

Deen in Islam: A conceptual analysis

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Abstract: There are four terms, *Ilah*, *Rabb*, *Deen* and *Ibadah* which scholars consider to be fundamental concepts found in the Qur'an and the core point of Islamic *dawah*. Since these terms have enormous significance in the life of a believer, many scholars explain the meaning and significance of these foundational concepts with special focus on *Deen*. Analysing varying perspectives, this study found that the term *Deen* is undoubtedly one of the most significant terms found in the Quran and that this concept embodies within itself perspectives on existence, life, society and sociopolitical system. Such an understanding renders Islam much more than a religion. Islam emerges as a complete and competing ideology and a system of life and society. There is a need to eschew legalistic explanation of the concept as done by many scholars and go beyond and reconstruct the term and weave it into a political-ideological system. Thus, Islam emerges as a superior ideology towering over other "isms" and the resultant socio-political systems.

Keywords: Islam, *Deen*, Islam as ideology, Islamic system, 'ibadah.

Introduction

A thorough review of literature dealing with Qur'an and Qur'anic terms show four concepts in the Qur'an as of fundamental importance. These are *Ilah*, *Rabb*, *Deen* and 'Ibadah and these terms are central to all the teachings of the Qur'an and the core point of Islamic *da'wah*. Therefore, these terms have enormous significance in the life of a believer in Islam.

Though these terms are central to the Islamic belief system, their meanings have changed over time because of two factors. Firstly, the gradual decline of interest in the Arabic language; and secondly, the original meaning of these four terms had not been passed on to those people who were born and brought up in Islamic society. These reasons caused recent linguists and commentators to use the meaning of later generation instead of the original meaning in explaining these terms. Therefore, it is important to explain these four terms in a comprehensive way to describe the real purpose of the Qur'an and its lesson.

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Though all the terms are equally significant and are interconnected, the term *Deen* deserves special treatment. This article deals with the interpretation of only one of the four terms which is *Deen* (way of life). It is argued that this concept properly defined renders it equal to an ideology, a system of life and society.

Deen: Its Meaning and Scope

In order to offer a deep analysis of the term *Deen*, it is necessary to resort to a detailed linguistic analysis for substantiating each with revealed and other sources. *Maqayis al-Lughah* (ibn Zakariya (2001): 353) and *Lisan al-Arab* (al-Misri, n.d.: v. 13,167) suggests four meanings of the term *Deen*. The first meaning is subjugation or dominance, administrative or legislative authority, to put pressure to be obedient or using power to enslave or make one obedient. In Arabic, *dintuhum fa danu* means "I subjugated them so they obeyed me" also *dintuhu* means "I ruled or governed upon him." Thus, the word *dayyan* is used to indicate a person who dominates and rules over a state, nation or tribe. The second meaning is obedience and bondage, subordination and domination by someone and bearing humiliation under subjugation and power of others. As stated, *dintuhum fadanu* means "I subjugated them so they obeyed me." The obedient tribe is called *qawmun dayyinun*. Here *al-deen* does not mean religion but it means obedience. The third meaning is rules, regulations, ideology, doctrine, custom, tradition or religion. And finally the fourth meaning is reward, repayment, justice and accountability.

It may be noted that before Islam, the Arabs had different connotations in using this word and their use of it in its various derivatives revolved around one or all of the abovementioned connotations. However, these connotations were not clear enough to the Arabs and this word did not get a terminological position in any systematic and recognised school of thought. Rather the understanding of this word was vague and insubstantial. With the revelation of the Qur'an, the word received a more definite connotation. The Qur'anic use of the word has four components:

- a. Sovereignty and supreme authority.
- b. Obedience and submission to that authority.
- c. Intellectual and practical system formed under that authority.
- d. Repayment by that authority for loyalty in obedience or rebellion and transgression against it.

Even though the Qur'an uses the term connoting various meanings, the term is generally referred to mean a complete code of life.

Explaining the four components

The term *deen* in the first and second sense (i.e., Supreme authority and obedience) can be found in several places in the Qur'an, 40: 64-65; 39:11-12, 17; and 97: 5. The Qur'an uses the term *al-deen al-khalis* (39: 2-3), the phrase *lahu al-deen al-wasiba* (al-Qur'an, 16: 52) and *deen Allah* (al-Qur'an, 3: 83).

