Discovering [The Qur'an]

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The Blackwell Companion to the Quran
Edited by Andrew Rippin

CHAPTER 2

Discovering
Christopher Buck

Why the Qur>an?

The Qur an, the holy book of Islam, may well be the most powerful book in human history, with the arguable exception of the Bible. Both in world history and contemporary affairs, it is doubtful that any other book now commands, or has in the past exerted, so profound an influence. Objectively, one of every five people on earth today is Muslim, each of whom subjectively believes that the Qur an actually supersedes the Bible, and that it is the Qur an – not the Bible – that is unsurpassed. Since Muslims see Islam as the last of the world’s religions, they view the Qur an as the latest and greatest book. Even if one does not share this view, the sheer magnitude of its influence commands respect, and one cannot be cross-culturally and globally literate without some understanding of this monumental text. The purpose of this chapter is to inspire and assist readers in discovering the Qur an for themselves, with the helpful synergy of insider and outsider – religious and secular – perspectives.

Academic Study of the Qur>an

The study of the Qur an in an academic setting has raised a number of legal and pedagogical issues in recent decades, some of which have thrust the scripture into the public eye in a way that has not been previously experienced. Of course,

religion in
general is a controversial topic within education, and demands inevitably arise to know
why the Qur an should (or even can) be taught in a publicly funded
university. The situation in the United States, for example, is one that has provoked legal discussions and
challenges. Doesn't the study of the Qur an in the university violate the Establishment
Clause of the First Amendment? What about the separation of church and state?
These very concerns were recently raised in US federal courts. A national academic
and legal controversy erupted in summer 2002 when the University of North Carolina

(UNC) at Chapel Hill required incoming freshmen, as part of its Summer Reading
Program, to read and discuss Michael Sells' Approaching the Qur an: The Early Revelation
(Sells 1999). This text – a fresh translation and elucidation of the early Meccan suras
of the Qur an – was recommended by UNC Islamicist Carl Ernst in order to promote an
understanding of Islam, especially in light of the events surrounding the September
11, 2001 terrorist attacks (Burdei 2002).
Alleging that UNC violated the Establishment Clause and abridged students' rights
to religious free exercise by forcing incoming freshmen and transfer students to study
Islam against their will, a conservative-Christian activist group, the Family Policy
Network (FPN) filed suit in US District Court, Middle District of North Carolina (MDNC),
on July 22, seeking a preliminary injunction to keep UNC from conducting its summer
program. The case was captioned (named) Yacovelli v. Moeser (after James Yacovelli, an
FPN spokesman, and James Moeser, UNC Chancellor). When the FPN lost, it
immediately appealed to the 4th Circuit Court of Appeals, but lost again. This case was widely
reported (see Euben 2002), both nationally and internationally, but was not judicially
"reported" (that is, the district and appellate decisions were not published).
A later challenge was filed in 2004 but was lost on appeal. Without going into the
technicalities of the Lemon test, which the Court applied along with the

endorsement
and coercion tests, the challenge failed. In his decision, Chief Judge N. Carlton Tilley,
Jr. ruled:

Approaching the Qur an simply cannot be compared to religious practices which have been
deemed violative of the Establishment Clause, such as posting the Ten Commandments,
reading the Lord's Prayer or reciting prayers in school. The book does include Suras, which
are similar to Christian Psalms. However, by his own words, the author endeavors only to
explain Islam and not to endorse it. Furthermore, listening to Islamic prayers in an effort
to understand the artistic nature of the readings and its connection to a historical religious text does not have the primary effect of advancing religion. (Yacovelli v. Moeser, 2004
US Dist. LEXIS 9152 [MDNC May 20, 2004], aff 'd Yacovelli v. Moeser [University of North
Carolina, Chapel Hill], 324 F.Supp.2d 760 [2004].)

