

**Crisis, Call, and Leadership in
the Abrahamic Traditions**

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Human Contention and Divine Argument: Faith and Truth in the Qur'an Story of Abraham

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For Jewish and Christian scholars, the conflict between traditional exegesis and modern, historical-critical study has been largely an intra-communal affair, conducted by scholars who were at least nominal members of the Jewish and Christian communities. In Islam, however, this conflict has been driven by a very different dynamic. When it implies a human rather than divine origin for the Qur'an, historical-critical study of the Qur'an is difficult to reconcile with the foundational principles of Islamic faith. This study has therefore been conducted almost exclusively by scholars outside the Islamic community—and often with polemical as well as academic aims. Islam's intra-communal debate has focused, instead, on the legitimacy of various hermeneutical approaches to the Qur'an. Should Muslims today, for example, be able to reinterpret the Qur'an according to the social, philosophical, moral imperatives of contemporary times, or must they rely exclusively upon traditional, medieval commentaries on the text? And if contemporary readings and interpretations are allowed, then who has the authority and the right to engage in such endeavors?

When I joined the Center for Theological Inquiry (CTI) fellowship, I was pondering these questions and searching for a scholarly means of responding to them. The inspiration I was seeking came from a Jewish colleague in our fellowship: from Elizabeth Alexander's work on a Talmudic narrative about Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac. Joining our group discussions of her work, I was impressed by her ability to make the traditional sources respond to the modern critics,

addressing the very same texts that challenge modern readers. Our group's exploration of the place of Abraham in the Torah and Talmud and New Testament also helped me rediscover important aspects of the Qur'anic Abraham. For all three traditions, Abraham appears as iconoclast and heroic forger of the monotheistic tradition. But Islam also sharpens our reading of Abraham as the "bosom friend" (khalil) of God: the Abraham whose relationship to God, displayed in different ways in all three traditions, was personal, direct, honest and unmediated by the weight of inherited tradition. Inspired, in part, by the Jewish and Christian readings, I discerned more clearly how the Qur'an portrayed the independence of Abraham's thinking about God: how his at times fearless questioning was suggestive not of some kind of rebellion against God, but of an intimate personal relationship with Him. I began to see how the Qur'anic Abraham—at once obedient and questioning—may encourage contemporary Muslims' intellectual engagement with their own scriptural and exegetical tradition.

For Muslims, the Qur'an is the pure and unalterable word of God, delivered and arranged exactly according to divine command and determination. The Qur'an, however, can be a difficult text to understand, as it is often elliptical and frequently uses metaphorical language, symbolic imagery, and multivalent terms. The Qur'an itself acknowledges the difficulties it poses for human understanding, occasionally making reference to its use of metaphor and its narrative omissions. A well-known verse of the Qur'an states that it contains both clear verses and verses whose full meaning is known only to God:

He it is Who has revealed unto thee the Scripture wherein are clear revelations—they are the substance of the Book—and others (which are) multivalent. Those in whose hearts is doubt pursue that which is multivalent, seeking (to cause) dissension by seeking to explain it. No one knows its explanation save God. And those firmly rooted in knowledge say: We believe therein; the whole is from our Lord; but only men of understanding really heed. (3:7)

This verse has often been used by conservative thinkers in Islam (both historically and in contemporary times) to discredit and indeed disallow independent speculation on the meaning of Qur'anic verses. Some use the verse to establish a direct connection between the independent search for the meaning of difficult Qur'anic verses with "seeking to cause dissension," thereby considering it a dangerous and morally unacceptable endeavor.

However, upon careful reading we see that the above passage criticizes specifically *faithless* speculation on the Qur'an purposely to cause

discord, not the questioning, in good faith, of one sincerely searching for its meaning. While, according to this passage, God alone knows the meaning of certain verses, the Qur'an elsewhere encourages and even commands its readers to contemplate and reflect on its meaning. It challenges its readers to seek out confirmation of its miraculous status, remarking in one passage that if the Qur'anic text were not from God, one would find much incongruity in it (thereby charging the skeptical to read it and consider its degree of internal consistency).¹ In other passages, it challenges those who do not believe in it to produce a text like it²—again encouraging the reader to test the miraculous nature of the text. While the Qur'an does assert that it is divinely given and protected, it does not attempt to preserve its claim on Muslim devotion merely through dogmatic assertions that one must accept its words without question or thought. Rather, it encourages the reader to ponder its rhetorical and suggestive passages and arrive on their own at the spiritual truths it intends to awaken in its readers.