The phrase *mukhlisan* or *mukhlisina lahu al-deen* suggests that the Arabic word *deen* contains several meanings such as (1) domination and sovereignty, ruler ship and political power and authority to enforce one's decision on others; (2) obedience, compliance with commands and servitude; and (3) the practice and the way that a man follows. According to these three meanings, *deen* in this verse means "the way of life and attitude which a man adopts after acknowledging the supremacy and accepting the obedience of another" and "to worship Allah making one's religion exclusively His" means that one should refrain from combining another's worship with the worship of Allah, but should worship Allah alone, should follow His Guidance alone, and should comply with His Commands and injunctions only.

In all these places, the word *al-deen* refers to Supreme Authority, acknowledgement of this authority, and as a result, being obedient to this authority. The implication of the phrase *mukhlisan* or *mukhlisina lahu al-deen* is that no one should regard anyone other than Allah (SWT) as having the ultimate authority, domain and ruler-ship over the universe and making one's obedience and submission exclusive for Allah (SWT) that there is no association of anyone else with Him in this respect.

In the third sense, i.e. intellectual and practical system formed under that authority, can be found in many places in the Qur'an as in *Surat al-Rum*:

To Him belongs whatever is in the heavens and the earth. All are obedient to Him... He sets forth for you a parable from your own selves, - Do you have partners among those whom your right hands possess to share as equals in the wealth We have bestowed on you? Whom you fear as you fear each other? ... Nay, but those who do wrong follow their own lusts without knowledge, ... So set you (O Muhammad) your face towards the *deen* of pure Islamic

Monotheism (*Hanifa*) Allah's *Fitrah*, with which He has created mankind. No change let there be in *Khalq-illah*, that is *al-Deen al-Qayyim*, but most of men know not (al-Qur'an, 30: 26, 28, 29, & 30).

The word "deen" in the verse does not allow to turn one's face to any other direction after he has adopted this way of life. He should think like a Muslim and his likes and dislikes should be of a Muslim. His values and standards should be the ones set by Islam and his character and conduct should bear the stamp of Islam, and the affairs of his individual and collective life should be ordered according to the way taught by Islam.

Allah (SWT) says in the Qur'an (al-Qur'an, 24: 2), "The woman and the man guilty of illegal sexual intercourse flog each of them with a hundred stripes. Let not pity withhold you in their case, *fi deen Allah* (in a punishment prescribed by Allah)." In this verse, the first thing that deserves attention is that the criminal law is termed as *deen Allah*. It shows that *deen Allah* does not consist merely in the prayer, fasting, Hajj and *Zakah* dues, but the law of the land is also part of *deen Allah*. The establishment of the *deen* does not mean the establishment of obligatory prayers alone but also includes the establishment of the divine law and the system of law based on it. If these things are not established, the mere establishment of the system of prayers will be regarded as partial implementation of the Way. But when an unislamic system of law is adopted, it amounts to the total rejection of the divine way itself.

In another verse of the Qur'an (al-Qur'an, 12: 76) Allah (SWT) says: "Thus did We plan for Yusuf. He could not take his brother by the *deen* (law) of the king (as a slave)." This verse categorically refutes the misconception by declaring that the law of the land is as much a part of the *deen* of Allah as *Salah*, *Hajj*, *Sawm* and *Zakah*. Therefore, the demand of the acceptance of *al-deen* made in al-Qur'an, 3: 19 and 3: 85 that is, "Indeed, Islam alone is the right *deen*, in the sight of Allah" and "Whosoever will adopt any other *deen* than the way of Islam, it shall not be accepted," includes laws as well as *Salah* and other obligatory duties prescribed by Allah. Therefore, the exclusion of this part of *deen* from any system would incur the displeasure of Allah.

Further use of the word *deen* in this sense can be found in al-Qur'an, 10: 104-105; 12: 40; 9: 36; 6: 137, 42: 21 and 109: 6. In all these verses, the word *al-deen* has been used to mean the rules or regulations, *shari'ah*, or code of conduct, or that system of thought and action, which are followed by people. If the

supreme authority for the law or code, etc., is Allah Himself, then a person, without any doubt would follow Allah's *deen*. However, if this code is the commandment of a monarch, a priest, or a scholar, then the person is following their *deen*. In brief, whomsoever a person considers as the supreme authority and follows his prescribed law, the person would be considered as a follower of that authority's *deen*.