This ruling is consistent with the US Supreme Court's endorsement of the academic
study of religion in public schools and universities, when Justice Tom C. Clark in 1963
declared that "one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion
or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization"
(Abington v. Schempp, 374 US 203, 224, n. 9 [1963]). It is the secular approach that
makes the academic study of religion constitutionally permissible: "Nothing we have
said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistently with
the First Amendment" (Abington v. Schempp, 374 US 203, 224, n. 9 [1963]). As Justice
Powell has said more recently: "Courses in comparative religion of course are customary and constitutionally appropriate" (Edwards v. Aguillard, 482 US 578, 607 1987]
[Powell and O'Connor, JJ., concurring]). Based on Justice Clark's statement as it applies
to the Qur an specifically, university officials now argue that – in addition to being
constitutionally permissible – one's education is not complete without a study of the

Qur an (as well as the history of Islam) and its relationship to the advancement of
civilization.

How to Read the Qur>an?

A nineteenth-century mystic once said that the Qur an eclipses all of the miracles of
all of the previous prophets, for the miracle of the Qur an, alone, remains (Shirazi
1950; Lawson 1988). That is to say, the staff of Moses may have turned into a serpent
and swallowed up the magicians' snakes in Pharaoh's court, but that prophetic scepter
has vanished. Moses may well have parted the Red Sea, as Muslims themselves believe,
but that prodigy is long gone. No empirical evidence of either miracle remains today.
What alone abides is the "miracle" of the Qur an – its prodigious ability to transform
the lives of those who believe and accept the Qur an as the best guide for their lives.
This transformation is spiritual alchemy, taking the base appetites that most of us are
born with and transmuting these into the pure gold of a refined moral and spiritual
character. The Qur an can transform a pair of horns into a set of wings, changing the
pious believer from a devil into an angel. Such is the nature of Muslim belief about
the Qur an.
The Qur an can and should be taught in the university – not to convert students into
pious Muslims, but to convert pious Muslim beliefs into something students can
understand, so that they can appreciate the power of the book to influence those who believe
in it. However, beyond the question of why the Qur an should be taught, there is the
problem of how it should be taught. In whatever course and context it may be taught,
the challenge is to engage readers in the study of this text, to assist them in
discovering the Qur an for themselves.
Reading the Qur an is far easier said than done. The Qur an is a challenging text. To
the uninitiated, the book is both simplistic and enigmatic. To the untrained eye, the

Qur an, on first impression, may strike one as arcane, florid, repetitive, or otherwise impenetrable to Westerners wholly unprepared to study the text dispassionately. However, there is a deeper hermeneutical issue involved, one of attitude and assumptions as to the authority and nature of the text.

The Qur an makes its own particular truth-claims, which are quite audacious. It tells the reader that its source is an archetypal “mother of the book” (umm al-kitab) in heaven. The Qur an is therefore of divine origin. It is not only authorized, it is actually authored by God Himself. This is an extraordinary claim, indeed. As such, from a Muslim perspective the element of divine revelation is of paramount importance. God wrote the Qur an, Muslims believe, and thus the book commands their respect. But should it command the respect of those who have not been raised in its culture, who might consider it in the university? Absolutely. So where does one begin? There are methodological considerations that must first be addressed. The Qur an may be a diffi-cult text for non-Muslims, but it is not unfathomable.

The still-predominantly Christian West may have serious misgivings as to the truth of such claims. Isn’t the Qur an an ersatz version of the Bible – a derivative imitation?

Table 2.1 Polarities in the study of the Qur an

Western	Muslim
Secular academic	Traditional academic
Analytic	Synthetic
Tendency to over-differentiate	Tendency to harmonize
Use of reason and bias	Use of reason and faith
Sometimes offensive	Sometimes defensive

