does one explain the Prophet’s (peace be on him) decision to ransom prisoners of war after the Battle of Badr instead of executing them as ‘Umar al-Khattab advised, citing al-Tawbah to “kill the polytheists wherever you find them” (9:5)? This then moved to the theological issue of whether the Prophet can “sin” (as opposed to a mere mistake or error), and to the question of the possibility of increase or decrease of faith (iman).

The conceptual narrative is even applicable in the domain of gender justice. Ayesha Chaudhury contrasted what she called “patriarchal” and “egalitarian” idealised cosmologies which she claimed are responsible behind interpretations of Surah al-Nisa’ (4:34), which seemed to allow husbands to beat their wives. Whereas “egalitarian idealised cosmology” depicts both man and woman to be equally connected to God, “patriarchal idealised cosmology” presents a woman’s relationship to God as “mediated” by men, specifically husbands. Pre-colonial interpretations of the verse appear to concur in the husband’s “privilege” to “discipline” their wives, their differences merely in terms of procedure and extent of harm allowed to be inflicted. But thanks to encounter with colonialism, progressive interpretations of the verse began to emerge. Underpinned by an “egalitarian cosmology”, post-colonial scholars now denied that the verse is to be taken literally, so that husbands are not permitted to smack their wives, literally, symbolically or otherwise.

Visit by Professor Tariq Ramadan to Malaysia
(29 January 2015 - 1 February 2015)

Tengku Ahmad Hazri

The renowned Muslim public intellectual, Tariq Ramadan, currently Professor of Contemporary Islamic Studies at the University of Oxford, held a lecture tour in Kuala Lumpur from 29 January 2015 to 1 February 2015. Among others he spoke on reclaiming the true meaning of jihad at a conference organised by the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM) and on the Qur’an, “The Word and its Signs” at the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia (IAMM).

In the latter Tariq restored the true meaning of “ayat” as “sign”, whose spiritual wellsprings have been obscured by the word’s rendition into English as “verse”. In reality the Qur’an, as a “school for intellectual humility and spiritual openness” addresses both the mind and heart, thus its significance transcends its rational meanings. Its substance then includes its form, its poetic expression as well as the manner in which it is to be read and recited. The richness of the content of the Qur’an corresponds to the richness of one’s experiences: to read the Qur’an is to dialogue with God.
One of the highlights of his visit was his lecture on Islamic reform at IAIS Malaysia. In the lecture on “Understanding Reform from an Islamic Perspective” (IAIS Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, 30 January 2015), Tariq reframed the discourse on reform by emphasising reform of the self as the prelude and prerequisite to social reform, inspired no less than by the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be on him!) himself, who “prayed at night to transform the world during the day”. This personal reform should culminate in a sense of personal security (salamat al-nafs) in the individual, a state necessary to attain to the Qur’anic ideal of the “tranquil soul” (nafs al-mutma’innah). Such objective necessitates the intensification and accommodation of Shariah in the heart (tadbiq al-Shari’ah fi’l-qalb) by transcending what Imam Nawawi described as the “lower” level of worship i.e. based on expectation of reward, to the “higher” form of worship which is performed out of sheer love for God.

Reforming the self also means reforming one’s attitude towards the environment or nature. In fact, nature functions as both the “context” to which one must adapt with the goal of transforming, and also on a higher plane, as ‘revelation by other means’. Indeed, the Qur’an as revelation itself connects to nature, as evidenced by various references to nature, how God makes oath by the events of nature (“By the dawn”, “By the night”, “By the ten nights”, etc), and how the Prophet himself wept when one such verse was revealed.

The reform envisaged here is thus wider than popular depictions of reform, especially those which are propagated by some jurists, for whom ijthad (independent reasoning), tajdid (renewal) and islah (reform) are construed from a strictly legal standpoint thereby reducing the reform agenda to questions of rulings (ahkam) alone. To the contrary, law itself is a means, not an end: it merely circumscribes, not prescribes – the latter being the function of ethics.

This explains the need to move from “adaptation reform” to “transformation reform”, two approaches by which the text (i.e. revelation) and the context (the lived social reality) may interact. Whereas adaptation reform only “responds” to changes as and when they happen so as not to lag behind, transformation reform calls for active participation as agents of change itself.

To accomplish the latter, Muslims should look to their own tradition, its intellectual and historical heritage, to set their own goals and objectives rather than merely responding and reacting to “the West”. Too often the Muslim world judges its own accomplishments by reference to the West (e.g. by locating “Islamic” antecedents to existing Western “achievements”), which in a way detracts the pursuit of independent objectives. In reality, Islamic tradition, especially its ethical thrust can infuse contemporary agendas towards the betterment of the ummah—recall that the Prophet (pbuh) was also sent for the refinement of ethics (makarim al-akhlq).