The traditional Islamic view holds that the best interpreter of the Qur'an is Muhammad himself, and after him, his companions who lived through and witnessed the descent, early propagation, prophetic interpretation, and implementation of the Qur'an. Thus whenever an explicit interpretation of a Qur'anic verse is attributed to the prophet or his companions, this interpretation is widely viewed as authoritative. However, most Qur'anic verses do not have a universally accepted prophetic interpretation, and as any perusal of early *tafsir* traditions makes clear, even Muhammad's most authoritative companions did not agree on the meaning of all verses. Moreover, the special place afforded to the earliest interpretations of Muhammad and his companions did nothing to dissuade generations of Islamic intellectuals from freely speculating on the meaning of Qur'anic verses from a variety of spiritual perspectives: sectarian, philosophical, and mystical. In fact, throughout Islamic intellectual history, the importance of relying on transmitted accounts of the earliest interpretations competed fruitfully and creatively with the belief in the ability of the individual human intellect (*aqf*) to arrive through study, contemplation, and spiritual practice, at deeper, esoteric meanings contained within the Qur'anic verses. Islamic thinkers spoke of the complementarity, rather than antipathy, of "transmitted" (*naqli*) and "intellectual" (*aqfi*) means of acquiring religious knowledge, with many asserting the necessity of both, but also the primacy of the latter.

Islamic intellectual culture encouraged Muslims to learn from and consider the spiritual teachings, interpretations, and traditions of

scholars who had preceded them, viewing them as links in a chain of traditional authority stretching back to the prophet Muhammad. At the same time, the Qur'anic challenge to arrive at religious truth through intellectual contemplation of the Qur'anic message and the natural world inspired Islam's greatest thinkers to write philosophical and mystical works that were often highly original. The constant suspension of the intellect between these two approaches allowed Muslim thinkers to penetrate the Islamic message in ever new and spiritually insightful ways, while remaining anchored in Islamic tradition. The tragedy of Islamic intellectual life in the modern period has been the destruction of this balance. The result has been a divide between modernist thinkers—who endeavor to present Islam as a thoroughly rational, scientific religion compatible with contemporary Western norms, even if this means the abandonment of a millennium of traditional commentary, religious speculation, and spiritual insight—and traditionalist thinkers, who rely exclusively on the vast body of (in many places, internally contradictory) *humanly transmitted* traditions, to the exclusion of independent intellectual consideration of the Qur'anic text or the world around them. It is a false dichotomy that has left the Islamic community with a split between modernist (and often Westernized) scholars detached from much of their own intellectual heritage, and traditional scholars who, unlike the pious forebears they hold up as exemplars, often refuse to apply their own intelligence to the tradition they transmit and its meaning in a radically different world.

In trying to resolve this dichotomy, a reflection on the Qur'anic story of Abraham is particularly instructive. As a man who was willing to leave his homeland and travel into strange territory upon divine command, and who later proves himself willing to obey divine orders to abandon one son in the wilderness and nearly sacrifice another, Abraham can be understood as a man of unwavering faith, and as one who represents the notion of patriarchal authority as an earthly reflection of God's sovereignty. Modern critics of the story in both its Biblical and Qur'anic versions have explored the moral implications of obeying even a divine order to abandon or sacrifice one's child, and they criticize the patriarchal implications of a father's right over the life and death of his offspring.³ At the same time, and paradoxically, one contemporary female interpretation of the Qur'anic Abraham sees him as an *anti-patriarchal* figure—a man who abandons the idolatrous religion of his father (and eventually “disowns” his father), and later asks for the willing consent of his son to his own sacrifice, as commanded by God.⁴

In this paper I would suggest that a closer reading of the Qur'anic Abraham yields more than just a reified model of blind faith and patriarchal authority. If we weave together the various Qur'anic accounts of events in the life of Abraham, we see that they form a thematically unified story with profound lessons for both scholars and practitioners of the Abrahamic faiths in dialogue with their own inherited traditions. For Abraham's legacy is not just about establishing or breaking inherited tradition (as he is variously interpreted as doing). Rather it is about the human struggle we all face between loyalty to the traditions we have inherited and our own inner discernment of truth. Abraham's faith can hardly be considered a “blind” faith, but is more accurately described as a faith that is not afraid to question, that is able to seek and find certitude, and that can arrive at the “argument”—in the Qur'an, “God's (own) argument”—for unswerving faith in the one God.

