

# “ONE” AND “MANY” IN ISLAM – THE PATH (*SIRĀT*) AND THE WAYS (*SUBUL*) IN THE QUR’AN

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The Qur’an considers both *one* path (*sirat*) and *many* ways (*subul*) simultaneously as a direction to righteousness and religiosity. The same kind of *one* and *many* has been revealed about wickedness and unrighteousness as well. Now, the question arises here, what is the relationship between *plurality* and *unity* in both righteousness and unrighteousness?

I think considering these questions will offer a new perspective in regard to “unity and plurality” which is an important issue in a pluralistic world such as ours. In order to respond to these questions, it would be significant to illuminate the relationship between many divine ways and the one divine path on the one hand, and to clarify the distinction between divine ways and devil ways on the other.

**Keywords:** *Unity, Plurality, Great ways (as-subul al-kulliyya), Tiny ways (as-subul al-juz’iyya), Exclusive path (Sirat), Divine ways, Devil ways*

## ***Introduction***

The Qur’an considers both *one* path (*sirat*) and *many* ways (*subul*) simultaneously as a direction to righteousness and religiosity. There are many verses in the Qur’an regarding those plural ways and the united path in the role of the divine lane for salvation and happiness. To take but one instance, consider the following verse: “whereby God guides whosoever follows His good pleasure in the ways of peace, and brings them forth from the shadows into the light by His Leave; and He guides them to a straight *path*.” (Qur’an 5: 16)

The same kind of *one* and *many* has been revealed about wickedness and unrighteousness as well, when it says: "Muster those who did evil, their wives, and that they were serving apart from God, and guide them unto the path of Hell!" (ibid. 37: 22–23); and "that this is My path, straight; so do you follow it and follow not divers paths lest they scatter you from His path." (ibid. 6: 153)

Now, the question arises here, what is the relationship between *plurality* and *unity* in both righteousness and unrighteousness? How is it possible to reach *one* through *many*? And what is the role of plurality in formulation of Muslim monotheistic identity that is based on the unity of God (*at-tavhid*)? Also, what is the influence of devil plurality in formation of unique wicked path and in deviation of human beings from the good way?

The second question that is far more difficult is to differentiate between two kinds of plurality, including noble and evil ways through which we get righteousness by the one and by another we lose it? How is it possible, in the view of the Qur'an, to reach unity through "divine plurality," and to lack unity through "devil plurality"?

In addition to the above questions that are related to the unity and plurality in reality (ontology), we might ask the same question about unity and plurality in the mind and knowledge (epistemology) when we face the reality or interpret the text such as the Qur'an. There are many narratives in Islamic tradition which assert that there is no one unique meaning for the Qur'anic verses; rather they are multi-layers which contain unlimited meanings. *Imam* Jāfar Sadiq said:

"The verse, its first layer implies something, its middle layer denotes another thing, and its deep layer refers to different connotation; but all have one unified message that comes in different appearances." (Ayyashi 1960: 23)

The prophet Muhammad declared:

"Every verse in the Qur'an has an external and internal dimension, and every letter has a limit (*al-hadd*) and every limit has its own prelude (*al-matla'*)." (Siuti 1995: II/1219; Aloosi 1994: I/8)

In the same way *Imam* Ali asserted:

"There is nothing from the Qur'anic verses that has but four meanings: exoteric (*al-zahir*), esoteric (*al-batin*), limit (*al-hadd*), and prelude (*al-matla'*). So, exoteric (outward aspect) is recitation, esoteric (inward aspect) is the understanding, and the limit (boundary) implies what is permitted or prohibited, and the prelude is what God means." (Kashani 1980: I/31)

Another key statement is *Imam Jāfar Sadiq's* statement:

“God’s book has four things: literal, mentioned (implicit points), subtleties, and realities. The literal phrases are for laymen, the mentioned points address intellectuals, the subtleties are for mystics, and the realities are specified for prophets.” (ibid.)<sup>1</sup>