The word *deen* in the fourth sense, i.e. repayment by the Supreme Authority for loyalty in obedience or rebellion and transgression against it, can be found in the Qur'an. Allah says, "Verily, that which you are promised (i.e. Resurrection in the Hereafter and receiving the reward or punishment of good or bad deeds, etc.) is surely true. And verily, *al-deen* (Recompense) is sure to happen." (al-Qur'an, 51: 5-6). In another place, He says, "Have you seen him who denies *al-deen* (Recompense)? That is he who repulses the orphan (harshly), and urges not the feeding of *al-Miskin* (the poor)." (al-Qur'an, 107: 1-3). Likewise, in al-Qur'an, 82: 17-19, He says, "Again, what will make you know what *Yawm al-deen* is? The Day when no person shall have power (to do) anything for another, and the Decision, that Day, will be (wholly) with Allah." A reflection on these verses makes it very clear that in all three places the word *deen* has been used to mean accountability, judgement and repayment.

Deen: A comprehensive code

All the examples of *deen*, quoted from the Qur'an show the senses that had been used by the Arabs, more or less, in pre-Islamic era. The following discussion will show that the word *deen* means a comprehensive code of life. The code in which a person acknowledges the supreme authority of a being, gives his submission and obedience to that being, and shapes his conduct and behaviour according to the guideline prescribed by that authority. Therefore, he puts great hope to achieve honour, position and reward for his loyalty as well as fears disgrace and severe punishment that can cause by disobedience to that authority. The ultimate purpose of establishing *deen al-haq* would be Allah's pleasure only.

This comprehensive use of the word *deen* in the Qur'an can be found in many places, such as in al-Qur'an, 9: 29:

Fight against those who (1) believe not in Allah (as the Supreme Authority thus does not obey Him), (2) nor in the Last Day (the Day of accountability and repayment), (3) nor forbid that which has been

forbidden by Allah and His Messenger (the intellectual and practical system formed under that authority), (4) and those who acknowledge not *Deen al-Haq* (religion of truth) (i.e. Islam) among the people of the Scripture (Jews and Christians), until they pay the *Jizyah* with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued.

Deen al-Haq is a term given and explained by Allah (SWT) Himself. All four senses of the term have been clearly shown in brackets throughout the translation of the verse. In the first part of the verse Allah clarifies these four senses and concludes the verse by using the term *Deen al-Haq*.

This terminological sense of the word *deen* also can be found in the statement by Fir'awn (Pharaoh) as Allah (SWT) says: "Fir'awn said: 'Leave me to kill Musa, and let him call his Lord! I fear that he may change your *deen*, or that he may cause mischief to appear in the land!'" (al-Qur'an, 40: 26). In this verse, the meaning of the phrase *yubaddila deenakum* should be properly understood on account of which Fir'awn wanted to put Prophet Musa (AS) to death. The word *deen* implies the system of government, and what Fir'awn meant to say was this: "I fear that he will change your king" (al-Alusi, 1997: v. 13, 94-95). In other words, the *deen* of the land was the religious, political, cultural and economic systems that were prevalent in Egypt on the basis of Fir'awn's and his family's sovereignty, and Fir'awn was afraid that Prophet Musa's message would change that very *deen*.

After reflecting upon the details of the discussion that is provided by the Qur'an about Prophet Musa and Fir'awn, it can be said that the word *deen* does not mean a religion only but it represents a state or a whole politico-social and cultural system. Fir'awn's concern was that if Prophet Musa (AS) succeeded in his *da'wah* then there would be a revolutionary change in the administrative system, together with all the laws, rules and customs. Therefore, a completely different new system could replace Fir'awn's prevailing system or there would be no system at all and the land would fall into anarchy (1971: 128).

Many examples of similar ideas to the word *deen* can be found in al-Qur'an such as 3: 19, 85; 9: 33; 8: 39 and 110:3. In all these places, the word *deen* refers to a complete way of life, which includes belief, ideology, moral principles and behaviour; in other word, all aspects of life.