Abraham and the Argument for Monotheism

According to Islamic prophetic history, prophets usually receive a form of miraculous guidance or communication from God that initiates their prophetic missions. In the case of Abraham, however, his arrival at a belief in monotheism is an independent one, according to a literal reading of the Qur'anic text. Abraham's discernment of divine oneness appears to develop from an observation of the world around him that is both inspirational in nature and rational in presentation. Like Muhammad, Abraham does not have the early guidance of a monotheistic heritage, nor does he have a sudden, miraculous “conversion” experience to awaken him to spiritual reality. Rather, he is inspired to see the error of polytheism through an observation of the natural world, and he comes to the rational conclusion that the only God is the one God:

(Remember) when Abraham said unto his father Āzar: Take you idols for gods? Lo! I see you and your people in manifest error. Thus did We show Abraham the dominion (*malakūt*) of the heavens and the earth *that he might be of those possessing certainty*: When the night grew dark upon him he beheld a star. He said: This is my Lord. But when it set, he said: I love not things that set. And when he saw the moon uprising, he exclaimed: This is my Lord. But when it set, he said: Unless my Lord guide me, I surely shall become one of those who are astray. And when he saw the sun

uprising, he cried: This is my Lord! This is greater! And when it set he exclaimed: O my people! Truly I am free from all that you associate (with Him). I have turned my face toward Him Who created the heavens and the earth, as one by nature upright, and I am not of the idolaters. (6:74–79)

Abraham's rejection of his people's idolatry is rooted in a certitude divinely granted, but granted through his faculties of observation and intelligence.⁵ Observing the celestial bodies, he assumes they are deities, but in further observing their "setting," that is their temporality, impermanence, and susceptibility to change, he rejects them as reasonable objects of worship. Note that while the Qur'anic account indicates that God has a role in this perception, His role is simply to show Abraham the dominion of the heavens and the earth and guide him toward careful reasoning concerning them. Moreover, Abraham's faith in the existence of one unseen God does not depend upon a suspension of the natural order, but rather on an intelligent appreciation of it. Thus it is accessible to all those with eyes to see and minds to think clearly. Some commentaries understand God's showing Abraham "the dominion of the heavens and the earth" as reference to a revelatory journey that precedes Abraham's mission, thereby positing a more typical miraculous event as the source of the prophet's spiritual insight.⁶ However, the Qur'an elsewhere states that the "dominion of the heavens and the earth" is a vision accessible to all; one has merely to contemplate it to arrive at religious truth.⁷

This arrival at the conclusion of monotheism (or an intellectual defense thereof) through natural rather than supernatural phenomena is in keeping with the Qur'an's perspective on miracles, for while all prophets bring "evidentiary miracles," the witnessing of miraculous events does not necessarily lead to faith and cannot be its basis.⁸ Rather, the Qur'an repeatedly suggests that faith represents an assent of the will to what the observant eye and the intelligence perceive as truth—that there is a single, all-powerful God responsible for the creation and maintenance of the world and of human life. Lack of faith in this merely represents willful ignorance and human ingratitude.⁹ From the Qur'anic perspective, God's power is demonstrated by the maintenance and regularity of natural phenomena. It is most clearly evident in those continuous miracles that, precisely in their continuity, hardly seem miraculous at all to the insensitive soul: the changing seasons, the regular pathways of the sun and the moon, the guiding capacity of the stars. The signs of God are everywhere, the Qur'an repeatedly asserts,

but those whose spiritual will and consciousness have been corrupted cannot apprehend them. They have, as the Qur'an says, eyes that do not see, ears that do not hear and hearts that do not understand.¹⁰

Once aware of the reality of monotheism, Abraham undertakes to convince his people of the oneness of God. Yet, they are unwilling or unable to see the evident truth that Abraham has come to understand. Abraham's people vigorously contend with him, but he asserts the truth of his position:

His people argued with him. He said: Do you dispute with me concerning God when He hath guided me? I fear not at all that which you set up beside Him unless my Lord wills otherwise. My Lord includes all things in His knowledge. Will ye not then remember? How should I fear that which you set up beside Him, when you fear not to set up beside God that for which He hath revealed unto you no warrant? Which of the two factions has more right to safety? (Answer me that) if you have knowledge. Those who believe and obscure not their belief by wrongdoing, theirs is safety; and they are rightly guided. That is Our argument. We gave it unto Abraham against his folk. We raise unto degrees of wisdom whom We will. Lo! thy Lord is Wise, Aware. (6:80–83)

Abraham argues that his people can hardly expect him to fear the idols they have made with their own hands, when they do not fear the consequences of illogically worshipping their own idolatrous creations in place of, or alongside, the universal creator. Importantly, Abraham's words suggest that proper religious belief lies buried in his people's hearts, somewhere beneath the accumulated traditions of idolatry. After asserting God's omnipotence he asks rhetorically: "will you not then remember?"—remember, that is, *the truth that you already know*. Later he states that the rightly guided are those who "do not obscure belief through wrongdoing," suggesting that proper belief and understanding is compromised, not so much by intellectual deficiency, but through willful human error.