This very assumption largely biased the Western reception of the Qur an from the very start, and affected (infected) its study until now. As a result, polarities in the study of the Qur an have emerged, although these are beginning to disappear. The great

divide
in Qur anic studies has historically been the tension between traditional
Muslim
approaches and Western academic approaches. Although problematic for gaining a coherent understanding and appreciation of the Qur an, these two competing paradigms are somewhat synergistic. If you combine the two, you get what
Wilfred Cantwell
Smith (Smith 1959: 53; but cf. McCutcheon 1999) regarded as the
insider–outsider
dynamic. In principle, he suggested that the best approach to the study of the
Qur an
and Islam is to be able to enter into a believer's (emic) perspective while
maintaining
some degree of relative objectivity (etic perspective). Indeed, Smith's canon
of believer
intelligibility requires that "no statement about a religion is valid unless
it can be
acknowledged by that religion's believers." This "creative principle"
offers the best of
both worlds, for it "provides experimental control that can lead" scholars
"dynamically
towards the truth." However, unless one adheres to Smith's principle,
polarities will
inevitably arise. Table 2.1 highlights the nature of these polarities.
The table shows a complement of productive and reductive approaches. The method of reading largely determines what is read and how it is understood. The Muslim approaches the Qur an reverentially and with full faith in the truth it
enshrines. The
Western secular approach can be just the opposite: it is skeptical and
analytic. But it
does not have to be. Where there are apparent difficulties and even apparent contradictions in the text, the Muslim will try to resolve those anomalies by
harmonizing them
on a higher plane of understanding, while a person approaching the text from a
secular
perspective (the Westerner) may be dismissive of the Qur an as simply a human enterprise where inconsistencies and errors are to be expected. Such a
conclusion is not only
misguided according to any knowledgeable Muslim, it is also an attack upon the integrity of a sacred text that is divinely revealed.
This concept of the Qur an as a revealed scripture is basic to an
appreciation as to
why Muslims both revere the Qur an and orient their entire lives according to its dictates, for the Qur an and the h.adi¯th (oral traditions that
report the sayings and actions
of the Muh.ammad) are the two principal sources of authority for Muslim
doctrine and

praxis. So, to the questions of where to begin in discovering the Qur an, it only makes sense to start with the concept of revelation.

Revelation and the Abrahamic Faiths

Scholars have long recognized that claims of revelation are central to the three Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. What these faiths have in common is that each is monotheistic. That is, they each preach a belief in a supreme Being, a oneand-only, all-powerful God. Historically, monotheism is a conscious revolution against the archaic, pre-monotheistic mind-set. This revolution was not prevalently theoretic but dynamic. It effected a radical shift in the concentration of what some scholars call the numinosum, or the locus of the supernatural. Archaic ("primitive" or "primal") culture is founded on the idea of an anthropocentric correspondence of microcosm and macrocosm, of part-to-whole, as in astrology. In the archaic worldview, the numinosum is situated in and around nature, whereas in a monotheistic framework, the numinosum is a supreme being, located outside nature. Monotheism disenchants the universe by exorcizing the very existence of gods, demons, and sprites. The nature spirits disappear, ghosts vanish, and the astrological basis of fate and predestination collapses.

Experimental science of a pre-modern type could not have been born without the demythologization of nature that monotheism put into motion. By moving God outside of nature, monotheism contributes to the revaluation of the ideas of infinity and the void.

This revolution in worldview – disenchanting nature and seeing divinity as its prime mover – gave rise to two major defining features of Western civilization: historicism and technique. The first affects the human sciences; the other impacts the physical sciences.

The argument that Islam is one of the unacknowledged roots of Western civilization flows from this historical perspective: Islamic philosophy and science impacted the high medieval and renaissance cultures to produce Western civilization, especially after the