This multiplicity and plurality of the meaning is not confined to the Qur’an, but also it could be found in Muhammad’s words as well when he said:

“We the prophets are commanded to talk to people [say nations, cultures, and various civilizations] according to their intellects (and their abilities).” (Majlisi 1983: I/85)

This means that the divine message is not an exclusive message, rather it is inclusive and includes all human beings<sup>2</sup> in spite of their different capacities and various languages (see: Kashani 1980: I/32; Ibn Arabi n.d.: II/219; Shirazi 1985: 10; Jami 1990: 134). Accordingly, the general sacred truth in the Qur’an is available for everyone including laymen and intellectuals but its deep layers are available only for elites and elites of the elites (see: Tabatabaei 1996: III/67; Abu Zayd 1996: 223).

Now the question arises again: what is the relationship between unity and plurality in the meaning of the truth and in interpretation of sacred texts? Is there any commonality between one and many meanings which exist behind the textual phrases in the Qur’an?

Nevertheless, this kind of questions has never been thought out in detail by Muslim scholars. Meanwhile these complicated and fundamental questions are the crux of the Muslims’ crisis now. In order to respond to these questions, it would be really significant to illuminate the relationship between many divine ways and the one divine path on the one hand, and to clarify the distinction between divine ways and devil ways on the other. In order to do it, it would be essential to make Qur’anic principles discriminate between divine and devil unity and plurality. I think considering this question in relation to the Qur’an will offer a new perspective in regard to “unity and plurality” which is an important issue in a pluralistic world such as ours.

1 Also, Ibn Abbas has quoted another statement: “The Qur’an has multiple aspects, exoteric and esoteric aspects, does not exhaust its excellences, and cannot arrive at its end; it has abrogated and is abrogating, explicit and implicit verses, so its exoteric aspect is recitation and its esoteric dimension is interpretation.” (Aloosi 1994: I/8; Tabatabaei 1996: X/130–131)

2 Based on this, the Qur’an should be read by every person as if it addressed them alone (see: Shirazi 1985: 64–70).

Briefly, I think: a) plurality in divine ways (*subul*) differs widely from plurality in evil ways; b) plurality in divine ways facilitates formulation of unitarian path (*as-sirāt at-tavhidi*) and monotheistic identity even in the plural world. Conversely, devil ways (*subul at-tāghūt*) isolate us from unity (in the faith) and solidarity (in society); c) pluralisation of divine ways, which is activation of every person's potency to reach his own celestial goal, would be best to implement the unitarian path (including infinite ways) in human life here and now; and d) the same kind of interrelated unity and plurality could appear in interpretation of the Qur'an as well, without any paradox between several meanings in textual frame.

### I

#### **"Great Ways" (*as-Subul al-Kulliyya*), "Tiny Ways" (*as-Subul al-Juz'iyya*) and "The Exclusive Path" (*Sirat*)**

The *path* (one), in the Qur'an, has typically been assigned only to God Himself, and conversely the *ways* (as a plural word) have been applied to human beings (Qur'an 12: 108; 4: 114; 31: 15). According to many exegeses, using of the "path" in singular form, and the "ways" in plural shape reveals some fundamental differences between "path" and "ways" in the Qur'an (see: Tabatabaei 1996: I/31). In this view, the "ways" depend on diverse people and different wayfarers. In contrast, the "path" is beyond variety and diversity. The *path* is *one* and all-inclusive highway which includes infinite ways to enter. Also, there are two kinds of *ways*: individual small ways (*as-subul al-juz'iyya*) that could be implemented in every person's self; and general great ways (*as-subul al-kulliyya*) that are smaller than the path (*sirat*) yet bigger than small ways. The unique path constitutes of several general ways, and general great ways are comprised of numerous and many tiny and small ways.