The passage concludes by saying this was an "argument" (*hujjah*), rather than a "message" (*risalah*), that God gave to Abraham against his people. God's *hujjah* stands in opposition to the false claims or "arguments" of Abraham's people. The argument Abraham presents is indeed God's own "argument," according to the Qur'an, since the Qur'an poses similar arguments against idolatry in a number of places, even occasionally without the medium of the prophet's voice.¹¹ The

Qur'an portrays Muhammad and earlier prophets as engaged in similar "arguments" with those resistant to their prophetic missions. In these narratives, the people make self-serving and disingenuous contentions against the prophet's message, only to be rebuked by a "conclusive" divine counter-argument. For example Qur'an 6:148-149 reads:

The idolaters will say, 'Had God willed, we would not have ascribed any partner [to Him], nor our fathers, nor would we have forbidden anything [that God had not forbidden]'. . . . Say [O Muhammad], 'Do you have any knowledge that you can produce before us? You follow nothing but conjecture (*ẓann*), and you do nothing but surmise.' Say [O Muhammad], 'To God belongs the conclusive argument (*al-hujjah al-bālighah*). . . .

The disputations of those who reject the prophet's message are dismissed as mere "conjecture" and "surmise," and as the Qur'an says elsewhere, "Truly conjecture is no substitute for the truth."¹²

In another Qur'anic passage, Abraham finds himself engaged in a similar argument about divine power with a local tyrant, usually understood to be the evil Nimrod who leads the charge against Abraham among his people. Here again, Abraham formulates the "conclusive argument" by invoking celestial phenomena as a proof of divine power over and against the arrogant contentions of the tyrant:¹³

Remember the one who had an argument with Abraham about his Lord, because God had given him kingship; how, when Abraham said: My Lord is He Who gives life and causes death, he answered: I give life and cause death. Abraham said: Lo! God causes the sun to rise in the East, so do you cause it to come up from the West. Thus was the unbeliever abashed. And God guides not wrongdoing folk. (2:258)

Abraham initially asserts the power of his Lord through an argument from human dependency and contingency: It is the Lord who gives life and causes death and so delimits the parameters of human existence. The tyrant counters Abraham's argument, contending arrogantly that he too gives life and causes death.¹⁴ Abraham responds with a proof of divine power that the king cannot pretend to imitate: the sun *always* rises in the East, who can cause it to rise in the West? Again, Abraham does not seek to prove the power of his God by resorting to miraculous suspensions of the natural order, but by *invoking* the natural order itself

and challenging the king to alter it. Here, it is precisely the regularity of the sun's movements that proves God's power, while the human inability to change them is a manifestation of mankind's dependency. In Abraham's argument, divine power is eminently manifest; the perception of this is obstructed only by human pride.

Abraham and the Argument Against Idolatry

Indeed We hurl truth against falsehood, and it crushes its head, and behold, falsehood vanishes!

Qur'an 21:18

The connection between intellectual obstinacy and idolatry is clear and palpable in several places in the Qur'an, as well as in the accounts of Muhammad's confrontations with his idolatrous people. In the passage cited above, the metaphorical image of divine truth "crushing the head"¹⁵ of human-generated falsehood brings to mind the smashing of false idols. The passage suggests that like idols made of human hands, the false ideas we contrive and cling to are fragile and helpless against the force of truth, in the face of which they should vanish like the dust of shattered idols. In one of the most well-known of all the Qur'anic stories about Abraham, the prophet provocatively challenges the "inherited" idolatrous beliefs of his forefathers, in favor of an intelligent assessment of the nature of things. In doing so, he condemns not only the physical practice of idolatry, but also human intellectual laziness, and the slavish acceptance of transmitted religious ideas over one's own capacity for clear reason:

And We verily gave Abraham of old his proper course, and We were Aware of him, When he said unto his father and his people: What are these images unto which you pay devotion? They said: We found our fathers worshipping them. He said: Verily you and your fathers were in manifest error. They said: Bring unto us the truth, or are you some jester? He said: Nay, but your Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth, Who created them; and I am of those who testify unto that. And, by God, I shall circumvent your idols after you have gone away and turned your backs. Then he reduced them to fragments, all save the chief of [the idols], that haply they might have recourse to it. They said: Who has done this to our gods? Surely it must be some evil-doer. They said: We heard a youth make mention of them, who is called Abraham. They said: Then bring him before

the people's eyes that they may testify. They said: Is it you who has done this to our gods, O Abraham? He said: *But this, their chief has done it. So question them, if they can speak.* Then they turned to themselves and said: Lo! you yourselves are the wrong-doers. And then they relapsed and said: *You know well that these speak not. He said: Do you then worship instead of God that which cannot profit you at all, nor harm you? Fie on you and all that you worship instead of God! Have you then no sense? (21:51-67)*¹⁶

When Abraham first challenges his people to explain their devotion to idols, they contend only that they were following the practices they had "found their fathers" doing. This contention is meaningless for Abraham, who without hesitation declares the transmitted tradition of his forefathers to be nothing more than transmitted error. Abraham proceeds to demonstrate, in a rather humorous manner, just how manifest their error really is. When no one is looking, he smashes all the idols except for the largest and, by his people's tradition, the most powerful of them. When they accuse Abraham of this destructive act, he replies (laughingly it appears) that it is the largest of the idols, still standing, that is responsible for the destruction and that they should question this idol. The people make Abraham's own argument for him when they reject his suggestion, contending: "You know well that these speak not!" Abraham has thus "revealed" to them their own capacity to assess the powerlessness of the idols and acknowledge that their idol-worship contradicts their most basic observations of the nature of things. Nonetheless their response to Abraham's challenge is not to abandon idol worship, but to cling to it in defiance of their own intelligence and to attack Abraham as a heretic against the tradition of his forefathers.

In posing this challenge to the faith of his "fathers," Abraham follows a series of earlier prophets who advanced similar challenges¹⁷ and prefigures Muhammad's own struggle against his idolatrous people in Mecca. The Qur'an encourages Muhammad in his struggle against the Quraysh by stating that whenever God sent a prophet to a people, its wealthy and powerful members rejected the prophet's guidance on the basis of what they claim is loyalty to the traditions of their fathers.¹⁸ The Qur'an rejects all such claims of loyalty by mocking the idea of following the inherited traditions of those who "never applied their intellect," or who lacked guidance and knowledge.¹⁹ But how is one to discern between a false prophet who leads people away from true beliefs, and a true prophet who leads them away from false ones? The Qur'an provides two answers that are, perhaps, related. In Qur'an 7:172, God takes

the testimony of all the "seed of Adam" in pre-eternity, asking them to bear witness to His lordship. When they unanimously testify to the one God, the Qur'an tells us that this was done "Lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, 'Truly, of this we were unaware,' or lest you should say, 'Our fathers ascribed partners [to God] before and we were descendants after them.'" The clear implication is that knowledge of the oneness of God and His lordship is embedded in human consciousness from before time, so that the excuse that one had merely "followed one's fathers" into false belief has no merit. This notion is implied in Abraham's statement that his people need only "remember" the truth. It is likewise implied in all of the prophetic accounts wherein both error and truth are described as "manifest"—that is, clearly discernible to the human intellect. Elsewhere, the Qur'an suggests that religious truth can be discerned from error through an inherent understanding of basic moral principles, such as justice. Qur'an 7:28-29, for example, instructs Muhammad to reply to the Quraysh's claim that God had enjoined various "indecent" practices upon them by saying, "Truly God does not enjoin indecencies.... My Lord has enjoined justice." This presupposes that human beings are endowed with the intellectual ability to discern truth from error; thus the manifest nature of either truth or error can only be obscured by human passions and selfish desires.

Despite the prevalence of the Qur'anic theme of resisting the false claims of one's forefathers in tradition, one of the issues that the commentators take up in their discussion of this passage about Abraham and the idols is the implied danger of the precedent Abraham sets in this account. Not only does he reject the "transmitted tradition" of his people and implore them to liberate their intelligence from slavish obedience to it, but he also curses his people, including his father—calling "fie" upon them, something the Qur'an says elsewhere one should never say to one's parents.²⁰ Some commentators, uncomfortable with this apparent lack of filial piety, argue that Āzar, who is mentioned quite explicitly as Abraham's idolatrous father in the text, was really Abraham's uncle.²¹ Other commentators tried to reduce the impact of Abraham's precedent by arguing that unquestioning obedience to the transmitted traditions of one's forefathers is permissible when one already knows the general correctness of their views.²² Nonetheless, most commentators interpret this passage as a critique of accepting doctrinal beliefs without examining them with one's own intelligence.