The message of the two verses (3: 19 and 85) of *Surat al Imran* is that according to Allah (SWT), the right and proper way of life is the one which stands

upon obedience and bondage to Allah (SWT). Any other system prescribed by other authority and showing obedience to that authority has no value in Allah's scheme and so it is naturally rejected by Him. Man is Allah's creature, lives in His kingdom and Allah (SWT) is his Master and Sustainer; the position of humankind is no more than a subject at the sight of Allah (SWT). Therefore, man has no right to spend his life in obedience to someone's authority besides Allah's as it cannot be accepted by Allah (SWT). True religion requires total obedience and submission to Allah (SWT) and to carry His Commandments at all times and not simply praying five times a day. There is no room to judge the right and wrong based on one's own desire or suggestion given by intellects, forefathers, families and relations but to obey Allah (SWT) as prescribed in the Qur'an and the Sunnah. In addition to this, the pointed verse of *Surat al-Tawbah* says that Allah (SWT) has sent His Messenger with *Deen al-Haq* (religion of Truth), *al-Islam*, and the sole purpose of the Prophet's mission was to make this *Deen* prevail over all other ways of life

Similarly, the referred verse 39 of *Surat al-Anfal* is a command addressed to the believers of *Deen al-Haq* to fight against all non-believers until there would be no *fitnah*; in other words, there would be no system based upon rebellion against Allah's obedience and bondage, the result of which the entire humanity will accept *Deen al-Haq*. In brief, *Deen* is regarding Allah (SWT) as Lord, Master and Ruler; to obey and serve only Him; to be accountable to Him, to fear only His punishment and to wish His rewards. It also includes obedience to Allah's Messengers because the commandments of God have been given to human beings through His Books and His Messengers.

Finally, in *Surat al-Nasr* (110: 3) Allah (SWT) addressed His Prophet (SAW) after spending 23 years of continuous struggle. The Islamic Revolution had overcome all resistance in Arabia and Islam had established itself practically as a system of life which includes all aspects such as belief, ideology, morality, culture, economy, politics, etc. Therefore, delegation after delegation from all parts of Arabia arrived to pledge allegiance to it, which was the sole purpose of the Prophet's mission. After mentioning this fruit of his *da'wah*, Allah (SWT) reminded His Prophet (SAW) not to let any sentiments of vanity or pride arise in his mind and make him feel that he owed the success to himself. Your *Rabb*, Allah (SWT) is alone free of all sorts of lackings and shortcomings as He is perfect in every respect. Therefore, any credit for the success which crowned the Prophet's efforts was due rightfully to Allah (SWT) alone, thus the Prophet should

glorify Him and utter His praises and beg forgiveness for any possible shortcomings that might have occurred during his 23 years of service to his *Rabb*.

Critiques

As mentioned earlier, the original meaning of the term *Deen* has changed over time leading the contemporary linguists and commentators to use the meanings of later generations instead of the original meanings in explaining the Qur'anic words. Many scholars disagree with the meaning adopted in this study.

Referring to the view that people remained unaware of the original meaning of the term, Nadwi questioned whether the term has remained unknown to people for many centuries? Were they unaware of the real spirit of Islam? (Nadwi, 1980: 29). He also warned that this statement can cause those people who do not have proper knowledge to not have firm belief about the preservation of the Qur'an and yet the validity of the Muslim *Ummah* is based upon receiving and understanding while the excellence of the Qur'an is its explanation and clarification. This view seems to be not particularly dangerous, yet it has deep roots that can affect Islamic thoughts. It will cause people not only to be doubtful about the authenticity of the Book and scholars' understanding of this Book but also to be doubtful about the previous interpretations of this Book and to feel the necessity to interpret according to everybody's wish as done by *Batiniyyah*.

Furthermore, Nadwi said this is contrary to the fundamental characteristics of the Qur'an. The reality is that, this *Ummah* does not take their religious teachings from the Book only but has taken its meanings and explanations from early generations and have learnt its practice from them too (Nadwi, 1980) 34, 35-37). Similarly, it is contrary to one of the sayings of the Prophet (SAW) to the effect that "My *Ummah* will never agree upon an error." The view adopted in this study indicates that the *Ummah* has misunderstood these four terms for centuries (Nadwi, 1980: 42). In addition, it is inconceivable that these terms were unknown to the people especially to the people who came immediately after the era of the Prophet (SAW) in the time when the *Ummah* produced a huge number of great scholars in various fields.

There is a hadith (sayings) of the Prophet (SAW) that "There will always be a group amongst my *Ummah* that will be triumphant and Allah will cause them to triumph" (al-Bukhari, 2003: 1324), and also authentic history to that effect. Nadwi is of the opinion that there is continuous attempt to reform and revive

Islamic history; this reality also goes against the view proffered in this study (Nadwi, 1980: 60).

