

STUDIES IN COMPARATIVE RELIGION

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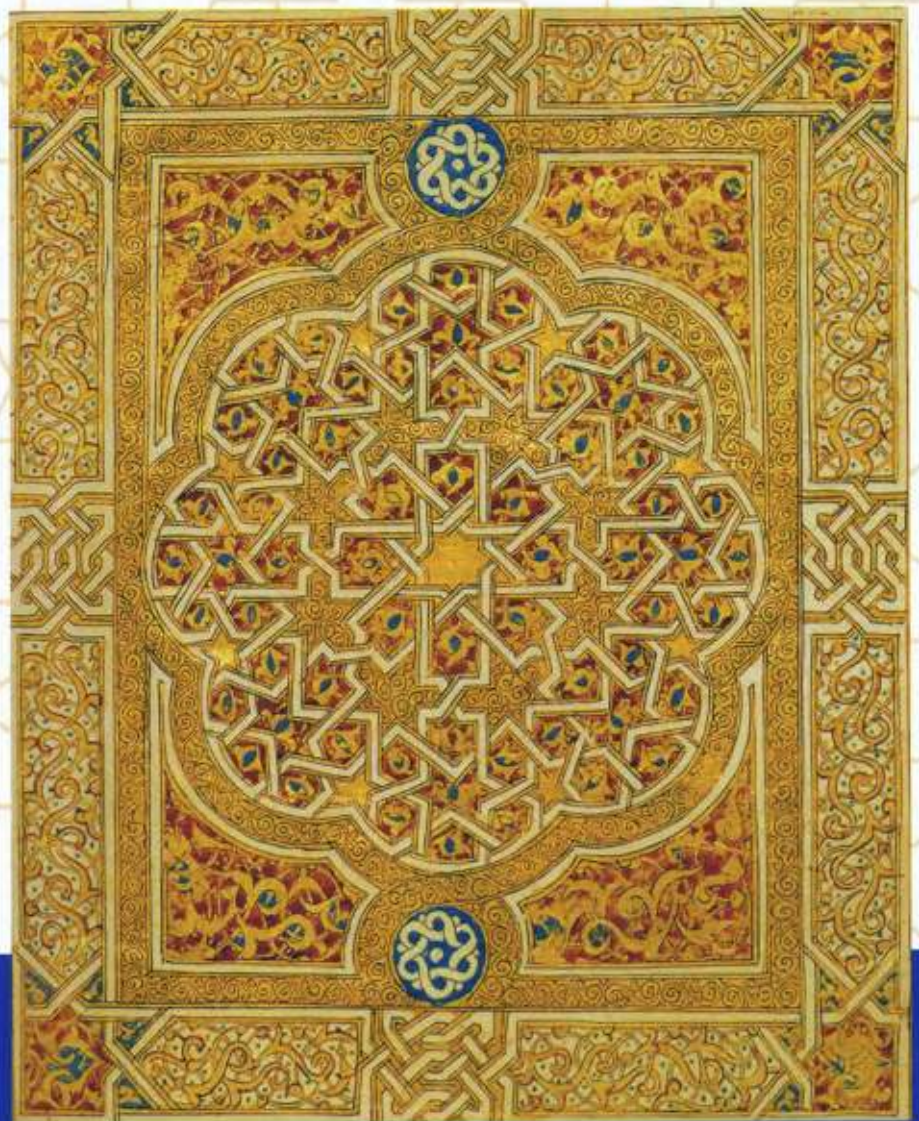
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The Shaykh Ahmad al-'Alawī and the Universalism of the Qur'ān: A Presentation and Translation of His Commentary on Verse 2:62

Tayeb Chouiref

Introductory Study

The Shaykh Ahmad al-'Alawī (1869-1934) was one of the greatest spiritual masters of Islam in the 20th century. During his life, his personal radiation was immense, not only in Algeria and within the Arab world but also well-beyond, for some among his hundred thousand disciples resided in Europe and others in South-East Asia.

His intellectual radiation was no less considerable: besides the works he published on Sufism,¹ he founded a newspaper, *al-Balāgh al-jazā'irī*, where he dealt at times with spiritual matters, and at other times with social matters, always from a strictly traditional perspective.²

Among the Islamic sciences, the Shaykh al-'Alawī had a particular affinity with Qur'ānic exegesis. Evoking his relationship with the Qur'ān, he says of himself in a poem:

It [The Qur'ān] hath taken up its dwelling in our hearts and on our tongues and is mingled with our blood and our flesh and our bones and all that is in us.³

This inner relationship with the Qur'ān led him to compose a commentary in which he could communicate to the reader a part of what his "spiritual opening" allowed him to grasp of the divine Word. He entitled his commentary—unfortunately unfinished—*al-Bahr al-masjūr*,⁴ a Qur'ānic expression that may be rendered as "the boiling ocean." This commentary distinguishes itself from classical works in that it approaches each verse in four steps: the Commentary (*tafsīr*) in which he explains the meaning of the words and sheds light on the circumstances of the revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*); the Deduction (*istinbāt*) where he expounds the rules and principles that may be drawn from the verse; the Spiritual Allusion (*ishāra*) that allows him to enunciate spiritual truths which appear to be far removed from the literal text; and, finally, the Language of the Spirit (*lisān al-Rūh*) where he provides insights into Sufi metaphysical doctrine.