The Qur'anic account of Abraham's challenge to the idolatry of his people has important implications for the moral dilemma between

obedience to the humanly transmitted religious traditions of one's ancestors, and the responsibility to think for oneself and to be accountable for one's own moral decisions. Even in premodern times, the larger Qur'anic theme of the "manifest" nature of religious truth and its imperative to its readers that they contemplate the world around them, nurtured the philosophical project of harmonizing reason and revelation. Moreover, the struggle Muhammad and earlier prophets faced against the entrenched idolatry and religious error of their time, led many Islamic thinkers to reject the idea of *taqlid* (unthinking obedience to the religious opinions of others). Innovations in religious ritual and practice were explicitly disapproved of. But the individual application of intelligence to, in some ways, the most ultimate things—the nature of God, His relationship to mankind, and other theological issues—was advocated by leading thinkers and authorities of medieval and early modern Islam. Even so, the traditional and textual emphases of Islamic intellectual culture served to hold these two approaches in a constant, if productive, tension.

The Ash'arite rationalist, Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī, holds that while reason can be used to explicate religious truth as presented in scripture—and to refute religious "error"—the human rational or intellectual faculty cannot arrive at spiritual truth without the aid of divine revelation. Rāzī therefore refuses to read Abraham's story as proof that the observation of natural phenomena necessarily leads to an awareness of monotheism. In so doing, he offers an interesting theory to explain the development of the seemingly illogical practices of idolatry among rational human beings. In order to contextualize Rāzī's argument, we need to explain that, unlike many contemporary theories that suggest that human religion began with the deification of natural forces and only later progressed toward worship of a supraformal deity, Islam holds that the first monotheistic prophet was Adam himself and that there is no people that has not been sent a prophet. Thus all manifestations of religious practice, no matter how misguided they may appear, are really just degenerate forms of an original, divinely sent monotheistic religion. Rāzī takes the Islamic doctrine of the originality of monotheism and the degenerate nature of polytheism as anthropological fact, and on this premise explains the rise of idolatry. Rāzī theorizes that some people who held monotheistic religious beliefs observed a certain connection between the movements of the celestial bodies and changes on earth, such as the seasons. Gradually, theories developed that these celestial bodies were God's intermediaries that controlled various forces and events on earth at His command,

and eventually people began to worship the intermediaries. Since the celestial bodies were not always present and visible, men began to construct idols to represent these intermediary forces when they were absent from view. Finally, the idols lost their original representative and intermediary function and began to be worshiped in their own right.²³

Rāzī's theory suggests that idolatry need not emerge out of an original blindness or lack of understanding, but may have originated from an effort to provide material support for the worship of a transcendent deity. Rāzī's explanation of the descent into idolatry suggests that these supports eventually become spiritually opaque in proportion to a growing spiritual laziness that found it much easier to worship concrete objects than to seek to worship and understand an abstract deity. His commentary also suggests that idolatry itself contributes to growing intellectual and spiritual obtuseness. Thus it is only when an idolater frees himself from the worship of, or preoccupation with, that which is other than God, that spiritual truth becomes manifest.²⁴

If we reflect, for a moment, upon Rāzī's theory in the context of our present discussion, we might ask whether an excessive reliance on the transmitted tradition of Qur'anic commentary (especially the simplified and selectively edited version often presented to Muslims today) does not serve as a kind of "idol" of the mind. Has the reverence for this tradition, originally meant as an intermediary to assist our understanding of the text, become through centuries of informal canonization, "spiritually opaque"? Does an unreflective acquiescence to the authority of transmitted interpretation stand as an obstacle to our own ability to approach the text, and offer us an easy alternative to the hard intellectual searching required to grasp the deeper meaning of its passages? I do not mean to suggest that recognizing the religious importance of the transmitted *tafsir* tradition is "idolatry," for certainly this traditional commentary continues to be an indispensable aid to any contemporary attempt to understand the Qur'anic text. But should we not be wary of the potential that an excessive reliance upon it may have for our own ability to "see" the text itself, and to contemplate it in its own right and with our own minds—to use, as the Qur'an so often bids us to do, our intelligence?