Ibn Taymiyyah opines that, only by being obedient or subjugated, which are the rights of *Ilah* and *Rabb*, does not fulfil the duty of *al-Ubudiyyah* in the real sense. In addition, there should be the ultimate love of an *Abd* towards his *Ma'bud*. *Ma'bud* deserves this love because of His attributes and virtue. He states in his book *al-Ubudiyyah*, “the worshipped that has been prescribed includes both subjugation and love; it contains utmost humiliation before Allah with utmost love towards Him” (ibn Taymiyyah, 1976: 44). To clarify this issue, Ibn Taymiyyah said:

Whoever humiliates himself for someone, although he hates him, in fact, or loves somebody without being subjugated to him, will not be considered as his *Abd*, such as a person loves his son or friend. Therefore one of these two conditions only is not enough to be a real *Abd*; to be a *Abd* in real sense, Allah should be the most beloved to him as well as His majesty should be above all (ibn Taymiyyah, 1976: 44).

In explaining the word *Ilah*, Ibn Taymiyyah said, “*Ilah* is one who is deified by the heart with absolute love and veneration, reverence and honour, fear and hope and so on” (ibn Taymiyyah, 1976: 4451). Ibn Taymiyyah claimed that the relation between *Abd* and *Ma'bud* is not just as ruler and subject; it is a comprehensive relation, which includes knowledge, repentance, love, devotion, remembrance, and so on. In contrast, a ruler deserves only submission and obedience. In this regard, he said:

Allah created whole creation to know and worship Him; to repentance toward him with love and devotion. His remembrance can give the satisfaction of heart; the coolness of eyes can be achieved through His vision in the Hereafter. There is nothing more desirable, which will be given in the Hereafter than his vision; likewise, nothing is greater, which is given in this World than *Iman* (ibn Taymiyyah, 2006: v.1, 185).

To the view that the meanings of *Deen* was clearly understood by the audiences during the revelation period, but was lost with the passing of time, al-Hudaybi (1987) said this view is contentious. Whatever meanings were known to

the people of *Jahiliyyah* and whatever is meant by these terms, the Qur'an explains them clearly in details. There is no possibility to be misunderstood or misguided even if one looks at the origin of these terms that was known during the pre-Islamic era. Muslims should not doubt the clarification given by the Qur'an and its perfection; it must be the standard to be followed whether pre-Islamic understanding goes in line with it or not. There is abundant evidence in the Qur'an, which explains these terms clearly. The first thing that can be found by a reader of the Qur'an is *Bismillah al-Rahman al-Rahim* which is a brief description of the holy word, Allah (SWT). Immediately after this brief definition a full *surah* (*Fatihah*) talks about Allah (SWT) that glory be to Him, all praises and thanks belong to Him and He is the *Rabb* of 'Alamin. In other words, He is the Supreme Authority over all of His creations, authority of the Day of Judgement also belongs to Him and only He is worshipped, no one else. His help is sought, He is the only One to depend on. The guidance is sought from Him.

Similarly, al-Hudaybi views that the explanation for the terms *ibadah* and *Deen* have also been discussed in the Qur'an in detail. When the Qur'an says, "*Maliki yawm al-deen,*" (al-Qur'an, 1: 4), there is no need to rely upon any evidence to prove that it indicates the Day of Judgement, when people will receive reward or punishment based on their deeds in this world. When the Qur'an says, "*Inna al-Deena inda Allahi al-Islam*" (al-Qur'an, 3: 19), everyone can understand that the word '*Deen*' refers to the comprehensive system brought by Prophet Muhammad (SAW). The same meaning can be understood from the verses 12:40; 5:3 and 10:104-105. In these verses, the term *ibadah* refers to performing rituals in addition to being completely obedient or submissive (al-Hudaybi, 1987: 42).

Conclusion

The term *Deen* is undoubtedly one of the most significant terms in the Qur'an. It offers a very wide perspective on existence, life, society and sociopolitical system. Even though it is popularly translated as 'religion' its scope is in fact much greater than what the term religion can offer. The attempt made in this study to interpret the term in its wider meaning emanates from a bigger perspective of presenting Islam as a complete and competing ideology and a system of life and society. Earlier scholars have explained the term in much more legalistic sense with spiritual overtone, but this study has attempted to go beyond and develop the term into a political-ideological system. This is due to the definitive influence of the contemporary world where Islam has to confront not only other religions but also

numerous ideological challenges that offer alternative socio-political systems. Therefore, though the view adopted in this study, regarding the interpretation of the concept of *Deen* has been criticised by contemporary scholars, the significance of the attempt to reconstruct the meaning of the term lies in presenting Islam as an ideological equivalence and even more.

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