The passage of the *Bahr al-masjūr* which we have translated below, and which we introduce here, is a commentary upon verse 2:62:

Lo! Those who believe, and those who are Jews, and Christians, and Sabaeans—
whoever believeth in Allah and the Last Day and doeth right—surely their reward

¹ See the list of his works as edited and commented on by Martin Lings in *A Sufi Saint in the Twentieth Century: Shaikh Ahmad al-Alawi, His Spiritual Heritage and Legacy* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1993), p. 230.

² A large number of these articles were included in two volumes: *al-Balāgh al-jazā'irī* (Mustaghānim, 1986).

³ Quoted by Martin Lings in *Sufi Saint*, p. 23.

⁴ *al-Bahr al-masjūr fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi-mahd al-nūr*, 2 vols. (Mustaghānim, 1995).

is with their Lord, and there shall no fear come upon them neither shall they grieve.⁵

This verse that the Shaykh al-'Alawī characterizes as enigmatic (*lughz*) enunciates clearly the universal perspective of the Qur'ān. It must, however, be noted that the universalism of the Book, as well as that of the Prophet, was harmed by the historical evolution of the Muslim community: political stakes, theological controversies, the social impact of the Crusades, etc. contributed greatly to the withdrawal of the universalist spirit in Islamic lands. To this must be added the complex evolution and the often ill supported extension of the theory of abrogation. In what follows, we will thus briefly remind our reader of the essential points of this theory in order better to bring to light the theological stakes that lie at the core of the Shaykh's argumentation in his commentary.

Although the Prophet expressly affirmed the right of Christians and of Jews to practice their respective religions in Islamic lands, theologians developed the theory of abrogation (*naskh*) according to which the Qur'ānic revelation supersedes all other religions. Historically, the phenomenon of abrogation pertains, in Islam, to the very process of the revelation of the Qur'ān. Certain verses were, in fact, replaced by others, thereby losing all legal import. It is in such a way that verse 2:240, stipulating that the period of abstinence (*'idda*) of a widow must last one year, is abrogated by verse 234 of the same surah which reduces this period to four months and ten days. One of the reasons that led theologians to affirm the abrogation of the previous revealed Laws is the Qur'ānic affirmation according to which the Jews and the Christians have altered their Scriptures (*tahrīf*). The Qur'ān reproaches them, for example, for having eliminated the announcement of the coming of the prophet Muhammad.⁶

The diversity of the positions of theologians concerning the abrogation by Islam of the other Abrahamic religions can be summarized by four theses:⁷

1. The Law of Muhammad abrogates all others.
2. The Law of Abraham is still valid with the exception of what in it has been abrogated by the Law of Muhammad.
3. With the same exception, the Law of Moses is still valid in addition to Abraham's.
4. With again the same exception, the Law of Jesus is still valid in addition to Abraham's.

Those who hold the three last theses base themselves on the verses inviting Muslims to follow the "guidance" that certain ancient prophets received (Qur'ān, 6:90 and 16:123).

However, the thesis of abrogation raises quasi-insoluble theoretical problems: When does the Qur'ānic Revelation abrogate the other Laws? From the moment of the first revelation in the Cave of Hira? At the time of the Hegira? Upon the death of the Prophet? At which precise moment does a Jewish or Christian believer cease to practice a religion accepted by Heaven?

⁵ All English translations of the Qur'ān appearing in this article are taken from Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall's classic *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*.

⁶ See verse 4:46.

⁷ We draw this summary from Eric Chaumont's article "Abrogation", in *Dictionnaire du Coran*, ed. Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2007), pp. 14-17.

Why would a believer be rejected by God for an event of which he may be totally unaware? For theologians seeking not to attribute to God an utter lack of mercy the only tenable position is that of the “transmission of the message” (*tablīgh*): the religion of the Christian and the Jew ceases to be valid from the moment when he receives the message of Islam. This position allows one to prolong the validity of these religions well beyond the life of the Prophet, but it poses other problems: What should one understand by “transmission of the message”? Does knowledge of the existence of Islam necessarily mean that one has received and understood its message?

