

The Qur'an: Essential Teachings

Abdur Raheem Kidwai

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Given that each teaching of the Qur'an is essential, it is neither possible nor desirable to divide its teachings into "essential," "less-essential," or "non-essential." Since this book seeks to serve "the needs of those new to the study of the Qur'an," *The Qur'an: Some Essential Teachings* would have been a more accurate title and would have forewarned the reader that the author presents only select teachings. That aside, A. R. Kidwai, a rising Islamic scholar, felt compelled to write this book to meet the needs of the common reader, because he believes that the available material mainly addresses the specialized reader. This brilliant work is designed to equip readers with the necessary tools to "grasp better advanced works on the Qur'an" (p. vi). The book mainly deals with the concepts of God, messengership, and the Hereafter and throws some light on modes of worship, as well as on social and family relations, in a very lucid, fluent, and persuasive manner.

This book opens by analyzing the Qur'anic concept of God. The third chapter, which deals with the Prophet, is full of remarkable observations about his life and his role as a perfect role model for humanity. Some important aspects of his personality, however, have been left out, such as his leadership, emphasis on acquiring *`ilm* (knowledge), and the use of reason.

Following in the footsteps of earlier exegetes, Kidwai also assumes, in his illustration of humanity's creation, that the "Qur'an bestows upon man the coveted status of God's vicegerent" (p. 59). However, the exact translation of *khalifah* is "successor," not "vicegerent." Moreover, nowhere does the Qur'an specify that God appointed humanity to be His vicegerent. On the contrary, it repeatedly stresses that humanity is His slave, whose only duty is to obey Him ungrudgingly. No messenger of God, including Muhammad, ever declared that he was a vicegerent or successor of God, a point the author himself mentions on page 59. True, humanity has been appointed a successor, but we are not told to whom. Perhaps humanity succeeded some other prehuman species that roamed the land. God commands humanity to obey Him in both the individual and social capacity as His slave, not as His successor or vicegerent.

Although Kidwai draws attention to the common ancestry – and therefore equality – of humanity, the issue of gender equality would appear more convincing if the verse in question (4:1) were interpreted to say that God created all men and women from a single soul. The first part of the verse covers humanity, instead of just men. It says: "O mankind, fear your Guardian Lord Who created you from a single soul." The second part refers to the same soul (note the feminine gender pronoun in the original Arabic), from which its "spouse/mate/partner" – not necessarily wife – was created. If it is interpreted to say that God first created Adam and then created Eve from him, the pronoun in point of fact would have been *m-n-h* followed by *z-w-j-t-h*, which is not the case. As it stands, the verse is explicit enough to convey that man and woman (Adam and Eve) share their common origin in a single soul; hence, there is perfect gender equality. To say that Eve was taken out of Adam leads one inevitably to infer a woman's inferior status. Moreover, this view also has an extra-Qur'anic (Judaic) origin.

This book has a great instructional value for those who are predisposed to accept things as they are told to them. It is a highly useful manual for the lay believer. Its usefulness, however, could have been increased manifold by including points for a questioning mind. This is even more necessary, since the book appears to address those who know little about Islam or are new to it. Such people, especially western readers, have many questions; these should have been taken into account. Moreover, the book could have offered

some clues (Qur'anic guidelines) about living peacefully and equally in a pluralistic society. Although the author points out that the Prophet "displayed exemplary courage and tact in overcoming the unbelievers on the battleground" (p. 22) and considers the essential injunction of jihad as one of "the main acts of worship in Islam" (p. 94), he devoted no space to this crucial Qur'anic concept. This is a significant oversight, for today Islam has been branded as terrorism the world over due to this term's misuse.

The Qur'an is unique in the pronounced stress it places on learning, thinking, and wisdom – to the extent of declaring that "it is the people of knowledge who truly fear God" (35:28). All other scriptures are quiet about this. The Qur'an persistently invites one to ponder the universe and one's self in order to discover God's signs therein. Some space, therefore, should have been reserved for highlighting this unique and unparalleled feature. Down the centuries, a trend has set in to study the Qur'an or Islam as a thing of the past and to rehash the questions and answers of the earliest period. This book also recounts past encounters and anecdotes to establish the Qur'an's truth now, leaving aside modern-day accusations, doubts, and misconceptions.

Providing answers to contemporary questions is likely to appeal more to a modern student of Islam or a new Muslim. Reading the Qur'an as a slice of the past hardly lays to rest modern queries and doubts. The reader would, therefore, be justified in expecting another book from the pen of this promising Qur'an scholar written exclusively for the questioning mind of the twenty-first century.

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