#### *Relationship between Ways and the Path*

There are two different interpretations of the relationship between the ways and the path. *Ayatullah* Jawadi Amuli<sup>1</sup> sets them apart: a) the *ways* are branchy means that are joined to the *path* like weak lights that return to the sun; and b) the ways lie under the comprehensive wrap of the path which covers all tiny ways. Based on the latter, tiny divergences are within the path and actually constitute the main body of the path itself. (Jawadi Amuli 1999: I/468)

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1 He is an Iranian Twelver Shi'a *marja'* in traditional educational centre at Qom.

Now, I think there is one path in fact-itself (*Nafs al-amr*) (the reality of the path that is created or recommended by God) which branchy ways catch up with. However, I think, there is another path, not in fact-itself, but in the midst of human culture and civilization (the cultural straight path) that could be created by human beings and their particular means in a specific time and place. This path is not a perfectly created path by God or any prophet, rather it depends on quantity and quality of Muslim intentions and deeds by consideration of the perfect model of the path that exists in reality or in the text (i.e. the Qur'an). To put the point another way, this path is not previous matter that should be figured out and must be conformed to and obeyed. Rather it is a human-made product that depends on their intentions and efforts.

Based on this, each particular way, i.e. every individual Muslim per se (*as-subul al-juz'iyya*), has a decisive role in the creation of the inclusive ways (*as-subul al-kulliyya*); these general inclusive ways play a significant role in formation of the unique path, so that all individual ways are required to be together to build that wide divine path. Although each way offers certain advantages for structure of the path, it has its own limitation. Therefore, each way requires other ways to get released from its own limitation and to join the comprehensive path. Based on this, the plurality of divine ways will be constructive, not destructive, for the divine united path. In other words, the more perfect divine ways emerge, the more strength the inclusive path will get. In fact, the divine great path consists of infinite individual (but not fragmented) ways.

Based on this, in order to get a perfect path in cultural ground, Muslims must activate every individual way and every singular instinctive divine advantage that is assimilated within each single human character. Activation of every different singular way (*as-subul al-juz'iyya*) will result in general great ways (*as-subul al-kulliyya*) and these general ways will produce the unique path on cultural context. Implemented cultural path would be a concrete version of God's created Path in text (the Qur'an). To be sure, there are criteria, as I will discuss shortly and briefly in the next section, by which we can distinguish between right and wrong ways, and between "the way of rectitude" and "the way of error" (Qur'an 7: 146).

## II

### *Distinction between Divine Ways and Devil Ways*

What is the difference between divine ways and devil ways in the Qur'an? How can Muslims tell the difference, according to the Qur'an, between good ways and the bad ones? There are several ways to discover divine ways or the "ways of peace and safety" (*subul as-salam*) (Qur'an 5: 16) from the ways of idols (*subul at-tāghūt*) and evil (ibid. 4: 76). One principle that might work as

a measure for distinction is "to struggle for truth and righteousness" that is mentioned in the following verse:

"But those who *struggle* in Our cause, surely We shall guide them in Our ways and God is with the good doers." (ibid. 29: 69)

Based on this verse, whoever struggles sincerely for the sake of Allah (*fi sabil Allah*) will be guided to a righteous way. Struggling for the straight path would be a measure for every individual to know whether their manner is good or bad. But, this measure may not allow one to judge about other's way and path, because of the complexity of judging other's sincerity in their struggle. Therefore, another question arises here; in what way can one recognize sincerity from insincerity in human activities? It seems that one sharp measure to evaluate sincere struggles from insincere one is to struggle with *possession* and *selves* in the way of God. Take the following verses into account: those who believe, and have emigrated and struggled with their possessions and their selves in the Way of God and those who have given refuge and help, those (Emigrants and Helpers) are friends one of another (ibid. 8: 72); those who believe, and have emigrated, and have struggled in the Way of God with their possessions and their selves are mightier in rank with God and those are the triumphant (ibid. 9: 20); but the Messenger, and the believers with him, have struggled with their possessions and their selves and those who the good things await for, those are the prosperers (ibid. 9: 88); the believers are those who believe in God and His Messenger, those who have not doubted, and have struggled with their possessions and their selves in the Way of God – those are the truthful ones (ibid. 49: 15).