Enlightenment.
Within the monotheist worldview that is central to Islam, the Qur an is the literary
amber of revelation – the primary mode of disclosure of God's will for humanity. The
Qur an speaks of itself as a revealed text. Phenomenologists of religion have identified
five characteristics or phenomena typically associated with revelation (Dininger 1987:
356). There are two prime characteristics. (1) Origin or source: All revelation has a
source – God, or something supernatural or numinous communicates some kind of
message to human beings. Wah.y is the technical term for revelation in the Qur an. The
fundamental sense of wah.y seems to be what those steeped in the European romantic
ethos would call a "flash of inspiration," in the sense that it is sudden and unpremeditated; (2) Instrument or means: Revelation is communicated supernaturally, through
the agency of dreams, visions, ecstasies, words, or sacred books. Nuzul is a synonym for
revelation, but with the explicit notion that the Qur an was "sent down" from its archetypal original in the spiritual realm known as the heavens.
Other key phenomena of revelation, all of which the Qur an exemplifies, are: (3)
Content or object: Revelation is the communication of the didactic, helping, or punishing presence, will, being, activity, or commission of the divinity. In this case, the Qur an
is a revelation from God, pure and simple, communicated through a series of revelations imparted to Muh.ammad over the course of twenty-three lunar years. Thus, it
would be error and sacrilege to speak of Muh.ammad as the "author" of the Qur an.

(4) Recipients or addressees: The Qur an itself is a revelation of the universal type. It is a
message from God to the world; (5) Effect and consequence for the recipient: Revelation
transforms its recipient. As the agent of revelation, Muh.ammad was commissioned
with a divine mission to present the Qur an as the voice of God, calling the entire world
to righteousness and justice, to morality and decency, and to a life of prayer and fasting,
and surrender to the will of God. The fact that Muh.ammad was commissioned with a

divine mission does not make Muh.ammad himself divine, as the Qur an itself states:
“He would never order you to take the angels and the prophets as Lords” (Q 3:74).
This idea may be seen in an early Christian text: “Neither is there salvation in believing in teachers and calling them lords” (Homilies 8:5 in Roberts and Donaldson
1989–90).

How the Qur>an Was Revealed

With an understanding of revelation generally, the specifics of the revelation of the
Qur an may now be addressed. Such considerations focus on the person identified as
the prophet of Islam, Muh.ammad.
It was Muh.ammad’s practice to meditate prayerfully in a cave on Mt. H.ira . He was
practicing tah.annuth, some sort of pious exercise, when he first encountered the
archangel Gabriel, who revealed the Qur an to him over the next twenty-three lunar
years. Tradition is unanimous that Gabriel was the agent of revelation, even though he
is mentioned only twice in the Qur an. The Qur an itself explains how God reveals: “It
belongs not to any mortal that God should speak to him, except by revelation, or from
behind a veil, or that He should send a messenger and he reveal whatsoever He will, by
His leave; surely He is All-high, All-wise” (Q 42:50). In other words, while the prophet
revealed the Qur an, it was God who authored it, according to Muslim belief.
The Qur an is modeled on an archetypal al-lawh. al-mah.fuz., the “preserved tablet”
(Q 85:22), having been sent down to the nearest heaven on the “night of power”
(Q 97) in the holy month of Ramad.an, in order for Gabriel to transmit it to Muh.ammad.
The text of Qur an is from God, Muslims believe, while the recording and editing of
Qur an is by men. It is important to understand the implications of the Qur an being
originally revealed over a period of time, and thereafter collected and edited. Just as the
Qur an cannot be read from cover to cover in quite the same way that one reads a novel
or treatise, the Qur an was not written from cover to cover as well. Just as

writers have
flashes of inspiration, Muh.ammad experienced flashes of revelation. These cumulatively became the Qur an.
The h.adith literature provides many anecdotes as to how revelations would come
upon Muh.ammad. The descriptions vary. The agent of revelation Gabriel taught Muh.ammad to recite the first passages of the Qur an. Most frequently the accounts
speak of revelations “descending” upon Muh.ammad such that he would hear the
sound of buzzing, or of bells, or would feel a great weight come upon him, or would
enter a trance, after which the words of the Qur an would become indelibly inscribed
in his heart, and subsequently dictated to scribes. The revelations of the Qur an were
first recorded by scribes who wrote down the verses on whatever writing materials
were available: leaves and branches of palm trees, white stones, leather, shoulder blades

