Religious Discourse and the Human Condition:  
Which Comes First?

by Dr. Ali Mabrook

28 April 2011

Out of fear of being judged as supporters of Mubarak’s regime (the most miserable regime in the history of modern Egypt), many intellectuals chose not to engage in critical dialogue with the Muslim Brotherhood. The corrupt regime had long claimed—in its propaganda outreach to Westerners and Copts—to be the “civil and tolerant alternative” to the Brotherhood, when in fact, the nominally “civil” status of the regime was merely a mask to conceal its authoritarian, totalitarian and even militant essence.

New conditions in Egypt, following the Mubarak regime’s collapse, render it obligatory that we critically examine and discuss the Muslim Brotherhood’s ideology, for the sake of our nation’s future. Many people assume, of course, that the group will become more open-minded, now that it’s free of oppression from Mubarak’s regime. In other words, the conditions required for a fruitful and productive dialogue with the Muslim Brotherhood have been fulfilled, from the perspective of civil society. Hopefully, members of the Brotherhood will be able to emerge from the defensive position they have long occupied, in which they were unable to critically examine or discuss the dogmatic discourse they employed as a kind of shelter, or ideological bunker.

If we all agree upon the fact that Egypt is currently in dire need of a serious and fruitful dialogue among its citizens, the only way to achieve such dialogue is to construct an open intellectual arena, in which everyone can share his or her views with others, for the sake of mutual enrichment. We do not need an atmosphere in which all parties assert the absolute validity of their own vision, and seek to impose it upon others, or cling to such ideas and ask others to accept or reject them, despite the feeble evidence adduced for said opinions. The prerequisite for any productive dialogue is a critical examination of any and all concepts being discussed, along with their intellectual foundations or lack thereof. That is to say, concepts should be treated not as ideological “slogans” used to mobilize people, but as “subjects” of discussion that may lead to further knowledge and understanding.

The basic idea being propagated by the Muslim Brotherhood within the context of our current, wide-ranging—though by no means profound—debate about the future of Egypt, is that of establishing a civil state within a religious (i.e., Islamic) framework. The religious framework of the state is a central element of the Muslim Brotherhood’s vision of a future
Egypt. Within this context, the Muslim Brotherhood argues for a relationship between the civil and religious elements of the state, in which the religious will definitively control the civil.

This view is based upon an implicit assumption that what they term “religious” is divine and immutable, while the “civil” structures of society are created by humans, and mutable. Hence, the civil mutable must fall under the authority of the religious immutable. Of course, if one believes it is obligatory to have stable and immutable criteria of government, it is far easier to attribute such stability to the Divine, rather than to humans.

While it is reasonable to acknowledge that the civil/human dimension of life is mutable, the opposing claim—i.e., that what the Brotherhood describes as the “religious/divine” is absolute and immutable—is subject to argument and refutation. This is because even a preliminary examination of religion reveals the distinction between a theological/spiritual/ritual aspect that facilitates the relationship between man and God (relevant to what we call the private domain), and a legal/practical aspect that structures the relationship between man and others (relevant to what we call the public domain).

According to Islam itself, the first aspect (i.e., the private domain) is shared by the people of all scriptures. “Say: ‘People of the Book! Come now to a word common between us and you, that we serve none but God, and that we associate naught with Him, and do not take others as Lords, apart from God.’ And if they turn their backs, say: ‘Bear witness that we are muslims’” (Quran 3: 64).

On the other hand, Islam assumes and accepts that the second aspect (i.e., the public domain) will be subject to disagreement and various modes of implementation amongst the people of scriptures, as stated in the Qur’an: “To every one of you We have appointed a right way and an open road” (5:48). Religion, then, cannot be stable and immutable except in one of its two aspects (i.e., the spiritual), and its teachings cannot be applied to the things of this world in a rigid and absolutist manner. This reality is completely acknowledged and accepted by the majority of Muslim scholars (ulama) in both classical and recent times, including al-Qurtubi [a renowned Qur’anic exegete and jurist, who died in 1273], Muhammad Abduh [Egyptian jurist, religious scholar and liberal reformer who died in 1905] and M. Shaltut [Islamic theologian and Grand Shaykh of al-Azhar, who died in 1963].

The jurisprudential aspect of religion is not only mutable and different from one religion to the next, but also mutable within a specific religion, from one time or place to the next. This existence of diversity—within the jurisprudential aspect of religion in particular, and human existence in general—is so essential that God explicitly recognizes it in the Qur’an (“And they routed them, by the will of God, and David slew Goliath; and God gave him the kingdom, and wisdom, and taught him as He willed. And if God did not check one set of people by means of another, the earth would indeed be utterly corrupted.” [2:251]), as do traditional Muslim scholars, who consider different opinions among jurists to be an expression of God’s mercy and compassion.

