

A Quranic perspective on thinking

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The Quran repeatedly invites its readers to think about the signs of God in the universe and within themselves, and to understand His illustrious presence.

Thinking is a movement driven by intellect (al-*Āql*), and this can only occur when an initial image of the subject is attainable in the mind.

Thinking cannot proceed over something of which no image exists in the mind.

About 750 verses of the Quran exhort its readers to study nature, history, the Quran itself and humanity.

Quranic references to thinking and the exercise of intellect occur in conjunction with basically five major themes: belief in the Oneness and munificence of God (tawhid), reflection (tadabbur) on the Quran; man and the universe; historical precedent; and thinking itself.

Often, the Quran gives examples and narratives of other nations, and reminders that people may think and reflect over them.

Quran commentators understand thinking as a form of worship if it is done with sincerity and good purpose.

A hierarchy of five perceptive-cognitive functions is suggested through hearing, sight, thinking, remembrance, and certainty.

Another aspect of Quran's outlook on thinking is indicated in its emphasis on wisdom and good judgment (hikmah).

Hikmah is seen to be more important than technical know-how and expertise, as it can guide expert knowledge to its proper application.

The Quran mentions hikmah 20 times, and 10 of these are immediately preceded by kitab, which is a reference to divine scripture — primarily the Quran, but also other revealed scriptures preceding the Quran (cf., Q 3:42).

The value of hikmah in the Quran is underscored in a verse: When God bestows hikmah on someone that person is indeed granted an immense source of goodness (2: 269).

In another verse, the Quran praises those who listen to the word and follow the best of it (or the best interpretation thereof) (39:18).

The Quran sees the signs of reality in the sun, the moon, the alternation of day and night, the perpetual changes of the winds, the variety of human colours and tongues for its readers to reflect on them.

Early Muslim thinkers do not seem to have grasped the Quranic emphasis on inductive reasoning and experimentation.

It was indeed a slow realisation for Muslim thinkers to note, as Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938) pointed out “that the spirit of the Quran was essentially anti-classical”.

Putting full confidence in Greek reasoning, Muslim thinkers tried to understand the Quran in the light of Greek philosophy, which in the beginning of their careers they had studied with so much enthusiasm.

Quran’s emphasis on pondering over the ayat is also underscored by a set of guidelines to ensure correct outcomes.

The text, thus, draws attention to a series of exclusions and factors that stand in the way of proper functioning of the intellect.

These are:

PURSUIT of caprice (hawa) which may consist of love, hatred, and prejudice that confound impartiality and good judgment;

PURSUIT of conjecture in the face of certitude;

BLIND imitation of others; and,

OPPRESSIVE dictatorship the like of Pharaoh and Kora and those who supported and followed them.

We need not retrace history that Muslims were pioneers in the creation of new knowledge during the golden period of Muslim science for about four centuries (c. 850-1250 CE).

Then came the rapid decline of creative thought due to a variety of factors including the Mongol invasion of Baghdad, the Crusades, the collapse of Ottoman caliphate and the ensuing onslaught of European colonialism.

But, this would take another narrative to unfold.

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