraq being the flying horse of

the Prophet's *mi`raj* – the *batin* meaning of this is that the word *buraq* is from the word *barq* meaning 'lightning' and is a reference to the speed of light as already referred to in the 57:12, where mu'min men and women's light runs in front and on their right sides.

- In verse 463 he says: "Ashaji sarag bhaman-manhe gur ne hurun, rahese anat raliyatji; Nurani kaya momanni hoese, hoese te din = O brother! *Pir* and *houris* will be in Paradise and they will be very happy. On that day mu'mins will be in luminous bodies." Mawlana Sultan Muhammad Shah (s.a.) in a 1893 farman at Manjewdi also says that mu'mins will go to paradise in the *nurani kaya* = luminous bodies.

To summarise, although the languages are very different and the cultural contexts vary greatly, it is interesting to see that Pir Hasan Kabirdin (q.s.) also talks about the Light of Allah, the Prophet's light, the Imam's light, the Pir's light and the mu'mins light.

To conclude this paper, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the Ismaili Tariqah is one of Nur or light and that this belief and conviction is based on the holy Qur'an, the Prophet's traditions and the teachings of our Imams, *Hujjats* and *Pirs*. The first Imam of this cycle, Mawlana Murtaza `Ali (a.s.) says: "*Nahnu min nuri'llah was shi`atina min-na* = We are from Allah's light and our followers are from us." In our times, Mawlana Sultan Muhammad Shah (s.a.) because of his unique role and Imamatus, explained the fundamentals of our faith for the whole world in the international language of English. In his Memoirs, he says: "This fraternity (Muslim) is absolute and it comprises men of all colours and races: black, white, yellow, tawny; all are the sons of Adam in the flesh and all carry in them a spark of the Divine Light. Everyone should strive his best to see that this spark be not extinguished but rather developed to that full "Companionship-on-High" which was the vision expressed in the last words of the Prophet on his deathbed, the vision of that blessed state which he saw clearly awaiting him."<sup>3</sup> Our interpretation of Islam is one of tremendous hope and unlimited possibilities of spiritual and intellectual development under the *nurani* guidance of the Imam of the Time, who is 'the luminous lamp' at present. Thus the Preamble of the Ismaili Global Constitution says: "The Imam's *ta`lim* lights the murids' path to spiritual enlightenment and vision." If we recall Sayyidna al-Mu'ayyad's words that "Light is the origin of everything" then we can say with

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

confidence that we are from the light and with the help of the light of the Imam we return to that light! Inshallah!

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London,

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## **Importance of giryah-u zari in the Ismaili Tariqah**

We have learnt that in our faith we have recourse to three books: the book of creation, the revealed book, that is, the holy Qur'an and our own existence or personal book. Taking each of these three books, we will examine the importance of giryah-u zari.

### **The Book of Creation:**

God's creation is full of amazing lessons for the human intellect. All of us at some time or the other have seen on our television screens the stark pictures of places in Africa where the rain has not fallen for many years or seasons. The ground becomes so parched and cracked that no vegetation can survive and we see the devastating effects on the livestock and human beings, whose skeletal bodies stare desperately from the pictures at us. The clear lesson from nature is that where there is no rain there can be no growth or greenery. This scenario is aptly described in the holy Qur'an in Surah Hajj, 22:5 as: "... and you see the earth sterile land, but when We send down on it the water, it stirs and swells and brings forth of every kind of beautiful herbage."

Many of us live in urban areas in towns and cities. We will all have experienced how when there is a good shower of rain, the air becomes purified from dust and urban fumes and everything feels lighter and fresher. Thus, the two distinct messages we receive from the book of creation are that rainfall and showers not only cleanse the atmosphere but they are also the source of the growth and greenery of vegetation which is so soothing for the eyesight. In our personal worlds this represents that supplicating with tears first of all cleanses our souls of the accumulated dirt of disobedience and further if this practice is continued, leads to spiritual progress.

### **The Revealed Book – Holy Qur'an:**

The holy Qur'an which is the final revelation of God to humankind, and thus encompasses the previous heavenly books, is crystal clear about the importance of giryah-u zari. In Surah Bani Isra'il, 17:107-109, God says:

“Say (O Muhammad): ‘Believe in it or do not believe; verily when it is recited to those who have already been given the knowledge before it, they fall down on their faces in prostration, and they say: “Glory be to our Lord! Verily the promise of our Lord was ever to have been fulfilled.”’ They fall down on their faces weeping, and it increases their humility.”

These verses are specifically about the Prophets who are the chosen of God and who are the Perfect Men. They are role models for the rest of the human beings. We see in the story of many Prophets that *giryah-u zari* was part of their lives. For instance, Hazrat-i Dawud is famous for his supplications and *giryah-u zari* to the extent that whatever he uttered in this state of merging (*fana'*) is considered to be Divine speech, which is why the Zabur or the Psalms is considered one of the four heavenly books. In other words, effective *giryah-u zari* results in luminous, Divine help (*ta'yid*) in whatever task that is to be done.

The story of Hazrat-i Yahya which is mentioned by Hazrat-i Mawlana Mustansir bi'llah II in “Pir Pandyat-i Jawanmardi” has the explicit message that if one desires to attain the Didar of Khudawand, one should never stop crying and supplicating. Pir Pandyat-i Jawanmardi has the status of a Pir or Hujjat, it is a compilation of the farmans of Imam of that time. For it to carry this story and its message is a clear indication to the mu'mins that they too should adopt the habit of doing *giryah-u zari* regularly.

Mawlana `Ali used to do *kathratu'l-buqa'*, i.e. supplicate with tears, because the Prophet in his testament to him, had said: “O `Ali weep excessively [in the fear of] God, for every tear, a thousand mansions will be built for you in Paradise ...” (Da'`imu'l-Islam, p. 341 English translation)

### **Book of Human Existence:**

Shedding tears is a common human experience. We cry when we are extremely happy and we cry when we are very sad, for example when a dear one passes away or we suffer some unbearable loss. Our esoteric faith teaches that we should not cry for material or worldly loss. Hazrat-i Mawlana Sultan Muhammad Shah, says in his Usul-i Din farman of 1899 in Daressalaam: “Like a child separated from the mother, one must cry for reunion with God.”

Why did he use this example of a mother and a lost child? We have all witnessed in our own families how as long as the baby is happy the mother busies herself in her other tasks, but the minute the infant starts to cry she drops whatever she is doing and turns her full attention to her child. There are many lessons in this example of the mother and child: the child relies completely and utterly on the mother for all its needs; crying on its part brings the full attention and care of the merciful mother. We too should rely totally on Khudawand for all our needs and giryah-u zari is the sure means of getting His complete attention. At this point a verse from a ginan by Pir Sadruddin is very appropriate. He says:

*“Tujh vina koi awar na dise, amne chhe tamaro adhar  
Tujh vina ame ekla Sami, Sami tame thajo rakhwar  
Mawla we are totally reliant on you, no other can help us  
Without you we are alone, so be our protector”*

More than five hundred years since Pir Sadruddin wrote these moving words, they have the power to touch the hearts of mu’mins, as do the words of Baba Sayyidna Hasan bin Sabbah when he utters:

*Za har kam kam taram garbi tu basham, za gardun bar taram garba tu basham  
Without you I am less than nothing, but when I am with you I am higher than the sky*

May Khudawand bless us all with the inspiration to do more and more giryah-u zari and to cleanse and polish the mirror of our hearts so that we can all be blessed with his nurani Didar, amin Ya Rabba’l-`alamin!

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2<sup>nd</sup> July, 2014