Thus, the theory of the abrogation of previous religions by Islam, as useful as it may be for the social cohesion of the Muslim community, is hardly satisfying from the point of view of spiritual coherence and the legitimate needs of thought. This theory seems more rooted in the development of a *contra errores infidelium* apologetics than it is the fruit of a literal reading of the sacred texts of Islam.

Moreover, Ibn Hazm (d. 1063), one of the most important representatives of the “literalist” school of jurisprudence (*madhhab zāhirī*), gives this recommendation:

Put your trust in the pious man, even if he does not share your religion, and distrust the impious, even if he belongs to your religion.⁸

It is not surprising, therefore, that it was above all the mystics who insisted on the universalist dimension of the Qur’ānic message. They seem in this closer to the positions of the Prophet than were the theologians. In fact, far from announcing to them the abrogation of their religion, the Prophet invited a delegation of Christians from Najrān to perform their rites within the very walls of the mosque of Medina, something which greatly surprised certain of the Companions.⁹ Concerning the attitude of a Muslim faced with what may disconcert him in other religions, the Prophet recommends a pious suspension of judgment: “Do not say that what is related by the people of the Book is true, do not say either that it is false, but say: ‘We believe in Allah and that which is revealed unto us and that which was revealed unto Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes, and that which was vouchsafed unto Moses and Jesus and the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and unto Him we have surrendered.’”¹⁰ These words of the Prophet seem to guard the common believer against two opposite pitfalls: syncretism and peremptory rejection. Nevertheless, this *hadīth* of the Prophet undeniably establishes a certain “right” to religious exclusivism. Exclusivism is not simply a sign of human limitation, for it also results from the divine origin of a religion:

In normal times a man’s religion is *the* religion, and in fact each religion addresses itself to a humanity which, for it, is humanity as such. The exclusivism of a religion is a symbol of its divine origin, of the fact that it comes from the Absolute,

⁸ Quoted by Eric Geoffroy in *Initiation au soufisme* (Paris: Fayard, 2003), p. 273.

⁹ Concerning this event, see Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1995), p. 326.

¹⁰ *Hadīth* transmitted by Abū Hurayra and validated by Bukhārī; and quoting the Qur’ān verse 3:84.

Translation²¹

Qur'ān (2:62)

Lo! Those who believe, and those who are Jews, and Christians, and Sabaeans—whoever believeth in Allah and the Last Day and doeth right—surely their reward is with their Lord, and there shall no fear come upon them neither shall they grieve. (Qur'ān 2:62)

Commentary (*tafsīr*):

Whoever meditates on the Qur'ān realizes that God is more merciful toward the servant than the latter could be toward himself. Thus God, after having struck the sons of Israel with deafness as a punishment for their unfaithfulness, describes these men in all of their perversity. But He then shows Himself under His Attribute of Mercy, for this prevails over His Wrath.²² Henceforth the sons of Israel were encompassed in this Mercy and placed among the number of those who have faith among other traditional communities: there is no greater sweetness than that! . . .

Deduction (*istinbāt*):

We can draw three deductions from this verse:

- The traditional communities (*firaq*)²³—including Islam—are, in themselves, equal since they form the object, in this verse, of a single enumeration.
- A man having faith in what is taught by Islam could be considered as belonging to the people of the Book, even if he does not accomplish the pious actions that must, in principle, accompany his faith. This will not be the case if his actions are contrary to his faith.
- The Sabaeans possess a sacred Law since they are mentioned among the traditional communities who possess one.

Spiritual Allusion (*ishāra*):

The fact of mentioning side-by-side the different traditional communities while not distinguishing Muslim believers from other believers must lead us to consider no one, be he a Muslim or an infidel (*kāfir*), pious or sinful, as being inferior to us, and this throughout our entire life. In fact, our destiny is unknown to us and it is our state at the moment of death that matters: such is the lot of all mankind.

Language of the Spirit (*lisān al-Rūh*):

Thus I have understood from this enigmatic verse that all aforementioned traditional commu-

²¹ See *al-Bahr al-masjūr*, vol. I, pp. 145-148.

²² Allusion to a famous *hadīth*: "Indeed, God Most-High wrote for Himself, when He created the world: 'Indeed, My Mercy prevails over My Wrath'" (quoted by Tirmidhī).

²³ The term refers here to revealed religions and therefore to those which possess a holy Scripture.

nities possess a genuine validity in Religion (*makāna fī l-Dīn*). One may draw from the order of the enumeration a certain preeminence of the first over the last, but it remains nonetheless that a traditional community will always be of an incomparably higher rank than pagan cults.

Translated by Patrick Laude and Joseph Fitzgerald

Earnest for truth, I thought on the religions (*tafakkartu fī al-adyān*):
They are, I found, one root with many a branch.
Therefore impose on no man a religion,
Lest it should bar him from the firm-set root.
Let the root claim him, a root wherein all heights
And meanings are made clear, for him to grasp.

Mansūr al-Hallāj