Based on the above verses, the important criterion to distinguish between good ways from the bad ones is to *struggle with possession and self* but not in the way of himself, but in the Way of great valuable existence (God). In other words, *real struggle* (with possession and self) to catch the *comprehensive truth* would be the best measure to understand good ways from bad ones. By consideration of this measure, one can determine one's self-central way that has real potential for conflict and controversy, from one's self-sacrificial way through which human conflicts could be resolved. This should not be denigrated that self-sacrifice varies widely from some self-bombing that arises from ignoring other's dignity and human rights. Self-sacrifice results from admiring others' humanity and respecting others' esteem, as I pointed out in another article:

"Self sacrifice for the sake of inclusive human dignity and honour does not lead to self-destruction, but leads to self-improvement. Self-im-

provement that stems from self-sacrifice is a powerful means for dealing with human conflicts and controversies. In addition, it can be a great factor in the creation of solidarity, peace, and a love-centred community through which we pursue each other, identify with each other, and direct our lives toward the flourishing of each other through sacrificial love.” (Babaei 2012b: 144)

### *Symptoms of Devil Ways*

According to the Qur’an, there are several symptoms of the devil’s work:

a) To scatter people from God’s unique path:

“And that this is My path, straight; so do you follow it and follow not divers paths lest they scatter you from His path” (6: 153);

b) To scatter people one from another:

“They will not fight against you all together except in fortified cities, or from behind walls Their valour is great, among themselves you think of them as a host; but their hearts are scattered that is because they are a people who have no sense” (59: 14)<sup>1</sup>;

c) To concentrate only on the world here and now (secularity of these ways):

“Know that the present life is but a sport and a diversion, an adornment and a cause for boasting among you.” (57: 20)

d) To follow caprice and whim. Following the desire of one’s own heart can deviate people from God’s path and lead them astray from the Way of God. This point that following of caprice can disgust people from God’s way has been mentioned in several verses in the Qur’an, like:

“David, behold, We appointed thee a viceroy in the earth, therefore judge between men justly, and follow not caprice, lest it lead thee astray from the way of God Surly those who go astray from the Way of God

<sup>1</sup> Also consider following verse: “And he said, You have only taken to yourselves idols, a part from God, as a mark of mutual love between you in the present life then upon the Day of Resurrection you will deny one another, and you will curse on another, and your refuge will be the Fire, and you will have no helpers.” (29: 25)

there awaits them a terrible chastisement, for that they have forgotten the Day of Reckoning." (38: 26)<sup>1</sup>

### **III** **Unity of Divine Ways**

In order to unify divine ways, the Qur'an proposes several means. According to the Qur'an, "O mankind, We have created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and make you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other)" (49: 13). "To know one another" makes a social link between different people and leads to social commonality. When people know one another and then they realize their commonalities with other divine selves, they will be able to build a cornerstone for worldwide association among divine individuals (*as-subul al-juz'iyya*) and communities in different nations and religions (see: Moradi 2011).

An absolutely crucial point to notice is how the Qur'an indicates the reason of diversity in God's creation and variety in His action. To understand this, paves the way to figure out the function of variety in the human world. As Fatemeh Moradi shows in her intensive article regarding this verse, to know one another is not formal and ceremonial knowledge, rather it is deep and spiritual knowledge to make fundamental bridge between one and others on the one hand, and one and God one the other. As she mentioned, this kind of knowledge among human beings would be the best bridge to pave the way for fundamental relationship between self and other. In other words, violence between self and others, man and woman, adult and child, religious and non-religious people, and even some disputes within religious communities between two Muslim or Christian brothers (who have many commonalities) emerges from misunderstanding one another. Deep understanding of one another, recommended by this verse, will resolve many problems and social disasters on a universal scale (see: *ibid.*).