The story of Abraham should serve to remind us that our moral and spiritual responsibility transcends the limits of our environment, our forefathers, and yes, even of our inherited traditions. We cannot claim exemption for false behaviors or beliefs on the premise that we were simply doing "what we have been told." As noted above, the Qur'an

asserts that God made all human beings testify, even before their birth, that He was their Lord, and declares that this was done so that on the day of resurrection human beings would have no claim or contention against God.²⁵ That early testament is viewed traditionally as the basis of the belief that all human beings are born with an intrinsic knowledge of the existence of their Creator and their duty toward Him. It can also be understood, however, as a reference to the gift of that same objective intellect with which Abraham was able to discern religious truth amid idolatry, the gift of intelligence symbolically bestowed upon Adam in the Qur'anic account of God's teaching him "the names [i.e., realities] of all things."²⁶

Questioning and Seeking in the Context of Faith

The Qur'an suggests that reason and faith are complementary, rather than mutually exclusive, ways of arrive at religious truth. Thus one must question and seek to understand the divine, but one must also obey direct divine commands. This is the lesson of Satan, who rationally argues for his own superiority over mankind in direct contravention of an express divine command to bow to Adam.²⁷ At the same time, the intelligence must consider, contemplate, and indeed seek certitude with regard even to those things that one believes to be divinely revealed. This is another lesson we might draw from the story of Abraham. While Abraham is able to intuit the idea of monotheism from an observation of natural phenomena, he finds he cannot comprehend the idea of resurrection in the same manner. Death is a physical reality that appears permanent and irrevocable even to the most observant human eye. Accustomed to "seeing" evidence of the religious truths that he clings to fearlessly, Abraham asks God to manifest the truth of resurrection to him:

And when Abraham said (unto his Lord): My Lord! Show me how Thou givest life to the dead, He said: *Dost thou not believe?* Abraham said: *Yea, but (I ask) in order that my heart may be at ease.* (His Lord) said: Take four of the birds and cause them to incline unto thee, then place a part of them on each hill, then call them, they will come to thee in haste, and know that Allah is Mighty, Wise. (2:260)

Most striking in this account is the dichotomy that is set up and then demolished between true faith and the desire for the certitude that

comes from *seeing*. When Abraham asks to be "shown" the divine power of resurrection, God immediately questions his faith. Yet Abraham disarmingly transcends the dichotomy between faith and seeing by asserting that he does believe but also wishes his heart "to be at ease." This passage suggests that human beings must accept the reality of the religious truths revealed to them *even* when they are "unseen" and indiscernible. Yet this faith does not obviate the legitimate human desire to know through "seeing," and to attain a spiritual certitude that can put their "hearts at ease."

In fact, in the unique Qur'anic rendering of the story of the near sacrifice of Abraham's son, Abraham reveals a heart that is still questioning and seeking in the context of obedience and humility. In a manner very different from the biblical version of the account, the Qur'anic Abraham does not keep the horror of the command to sacrifice his son to himself, but rather makes his son a *willing* participant in the sacrifice:

And when (his son) was old enough to walk with him, (Abraham) said: O my dear son, I have seen in a dream that I must sacrifice you. So consider, *what do you think?* He said: O my father! Do that which thou art commanded. God willing, thou shalt find me of the patient. Then, when they had both surrendered (to God), and he had flung him down upon his face, We called unto him: O Abraham! Thou hast already fulfilled the vision. Thus do We reward the good. That verily was a clear test. Then We ransomed him with a tremendous victim. (37:102-107)

Abraham shares his dream with his son, so that it becomes a test of faith for father and son together. After telling him of the dream, moreover, he asks for his son's view on the matter, asking him what he *thinks* about it. Given the opportunity to consider and contemplate his own sacrifice at his father's hands, the son passes the test of faith by telling his father to do what was "commanded"—and that he hoped to remain steadfast through the trial, patiently obedient until the spiritual meaning of this unfathomably painful command became clear. Here, too, faith and independent thought coexist. While the command must certainly be inexplicable to them, Abraham and his son's certitude in the justness of God gives them the ability to be patient until the fullness of the situation has become clear to them. Questioning, as in the previous case, exists within an overall context of belief.