of sheep, ribs. One early account states that a revelation was actually eaten by a domestic animal, because it had been recorded on something organic and edible.
After Muh.ammad’s death in 11/632, there was no authoritative record of the revelations. They had to be collected. The process of assembling, collating, and codifying
the Qur an was not informed by a great deal of available information as to dating and
other historical information on which to base the traditional form that the Qur an eventually took. According to tradition, the decision to preserve the Qur an was taken after
hundreds of reciters were killed in the Battle of Yamama (12/633). Umar (who was to
become the second Caliph) suggested to Abu Bakr that the Qur an be collected and
written down. Finally, the text was fixed under Uthman, in the dialect of the Quraysh
tribe (that of Muh.ammad), said to be the clearest of dialects, according to tradition.
Where difficulties in establishing the text arose, the dialect of the Quraysh, the tribe to
which the prophet belonged, was given preference. Written texts required attestation
from reciters, who had heard and memorized the Qur an by heart. Thus, the canon

of the Qur an was fixed as well as the order of the suras and the integrity of the consonantal text.

The urgency with which the text became fixed under the decree of the caliph Uthman afforded precious little opportunity for a systematic, much less scientific ordering of the text. Its preservation was more important than its sequencing, and it was left to later Muslims scholars to provide a critical apparatus for more fully appreciating the pieces that made up the larger whole. How much editing and how intrusive or interpretive such editing may have been is largely a modern question that has occupied much of Western scholarship on the Qur an.

Soon after the Qur an was revealed, it spread like wildfire, racing with the Arab conquerors during the first two centuries of Arab expansion. The rapidity and breadth of that expansion was dramatic. At this stage, the Qur an had not yet achieved its status as a world text, for the simple reason that it was considered an "Arab" book (or, rather, "the" Arab book, since the Qur an is the first book in Arabic). Non-Arab converts were at first obliged to attach themselves to various Arab tribes, in a kind of process of spiritual and social adoption. It did not take long before non-Arabs, especially the Persians, took umbrage with this. How could a scripture with a universal message, they argued, be restricted to just a single ethnicity? And, if not, on what grounds were Arabs justified in relegating to non-Arabs a secondary status, when the category of "Muslims" constitutes a spiritual and social "nation" that embraces all races and nations, yet transcends them? Was not the prophet Abraham a Muslim ("one who surrenders" to the will of God)? And is not anyone who professes belief in the oneness of God and in the authenticity of the prophet Muh.ammad to be accounted as a believer, on equal footing with every other? And so it came to be: the appeal to the Qur an's universalisms, expressive of its egalitarian ethic, prevailed. Thus Islam, although based on a message revealed in Arabic, was transposed to other cultures and climes, although it took centuries before the Qur an itself was actually translated into other languages. This singular revelation became a universal scripture.

In its final form, the Qur an's 114 suras are arbitrarily arranged by the longest sura
first (except for the short "opening" chapter). The traditional dating of these suras has
the "early Meccan suras" spanning the first thirteen lunar years (with early, middle, and

final periods), shifting to the period of "Medinan suras" in 1/622, coinciding with the
first year of the hijra or migration of the early Muslim community from Mecca to
Medina, followed by the "later Meccan suras" on the prophet's triumphal return to his
oasis-city of Mecca shortly before the end of his life in 11/632.
Taking what has become a classic, two-part division of Muh.ammad's life (Watt 1953, 1956), the early Meccan suras exemplify Muh.ammad's role as "prophet" while
the Medinan and later Meccan suras present Muh.ammad's vocation as "statesman."
Thus the earlier revelations are intended to kindle hope and to strike the fear of God
into the heart of the hearer by the promise of heaven and the threat of hell.
Accordingly, the prophet's role is that of a "warner" who has come to make people alive to
the threat of impending doom and death unless they repent and surrender to the will of God.
First warned, later governed – this is basically the purpose of the revelations and the
logic of their sequence. The later Qur anic revelations enshrine laws and principles for
Muslims to follow. Once a Muslim community had formed (the migration of Muslims to Mecca in 1/622 effectively created the first Muslim state), laws were needed. Accordingly, Muh.ammad became a statesman in addition to his role as prophet, and began
revealing the laws and ethical principles that later became the foundation for the four
Sunni schools of law and a distinctive way of life.