Based on this, another way to make a bridge between different ways (different individuals) would be *self-sacrifice* and "preferring others above themselves" as the Qur'an declared that:

"And those who made their dwelling in the abode, and in belief, before them, love whosoever has emigrated to them, not finding in their

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<sup>1</sup> Regarding *caprice* and its relationship to injustice which causes controversy and conflicts, see following verse in the Qur'an as well: "O believers, be you securers of justice, witnesses for God, even though it be against yourselves, or your parents and kinsmen whether the man be rich or poor; God stands closest to either then follow not caprices so as to swerve for if you twist or turn. God is aware of the things you do." (4: 135)



breasts any need for what they have been given, and preferring others above themselves, even though poverty be their portion And whoso is guarded against the avarice of his own soul, those they are the prosperers.” (Qur’an 59: 9)

It should not go unnoticed that there is a deep relationship between self and others through which one can get back to himself by self-sacrifice for the sake of others:

The *real-self* of humans, which embraces the spiritual and celestial aspects of the human that is common between self and others, can serve as a strong and sufficient basis for self-sacrifice – to sacrifice the *figurative-self* for the sake of the *real-self*. Through this kind of sacrifice, just as he/she reaches his/her own *real-self* that is shared with others, so too he/she attains closeness to his/her God (in accordance with the practical and theoretical rule in Islam that states whosoever knows him/her-self, he/she will know his/her God). As knowing the self is a path for knowing God, knowing God is also a way for knowing the self. Based on this existential and ontological relationship between the *self* and *God*, it is comprehensible how honouring of the self is, in fact, honoring God, and on the other hand honouring God is in reality honouring the self (see: Babaei 2012a: 7–24).

Based on this, to know one another, would result in human brotherhood among all human beings. Human brotherhood based on common and universal components among all human beings could be very effective in creation of basic ethics on the universal scale. And brotherhood among all human beings conduces in human relationships and universal coexistence among different people from various cultures and nations.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, human brotherhood that is founded on human characteristic paves the way for formulation of religious brotherhood and faithful ethics in one religious or even multi-religious community. Indeed, faithful and religious brotherhood that is a perfect model of human brotherhood, deals with human conflicts and violence (negative function) on the one hand, and makes social integration and solidarity among religious and non-religious humans (positive function) on the other (see: *ibid.*).

And the further way that is very essential to bridge humanity and achieve brotherhood is to advocate common love to typical characters through which

1 According to above point, care and compassion that are considered by the Qur’an, to make social solidarity, would be understandable when He says: “And as for those who came after them, they say, Our Lord, forgive us and our brothers, who preceded us in belief, and put Thou not into our hearts any rancour towards those who believe Our Lord, surely Thou art the All gentle, the All compassionate.” (Qur’an 59: 10)

it would be possible to love one's own spiritual self and others' spiritual selves simultaneously. This kind of love will be effective in creating social commonality and solidarity among diverse individuals and different communities. In fact, common perfect beloved one creates common characters among lovers who all love inclusive perfect one like prophet or *Imam* (see: Babaei 2010). Based on this kind of relationship between self and others, confirming others' selves will result in the affirmation of one's own self; likewise, the rejection of others' selves results in the rejection of the same self within oneself. This could be the interpretation of some insightful narrated traditions from *Imam* Ali and Prophet Muhammad saying: "The most intellectual man is the greatest one in doing tolerance with others, and the most abject man is the one who insults and degrades others" (Majlisi 1983: LXXII/52), and "whoever exulted over other people, he/she will become low." (ibid.: LXXIV/235)

#### **IV** ***Necessity of "Plurality" to Reach Divine Goal***

There are several kinds of plurality in the Qur'an:

A) Plurality in creation:

"O mankind, We have created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and make you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other)." (49: 13)

"It is He Who has appointed you viceroys in the earth, and has raised some of you in rank above others, that He may try you in what He has given you." (6: 165)

"Do not covet that whereby God in bounty has preferred one of you above another To the men a share from what they have earned and to the women a share from what they have earned And ask God of His bounty God knows everything." (4: 32)

"And God has preferred some of you over others in provision but those that were preferred shall not give over their provision to that their right hands possess, so that they may be equal therein What, and do they deny God's Blessing?" (16: 71)

B) Plurality of ways: according to the Qur'an, plurality of creation requires plurality of ways (*as-subul al-juz'iyya va as-subul al-kulliyya*), not plurality of

path (*sirat*) to reach God. This kind of plurality of ways appears in plurality of divine religions and celestial Messengers with distinctive languages:

“Mankind was one single nation, and Allah sent Messengers with glad tidings and warnings; and with them He sent the Book in truth, to judge between people in matters wherein they differed; but the People of the Book, after the clear Signs came to them, did not differ among themselves, except through selfish contumacy.” (2: 213)

“And We have sent no Messenger save with the tongue of his people, that he might make all clear to them.” (14: 4)

Plurality of *ways* and unity of *path* appears in different cases at the same time:

A) Plurality in diverse ranks of faith and belief in God, and commonality in rejection of idolatry and polytheism;

B) Plurality in juristic rules (that is proportional to a special community and a particular individual) and commonality in general and inclusive juristic principles;

C) Plurality in maximum moralities (in moral perfections that must be confined to every person’s limitations and potentials) and commonality in minimum moralities and avoidance from mortal sins;

D) Plurality in mystical Journey (on both individual and social scale), and commonality in the theistic faith and rejection of evil spirit; and finally plurality in style of life, in political organisms, in educational systems, and commonality in humanity, morality, and so forth.

It must be recalled that plurality such as this differs widely from relativity. Pluralisation of this kind does not mean fragmentation of the ways, rather it implies integration and amalgamation of the ways to make a great and perfect highway (the path). Now, recognition and activation of plural ways results not in perplexity and division, but in perfection of a single and overarching path.

## V

### *Unity and Plurality of Meanings*

The same sort of plurality could be right in the meanings of the truth and the interpretations of the Qur’an. The key point that should be considered is that God’s religions have been sent to resolve basic human disputes

(according to "Islamic theology of religions") in human society.<sup>1</sup> It is so because of the impossibility of actualization of religions and divine identity without ethical conditions, as well as the impossibility to create ethical condition without safe and proper society. On the other hand, religions have "come down" (*Nuzool* in Qur'anic term) for human beings. This coming down to the human area is not just for the obedience, but rather it is for knowing and understanding, too. Therefore, the explanation of the Qur'an or the Bible should be understandable by human beings. The religions have come down to be intelligible and then to help people to improve their social and individual situation. In other words, religion is not for confirming the human world, but rather, it is in reality to change and improve it. Then, because of the different audiences of the Qur'an, it must be translated and interpreted in different forms. Moreover, several layers of meaning in the Qur'an require various interpretation of the Qur'an, according to the meaning of each layer. In fact, God sends His high message through the human plural mindset and human plural language, in a cultural way, to make it intelligible and easier to understand and believe. Indeed, there is no another way to make this supernatural essence intelligible for human thought (see: Tabatabaei 1996: III/70). Otherwise, the Qur'an would be merely a local message for a particular people in a particular condition. This is the meaning of Prophet Muhammad's saying that: "we the prophets are ordered to talk to people according to their intellects" (Majlisi 1981: I/85),<sup>2</sup> and what God declared in the Qur'an:

"He sends down out of heaven water, and the wadis flow each in its measure, and the torrent carries a swelling scum; and out of that over which they kindle fire, being desirous of ornament or ware, out of that rises a scum the like of it. So God strikes both the true and the false. As for the scum, it vanishes as jetsam, and what profits men abides in the earth. Even so God strikes His similitudes."<sup>3</sup> (Qur'an 17: 13)