Conclusions

There is human contention, and there is divine argument. The Abraham story in the Qur'an serves to emphasize a point made in a variety of ways elsewhere in the Qur'an: that divine truth is ultimately manifest and attainable through objective observation, while human contentions that go against religious truth also contend against our own intelligence and rational judgment. We must ultimately rely on our own intelligence and judgment, for these Qur'anic accounts suggest that we will, in the end, be judged by our intellectual effort or laziness, by the ways we have used or misused our intelligence. Humility should compel us to seek our own understandings of the Qur'anic text "in consultation"²⁸ with the transmitted traditions of interpretation. Doing so may help one avoid a kind of "spiritual pride" that the Qur'an suggests leads precisely to the blindness and rash judgment that clouds human intelligence itself. But we must remember that, ultimately, we alone are held accountable for those religious beliefs and understandings we come to hold.

Notes

All Qur'anic translations are based upon the English translation of M.M. Pickthall, with occasional changes or amendments.

1. Qur'an 4:82.
2. Qur'an 2:23; 52:34.
3. See, for example, Phyllis Trible, "Ominous Beginnings for a Promise of Blessing," in *Hagar, Sarah and Their Children: Jewish, Christian and Muslim Perspectives*, ed. Phyllis Trible and Letty M. Russell (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 33-70.
4. See Asma Barlas, *Believing Women in the Qur'an: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), ch. 4.
5. This reading is consistent with the interpretation presented in Tabari, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, v. 6:320-321, 323-325; Suyūṭī, *al-Durr al-munthar fi'l-tafsīr al-ma'thūr*, in his commentary on 6:75-79; and Tusi, *al-Tibyan fi tafsīr al-Qur'an*, in his commentary on 6:74-79.
6. See, for example, Zamakhshari, *al-Kashshaf*, v. 2:31-32.
7. See Qur'an 7:185: "Have they not contemplated the dominion of the heavens and the earth, and whatever things God has created, and that maybe their time has drawn near? What discourse will they believe after this?"
8. Note that despite witnessing the many extraordinary miracles brought by Moses, Pharaoh is not persuaded to believe (Qur'an 20:56-71) and that although Abraham is miraculously saved from the fire into which he has been thrown by his pagan community, the fact that Abraham feels compelled to leave them thereafter suggests that they did not change their views toward his message of monotheism (Qur'an 21:68-71; 29:24-26).
9. As is well known, the Arabic word for unbelief (*kuf*) literally means ingratitude, and the Qur'an continually mentions the wonderful natural phenomena that God has provided for the benefit of mankind, and frequently follows this with a rhetorical question asking why, in consideration of all these gifts, man still refused to believe. (See, for example, Qur'an 55).

10. Qur'an 7:179.
11. See, for example, Qur'an 7:194-198, 20:88-89; 25:3; 46:4.
12. Qur'an 53:28.
13. Ibn Kathir, *Tafsīr al-Qur'an al-'azīm*, v. 1:419.
14. Here from the negative point of view that he can decide whether or not to end the life of his subjects at his whim. *Ibid.*, v. 1:420.
15. The Arabic verb here, *damagha*, means literally to crush the skull, such that the brain itself is injured in its classical usage (see Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, v. 3:914). It can also mean to "prevail over" or to "overcome." In contemporary Arabic usage, the verb is used almost exclusively to denote the triumph of truth over falsehood, perhaps as a result of its Qur'anic usage.
16. Similar accounts of this event are given in two other places in the Qur'an, see 26:69-82 and 37:83-96.
17. See Qur'an 11:62-63, 87-88.
18. Qur'an 43:23.
19. Qur'an 2:170-171; 5:104.
20. Qur'an 46:17; see also 17:23 where it says that one should not speak harshly or contemptuously to parents. Rosalind Gwynne has noted in her study of Qur'anic argumentation that Muslim exegetes wished to "absolve Abraham of any culpability in offending tradition by disobeying his father, on the one hand, and praying that he—an idolater—be forgiven on the other." (See *Logic, Rhetoric and Legal Reasoning in the Qur'an: God's Arguments* [New York: Routledge Curzon, 2004], 194-195).
21. See Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-kabīr*, pt. 13, pp. 38-40.
22. See Baydāwī, *Anwār al-tanzīl wa'l-asrār al-ta'wīl*, v. 6:259.
23. Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-kabīr*, pt. 13, p. 36.
24. *Ibid.*, 41.
25. Qur'an 7:172.
26. Qur'an 2:31-33.
27. Qur'an 7:11-13.
28. Qur'an 42:38 praises those believers who decide their affairs in "mutual consultation" with one another.