Sources of Revelation?

Whether the Qur an is informed by previous sources is a vexed question. To suggest that
the Qur an somehow derives from predominantly Jewish or Christian sources is tantamount to discrediting the Qur an as a document of revelation. For Muslims, the question should be the other way around. The Qur an is the gold standard of divine truth.
Since it is pure and unadulterated, it is previous scriptures that should be

measured
against the Qur an, not the other way around. Indeed, the Qur an
comprehends all previous scriptures:

Within itself, the Qur an provides Muslims with a view of the Bible. Mention
is made of
the “scrolls” of Abraham and Moses, the Tawra t (Torah) of Moses, the
Zabur (usually
understood as the Psalms) of David and the Injil (Gospel) of Jesus, all
conceived as direct
revelation from God to the prophet concerned: “Surely we sent down the Torah
wherein is
guidance and light” (Qur an 5.48); “And we sent, following in their
footsteps, Jesus son of
Mary, confirming the Torah before him; and we gave to him the Gospel, wherein
is guidance and light” (Qur an 5.50). In this way, all previous scriptures
are pictured within the
revelatory and compositional image of the Qur an itself. (Rippin 1993: 250)

To say that Muh.ammad was “influenced” by his religious world and that the
Qur an
is a hodge-podge of intermixed influences is not only highly reductionist, but
suggests
that the prophet was himself the author of the Qur an and not God. Surely God
had
no need to borrow from previous scripture or religious lore, from the Muslim
perspective. So the tension between traditional Muslim and Western academic
approaches is
perhaps nowhere more intense than in discussing this question.

One approach that is both methodologically sound as well as religiously
acceptable
is to look at the foreign vocabulary of the Qur an and also the religious
technical terms
and concepts that the Qur an mentions. This area of study has proven fruitful
for elucidating the text. But then, again, what exactly is being proved? If
used as evidence that
the Qur an is derivative, then this crosses over from a purely descriptive
phenomenology into an explanatory phenomenology that is inherently reductive.
This latter
approach tries to “explain away” the Qur an, presenting it as the product
of past influences rather than as an original work that absorbs and
reconfigures its cultural content
to produce an Islamic civilization of world-historical proportions.
For Muslims, the only pre-Islamic source for the Qur an is the archetypal
“mother
of the book” of which the earthly Qur an is a faithful copy. But Muslim

scholars will readily admit that the Qur an speaks to its historical-contemporary world, which includes the immediate past. Thus we find specific references to practices from the pre-Islamic period that the Qur an explicitly forbids. This is “influence” in the other direction. For instance, the pre-Islamic practice of female infanticide was quite common, where parents would bury their infant daughter in the hot, desert sand, if they thought it too much of a financial burden to raise a girl. So, in this respect, Islam functioned as a women’s protectionist movement. Suffice it to say that knowledge of pre-Islamic Arabia is the natural starting place for developing a fuller understanding and appreciation for how the Qur an represents a significant moral and social advancement after the pre-Islamic “age of ignorance.”

Major Themes of Revelation

Knowing something of the history of the revelation of the Qur an and its codification provides a necessary orientation. But the real heart of the Qur an is its message. One useful way of approaching the Qur an is to see it as the vehicle for expressing profound truths regarding God and the universe, and humankind and its civilizations. God is the creator, and humankind the creative. The themes of the Qur an, therefore, are the organizing principles of Islamic religion and civilization. What follow are several of the major themes of the Qur an. Most of the Qur an’s religious principles are common to the Abrahamic faiths, and many of its morals may be appreciated as universal ethical truths.