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- 1 "The people were one nation; then God sent forth the Prophets, good tidings to bear and warning, and He sent down with them the Book with the truth, that He might decide between the people touching their differences; and only those who had been given it were at variance upon it, after the clear signs had come to them, being insolent one to another; then God guided those who believed to the truth, touching which they were at variance, be His leave; and God guides whomsoever He will to a straight path." (Qur'an 2: 213; Tabatabaei 1996: II/111-134)
  - 2 This is for the theological basis that God's guidance is for all human beings. It is a general message for all human beings in spite of their different capacities and various situations (see: Kashani 1980: I/32; Ibn Arabi n. d.: II/219; Shirazi 1985: 10; Jami 1990: 134).
  - 3 According to Tabatabaei's explanation, God's message, like raining, is one (water) but situations and measures are very different. He says in the interpretation of this verse that divine knowledge is like water which God send down, without any limitation in the quantity and

Nevertheless, different audiences and various levels of meaning do not involve pluralistic meaning with great gap in the meaning. In other words, the essence of a message is unique but assumes a different shape (ontologically) and a different language (epistemologically). But differences in the shape and frame do not change the essence or the hard core of the message. This is because of:

- A) the unity of human nature in the past and present time according to theological approach to humanity;
- B) the unity and stability of some divine messages, in “theology of the Qur’an”;
- C) the unity of history as the context of humanity and of the divine message according to “Islamic theology of history”. Put differently, the nature of humanity, despite individual and social differences, and the nature of history and divine message, is unique.

In my opinion, one of the methods to get unity within plurality of the meanings would be theory of *ta’wil* in Tabatabaei’s terms in his dialectical interpretation. Very briefly, this theory involves the following statements:

The interpretation (*at-ta’wil*) in the Arabic language refers to the origin of a word.<sup>1</sup> The origin of the word could include some features:

- A) it might mean the beginning of the word;
- B) it may mean the end (objective influence) of the word;
- C) it is the people’s aim when they use that word (see: Ibn Faris 1990: 162).

The spirit of the meaning or essence of the message refers to the third aspect of the meaning (meaning as an aim). People’s meaning through their using words is their purpose and goal. For example, what connects the meaning of “light” or “weapon” in the past and present time, is the aim and benefit of “light” or “weapon” in both past and the present time because no difference exists between our need, goals and expectations of “light” or “weapon” over the centuries (Tabatabaei 1996: I/16).

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quality. Then this knowledge like water flows according to measures among human beings. There are some time-bond laws (*al-mansookh*) like scum (in this example) that passes away as a worthless thing. Yet, the divine truths that are limited in the words and sentences and implications are stable within God’s purpose through this words and particles (see: Tabatabaei 1996: III/71–72; *ibid.* 1981: 10).

1 “Interpretation is the explanation of the essence or reference of the word” (al-Jawhari 1983: 1627). In the other words, “The interpretation is the returning to its root” (al-Mustafawi 1980: 160).

The same thing is true about the meaning of the Qur'an. For instance, what is God's aim through the "Moses" and "Pharaoh's" stories when He says: "Hast thou received the story of Moses? When his Lord called to him in the holy valley, Towa: Go to Pharaoh; he has waxed insolent. And say, 'Hast thou the will to purify thyself, and that I should guide thee to thy Lord, then thou shalt fear?'" (79: 15–19). The major point in the story of "Pharaoh" is his "insolence" and "inordinateness" and his desire for the present earthly life; as well as the essence of "Moses", as another historical but positive figure, is the attention to God and a forbiddance the soul from low desires, as God continually says: "But as for him who feared the Station of his Lord and forbade the soul its caprice, surely Paradise shall be the refuge" (79: 40–41).