Diversity within the legalistic aspect of religion cannot be explained but through the human condition, as “[t]here is”—according to al-Qurtobi—“complete agreement amongst intellectuals that the revelation of the prophets is meant to foster the religious and worldly interests of humanity. Bearing this fact in mind, we may recognize that divine discourses are mutable, in accord with the changing needs of humanity. God behaves like a physician who
takes into account the condition of a patient. God, likewise, willingly takes into account the changing conditions of humanity, and His discourse is mutable for that reason.”

According to al-Qurtobi’s statement, the mutability of divine discourse arises from the mutability of people’s needs, which means that civil/mutable human interest is the proximate cause for the mutability of divine discourse itself. Thus, religion—which the Muslim Brotherhood views as the necessary framework for a civil state—in fact arises from, and finds its justification within, the prevailing civil/human condition. If mutability is acceptable within the divine discourse in general, it must be even more acceptable within the legalistic dimension of that discourse—which is completely related to the public domain. Denying the relationship between the mutability of divine discourse and evolving human needs, leads to attributing ignorance to God, which no one can accept.

The legalistic dimension of religion (which structures relationships between people) is of course what the Muslim Brotherhood seeks to install as the “religious framework” of the state, since it is inconceivable that the other (theological/spiritual/ritual) dimension of religion, which facilitates the relationship between man and God, could be employed for this purpose.

The fact that the legalistic dimension of religion is not only mutable, but also—and most importantly—determines the content of divine discourse, leads to the solid conclusion that it is, in fact, the mutable civil/human condition that controls religious/divine discourse. In other words, it is the condition of society that underlies and animates religious discourse. When members of the Muslim Brotherhood speak of installing religious discourse as the “immutable” framework of a civil state, they seek nothing less than to mask their political ideology and agenda behind the sacredness of religion, in order to render their actions immune to questioning or criticism. Which is the point, exactly!

*Dr. Ali Mabrook serves as Deputy Director of Academics of LibForAll Foundation’s International Institute of Qur’anic Studies (www.libforall.org), and is a prominent member of Egypt’s intellectual and academic community.*
عن الديني والمدني... وأيهما المرجع للأخر؟

بـ حـب - عـلي مـيروك

التقى يوم真理 اشتراع عم يزج راح راح يج طارخلا نع نم حج أدق نيريش شوك نام 
كيفه حـيزـمـلا مـاـركـلا نع نم حج أدق نيريش شوك نام 
كيفه حـيزـمـلا مـاـركـلا نع نم حج أدق نيريش شوك نام 
كيفه حـيزـمـلا مـاـركـلا نع نم حج أدق نيريش شوك نام 
كيفه حـيزـمـلا مـاـركـلا نع نم حج أدق نيريش شوك نام 
كيفه حـيزـمـلا مـاـركـلا نع نم حج أدق نيريش شوك نام 
كيفه حـيزـمـلا مـاـركـلا نع نم حج أدق نيريش شوك نام 
كيفه حـيزـمـلا مـاـركـلا نع نم حج أدق نيريش شوك نام 
كيفه حـيزـمـلا مـاـركـلا نع نم حج أدق نيريش شوك نام 
كيفه حـيزـمـلا مـاـركـلا نع

يمـلـسـلا مـيرـيـلـيـبـلا ارموه 
حـبطـتـهـس ام روـاحـلا لـغيـهـ لـمـارـبـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـمـم~

Al-Ahram – “Religious Discourse and the Human Condition: Which Comes First?”
بين اجلنا.. لا لتقدير لاجلو وتقي نب شريته.. على ميظنت مب اجل اعجم
نعم نعشي دن لوقوع.. وه، يريغ ناسنلا تقاله مظنتني يذلا ينيدنا نم يع strikeouts
نم ءيف أبل سرؤي ام دجي يذلا ينيدنا نم بناجلا، وهو ينيدنا قلودنل قفوني قفعي قفعم
ثم التفرز ينيدنا نامسنلا عضولا يف راهننل زيدباقذا يغ.. قري أغيلوا ففالتخالا
ادحا لظي نيج.. سرك علا سيلوه ينيدنا عجلوا وهو ينيدنا نأ.. تفرافسلوه وينغ
مشيور يفخي نأ ابل لعفيال مناف، ينيدلل عجل، ينيدنا نع لثلد دعب نشعحي
مفصلا قطنم قروف امب وبسرا فنامصح امتداع يغضب ينيدنا عارو امتعت يطب قفدنلا
تالفنالا او مزوات يذلا رصم يجريت يذلا ماظنل، مب لعيدت يذلا قطننلنا وهو بعلاء سعلوا
رعيياً نم

http://www.ahram.org.eg/The-Writers/News/75047.aspx