Exaltation

One feels the presence of God in the Qur an, which makes it such a powerful text. Since Muh.ammad is the revealer, not author, the pious read the text as the voice of God Himself. This is not a mere poetic device, as the voice of God in the Puritan poet Michael Wigglesworth’s “God’s Controversy with New England” (1662). The Qur an is the real thing, like a whole book of the Ten Commandments and more. This direct communication of God to man is charged with a power and authority that Muslims

feel makes
the Qur an inimitable, and without peer. No other text can compare with it, except

previous scriptures. And rarely are they so direct and compelling. The Qur an is a
conduit to the presence of God, and to follow the Qur an's dictates is to manifest the
will of God.

Creation

The Qur an accounts for the creation of the world – not as a scientific treatise, but
rather as a prophetic narrative. Scholars call this cosmogony. The important thing to
remember is that cosmogony often functions as "sociogony" – the genesis of society.
Just as God is the creator of the physical universe, the Qur an is the great moral and
social civilizer of human (Muslim) society, when ideally applied.

Revelation

We have stated earlier that the Qur an is a revelation (actually a series of revelations)
direct from God. In practice that means that everything the Qur an says is taken as
truth. This fact is clearly of profound importance in appreciating the status and authority of the Qur an. While all of the Qur an is God's revealed truth, the Qur an does not
contain all of God's revelations. The Qur an "confirms" the truth of previous revelations, as embodied in the Jewish and Christian scriptures. Much of the Qur an, in fact,
is retrospective. It harks back to the days of previous prophets and relates what became
of them and tells of the fate of peoples who rejected and persecuted the warners and
messengers that God sent to them. These historical narratives have a didactic (edifying)
function. They are homilies on religious history, and thus serve a religious purpose.
With its dire warnings of the day of judgment, the Qur an is prospective as well as
retrospective. It endows history with teleology – a purpose and a final result. While this
teleology is predestined, the individual can largely choose the outcome for his or her

salvation. Here, salvation is not absolution from sin, but a resolution to abide by the
will of God. This is true for entire societies as well, since they are aggregates of individuals and families. That is to say, an entire social order can be transformed by following the way of life illuminated by the Qur an. Thus, revelation contains within it
the seeds of a higher civilization.
And so it happened: Islam reigned as the world's "superpower" during the so-called
dark ages of Europe, when great Muslim civilizations exerted a moralizing, philosophical and scientific influence on the West. Historically, Islam is one of the catalysts that
sparked the Renaissance. Ideally, revelation is the genesis of ideal civilization.

Consummation

The Qur an is not just one of a series of progressive revelations sent by God to help steer
the course of civilization. The Qur an literally is the latest and greatest revelation to
date. We know this because we are told that Muh.ammad is the "seal of the prophets"

– that is, the final messenger. He has, in a real sense, completed the series of revelations. The Qur an is therefore the capstone of God's messages to the world.
Muh.ammad's station as the "seal of the prophets" is of fundamental importance in
Islam. This appellation comes from the famous "seal verse" (Q 33:40). Although interpretations of this key verse did vary in early Islam (Friedmann 1986), there is now a
consensus among Muslims that the term "seal" means "last," in the sense of both
"latest" and "final." While Muh.ammad is considered fully human and not divine (Islam
rejects the doctrine of incarnation), this truth-claim easily rivals – in both its audacity
and centrality of dogma – that of Jesus being the son of God. Rather than a person
being the "word" of God, for Muslims the Qur an is the word of God literally. However,
that Muh.ammad is the seal of the prophets is a major truth-claim and is effectively nonnegotiable. It has achieved the status of a dogma, and one learns not to debate this point
with Muslims if friendship is a priority. Accepting Muh.ammad as the seal of the

prophets is absolutely fundamental to Muslims everywhere. And this belief is firmly
anchored in the Qur an itself.