The end of this excerpt clearly shows God's aim, during the story of Jesus as an ancient prophet. God's historical message, conveyed through these different prophets, is unique but not different: "There is no god but God". It should be recalled that the extracting of this unique message of God through the sacred text is the linguistic and hermeneutical task, but its base is the theological task.

The method of this combined knowledge (hermeneutical and theological) is existential (Tabatabaei 1996: III/67) and theoretical (that contains hermeneutical attempts as well) at the same time. In other words, an existential way without a theoretical and hermeneutical one is imperfect to get religious knowledge and religious life. Similarly a theoretical way without an existential path will be incomplete.

The criterion, here, is not a literalistic measure, rather a process that moves between the text and context (culture or society) and transforms literality into its deep meaning through the language of reality, and transforms reality into text. Indeed, this is not theological reductionism because this moving is not only one way but both ways in a dialectical process. Theoretically, it is essential to read a text and analyze it theologically, and it is necessary also to see reality (through sociology and psychology or another human science that helps us to know human phenomena) and to think ultimately theologically about it.<sup>1</sup> It seems that the more a person reads a text and thinks about it, the more his individual propositions decrease in hermeneutical process as well. This method paves the way for the connection between text and context, reason and revelation, subject and object, unity and plurality, and natural and supernatural areas.

Tabatabaei's known method (the interpretation of the Qur'an by the Qur'an to explain some obscure points through clear ones) does mean, in my view, this sort of process between text and reality. The Qur'an says: "What,

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<sup>1</sup> The Prophet Muhammad says that in another world will be said to reader of the Qur'an that read and became elevated. Ibn Arabi says that everybody who reads the Qur'an and keeps in his reading will find new meaning in each new reading (see: Ibn Arabi n. d.: IV/202).

have they not journeyed in the land so that they have hearts to understand with or ears to hear with? It is not the eyes that are blind, but blind are the hearts within the breasts.” (22: 46)

### **Conclusion**

The question of the *one* and *many* in Islam is both exciting and confusing in equal measure. However, grappling with such a question in relation to the Qur’an may help people understand how to overcome the issue and even how to live. As demonstrated from several verses in the Qur’an, there are many singular ways (*as-subul al-juz’iyya*) with particular divine potential that must be activated. Activation of particular potentials conduces in great group-ways (*as-subul al-kulliyya*) that paves the way for figuration of the unitarian path (*sirat*) in thought and society. In addition, plurality of divine ways (singular ways or great group-ways) facilitates monotheistic culture based on unity of God. In a deeper sense, it is impossible to make cultured unity and cultural divinity without pluralisation of divine ways. To make a culture (that is an essentially plural phenomenon) based on unique divine path it is necessary to stimulate every small diverse ability to create social solidarity.

However, it should never be lost from sight that Islamic pluralisation varies widely from the postmodern plurality. I think the foundation of Islamic pluralisation (*kawsar*) would be boundlessness of infinite reality which contains gigantic space to engage plural phenomena within it. But postmodern plurality (*takasur*) depends on plural and atomic fragmented reality. Thus, western postmodern culture, contrary to Islamic attitude and culture, has been based on ever-increasing attention to internal subjectivity not external objectivity. Consequently, postmodern plurality emerges from limitation and restriction that is not capable to enclose many and plurality. No doubt, this distinction between Modern and traditional plurality is utterly crucial for traditional and religious identity in the world such as ours.

Finally, although this article is not sufficient to give an answer to the question of how wide precisely the path to God is, it can draw a new standpoint from the Qur’an to insist on the necessity of plurality in Islamic thought and society. To find a moderate answer to this question can be very important so as to reject those extremist Muslims who say God’s way is so narrow that those who are not on a strict and literalist path that we are on must be killed, as well as to reject those highly liberal Muslims who say it is so wide that it doesn’t matter if you’re a Muslim or anything, as long as you give charity, are kind, are helpful.

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