

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the name of Allah, the All-Merciful, the All-Compassionate

Chapter 2: AL-BAQARA (The Cow 148)

﴿وَلِكُلِّ وُجْهَةٌ هُوَ مُوَلِّئُهَا فَاسْتَغْبِئُوا الْخَيْرَاتِ أَيْنَ مَا تَكُونُوا يَأْتِ بِكُمْ اللَّهُ جَمِيعًا إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ﴾

“For each is a direction toward which it faces. So race to [all that is] good. Wherever you may be, Allah will bring you forth all together. Indeed, Allah is over all things competent.”

The word /kull/ means all and everyone, and /wajah/ means a direction, a goal. The word /khayraat/ has a comprehensive meaning which includes all deeds that are good and meritorious in the sight of Allah.

There are various interpretations for what the /kull/ (everyone), and the /wajah/ (direction) refers to in this verse. The passage where the above verse is taken from was revealed in Madinah, on the occasion when the /qiblah/ (the direction that Muslims face in their daily prayers) changed. It is reported that Rasulullah was instructed to face Masjid al-Aqsa (Distant Mosque) in Jarusalem (Quds) in prayers for about 10-17 months after emigration to Madinah. However, he always harbored a desire to turn to Makkah in his blessed heart, and the /qiblah/ was eventually changed towards Masjid al-Haram (Sacred Mosque) in Makkah abrogating the earlier practice (/sunnah/). Read: *“We have certainly seen the turning of your face [O Muhammad] toward the heaven, and We will surely turn you to a /qiblah/ with which you will be pleased. So turn your face toward al-Masjid al-Haram. And wherever you [believers] are, turn your faces toward it [in prayer]. Indeed, those who have been given the Scripture well know that it is the truth from their Lord. And Allah is not unaware of what they do.”* (2:144)

According to Ibn Kathir, this change and new development has disturbed the Jews of Madinah at that time; and they started raising doubts and circulating speculations such as the one that all prayers Muslims had made until that time became null and void. It appears that such vain talk had influenced and caused suspicion even among some new Muslims. Thereupon this passage was revealed addressing the Jews, and assuring the Muslims in the person of Allah’s messenger, peace and blessings be upon him. Read: *“And to Allah belongs the east and the west. So wherever you [might] turn, there is the Face of Allah. Indeed, Allah is all-Encompassing and Knowing.”* (2:115) Thus the verse cleared the false contentions that previous prayers offered facing Jerusalem were worthless and in vain.

The verse indicated that setting a particular direction is no more than a matter of discipline. The direction symbolizes the unity of the /ummah/ (Muslim community), and the unity of God. The essence of faith and worship does not lie in the direction towards which one turns, it lies in to whom one turns. Read: *“Righteousness is not that you turn your faces toward the east or the west, but [true] righteousness is [in] one who believes in Allah, the Last Day, the angels, the Book, and the prophets and gives wealth, in spite of love for it, to relatives, orphans, the needy, the traveler, those who ask [for help], and for freeing slaves; [and who] establishes prayer and gives zakah; [those who] fulfill their promise when they promise; and [those who] are patient in poverty and hardship and during stress. Those are the ones who have been true, and it is those who are the righteous.”* (2:177) Therefore, the command on changing the /qiblah/ should not be a matter of dispute for people of other faiths, nor be a cause of suspicion and disbelief.

The /qiblah/ is significant as a symbol of Islam. However, its symbolic significance does not imply that God is found in only one direction and not in another. Allah is free from all spatial and temporal restrictions, He transcends above His creation at the same time as He is immanent. He is Manifest (al-Zahir) and He is Hidden (al-Batin); He is the First (al-Awwal) and He is the Last (al-Akhir). No prayers of any worshipper are lost as He is Ever Watchful (al-Muhaymin), and All-Knowing (al-Alim). Blessed and exalted is His face!

The direction (/wajah/) has a general meaning that allows other interpretations besides the /qiblah/. It also denotes a goal and a direction in abstract sense of the word. The word is thus interpreted to refer to various religious communities and their different modes of turning towards God for worship. In this sense, this verse is further explained elsewhere in Quran: *“And We have revealed to you [O Muhammad] the Book in truth, confirming that which preceded it of the Scripture and as a criterion over it. So judge between them by what Allah has revealed and do not follow their inclinations away from what has come to you of the truth. To each of you We prescribed a law and a method [a way of life]. Had Allah willed, He would have made you one nation [united in religion], but [He intended] to test you in what He has given you; so race to [all that is] good. To Allah is your return all together, and He will [then] inform you concerning that over which you used to differ.”* (5:48) The law (/shir’a/) and the way of life (/minhaj/) in this verse has the same connotation as the word (/wajah/) above.

Even though the word /kull/ (everyone) in the beginning may be interpreted as a reference to the individual, most commentators explained it as a reference to nations and communities of people. We find similar statements in Quran addressing the individual specifically, such as *“Say: Each works according to his manner, but your Lord is most knowing of who is best guided in way.”* (17:84) Every individual and every community has their own unique characteristics and qualities. Quran asserts that such differences are signs of God: *“And of His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your languages and your colors. Indeed in that are signs for those of knowledge.”* (30:22) Allah willed and decreed an infinite variety in all His creation. One wisdom behind this abundant variety in the humankind is explained in the verse: *“O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Aware.”* (49:13) Besides recognizing one another through unique qualities and natural dispositions, Quran indicates that the competition, vying and racing one another in all good works and meritorious deeds is another purpose and wisdom behind this variety. The unique qualities and distinct potentials in humankind may fully develop only through such a race as encouraged by Quran; for otherwise the superior qualities of man will remain idle and become dormant.

It should also be noted that the competition and racing towards good works is commanded by Quran not only among the believers within the Muslim community, but also in relation with other faith communities in general. In addition, the statement that everyone (individual or community) faces a direction of their own may indicate a pursuit of a unique direction not only in the expression of their submission to God, but more generally in all their endeavors. Quran urges man to developing his skills to their full potentials by striving and competing towards the good and the virtue, and encourages men to turn their differences into advantage in that race, and into a source of richness. It is Satan that deceives mankind to make such differences into a cause

for contention, fight and shedding blood let it be within one community, or between different communities and nations. Recall the command of the verse we studied few weeks ago: “*O believers, enter the peace, all of you, and follow not the steps of Satan; he is a manifest foe to you.*” (2:208) Quran also declares that “*peace [right settlement, reconciliation] is better.*” A Muslim sees other Muslims brothers in faith, and accepts all men as brothers in humanity. Peace is the norm; peace is the virtue; peace is the command of Quran. Peace is the main characteristic of Islam; and peace derives its value from the divine name al-Salaam, The Peace.

Yazir explains in his famous commentary that the statement “*For each is a direction toward which it faces*” in the verse 2:148 describes Muslim communities praying at distant corners of the world. They are facing different directions; east, west, south, north, etc., in relation to each other when they face Ka’bah in their respective positions. He explains the next sentence “*Wherever you may be, Allah will bring you forth all together*” in line with this interpretation. Muslims should vision in their prayers that they are all together forming a great circle of worship around Ka’bah, and should turn to Allah with this consciousness for a perfect worship. For Badiuzzaman this consciousness of brotherhood is not limited to the ritual prayers. He says “*even if one of us is in this world and the other is in hereafter; one of us is in the east and the other is in the west; or one of us is in the north and the other in the south.. we are still all together.*”

The ‘bringing together’ is reinforced in the verse by the clause “*Indeed, Allah is over all things competent.*” This should not be seen as a mere dream and imagination; Allah has the power to bring together all of whom He desires, wherever they may be. In the context of earlier explanations, this part is also interpreted in various ways as saying that Allah will bring together all humanity to the truth, or that Allah will resurrect and bring together all humanity in the hereafter.

There are interpretations, especially in Shia tradition, that this verse is addressing to the companions of Imam Mahdi, the luminary figure who will work with Jesus Christ in his second coming at the end of the time to establish a universal peace on earth. The statement “*wherever you may be, Allah will bring you forth all together*” is a reference to those believers who will be brought together by Allah from around the world to Makkah to meet and help Imam Mahdi in establishing the world peace. Such exceptional interpretations are not commonly agreed upon, and are mentioned here for the sake of completeness.

Finally, it should be pointed out that the statement “*for everyone is a direction*” is one of the maxims found in Quran that has comprehensive meanings. It may be explained in a number of different ways, and applied to a variety of situations. It is a style feature of Quran that multiple layers of vast and deep meanings are imparted in just a few words. This particular statement, for example, may be interpreted in the setting of individual and society spheres of life, in reference to social or economic trends, or in connection with educational practices, etc. Quran is miraculous both in its matchless style and in its luminous content full of healing and guidance.

~~~\*\*\*~~~

May Allah help us direct our lives towards His pleasure, and favor us with certainty of faith and sincerity of worship. May peace and blessings of Allah be upon His messenger, his pure family and companions, and his noble brothers in the office of messengership.