Salvation

For Muslims, salvation consists in much more than simply being forgiven for one's past
sins and transgressions. The act of repentance itself effects much of this. Indeed, the
true test of one's sincerity is a matter of public record, purely in terms of one's actions.
This record is not simply what gets recorded in the proverbial "Book of Deeds," to be
read back to each individual on the day of judgment. Rather, pious deeds both
manifest and further nurture purity of heart and soul. Here, salvation is active, not passive.
One's salvation is a matter of degree, not of status. But Islam sees a spiritual life beyond
forgiveness. Salvation is not a change of status that magically and suddenly averts
God's wrath. Salvation is a process, a refinement of one's character over time.
A deeper walk with God on the "straight path" of Islam can come about through
spiritual growth and transformation. But how does one do this? What can serve as an
infallible spiritual guide? For Muslims, the way to bring one's life into greater conformity with God's will is through following the laws of the Qur an and the example of
Muh.ammad. The truest sign of one's transformative faith is conformity and dedication
to the principles and teachings of Islam which are preserved, first and foremost, in the
Qur an itself. The single most important act of piety is to surrender one's own will to
that of the will of God. The word "Muslim" means "one who has submitted" or surrendered to the will of God. "Surrender" is not the best translation, because following
God's will is an act of free will, a vigilant choice, a matter of strength through commitment and practice.
Then what is the will of God? There is a Zoroastrian scripture that states: "The
will of the Lord is the law of holiness" (the Ahunwar, the most sacred formula in
Zoroastrianism, a common refrain found throughout the Zend Avesta – see Vendidad,
Fargard 19, and passim). This means that, rather than trying to divine what the

will of
God is in terms of making important life-decisions, the will of God is not so much what

one believes, or what one is, but what one does. What a Muslim believes and what a
Muslim does combine to produce what a Muslim is.
Surrendering to the will of God begins with professing one's self to be Muslim, by
proclaiming that "There is no god but God" and that "Muh.ammad is the messenger of
God." As a general rule, Muslims pray more frequently than in any other religion. They
also fast longer, for thirty days during the holy month of Ramad.an (the dates of which
annually vary because Islam is based on a lunar calendar). Once one is properly
oriented towards God, and is conscious of God throughout the day, it becomes much easier
to fulfill one's moral obligations as a pious Muslim. For salvation to be complete, it must
be perfected. But salvation is not an all-or-nothing proposition. It is a process of drawing
ever nearer to God, which process involves becoming more God-like in one's deeds. Here
is where faith and works combine to effect salvation.
Therefore, the requirements of the Qur an for the true believer may be described, in
Christian terms, as a "faith of works." In other words, Islam is ideally a "faith at work"
(in Christian terms, a "way of life") and thus a "faith that works" – for the benefit of
individual and society alike. If, as Christians often say, "faith without works is dead,"
the "faith with works" is very much alive. This is the spiritual life that Islam breathes
into the physical lives of pious Muslims. Readers may be familiar with the way in which
Martin Luther dichotomized faith and works. Individuals would not be "saved" by
unaided efforts, but by faith alone. Islam has no such doctrine of salvation by grace.
The most efficacious grace is not to give up on the sinner and allow another to die in
his place as in Christianity. The better way is to promote the spiritual and moral growth
of the individual. This takes discipline as well as a certain amount of faith.

Daily obligatory prayer and following the laws and precepts of the Qur an is the truest salvation
by grace, because works and faith combine to become, in the words of the beloved spiritual, “Amazing Grace.”

Civilization

Salvation is not just for the individual. There is collective salvation as well. The purpose
of the Qur an is to communicate God’s will for humankind – all of humanity. Through
its laws and moral principles, the Qur an is meant to benefit the world through restructuring human society, to infuse it with the consciousness of God and to make it alive
to the will of God for human society. It is a call to righteousness and brotherhood, to
human solidarity in a community of principle and commonality of values. The Qur an
is nothing less than an attempt to reorder human society, to rescue it, Muslims would
say, from the moral appetites and turpitude that threaten to make the West morally
uncivilized while remaining technologically advanced. Islam offers to fill a spiritual
vacuum to which Western society has largely turned a blind eye. Islamic spirituality
can be harmonized with the best of Western – Christian as well as contemporary
secular – traditions of civic virtues, of moral decency and of family values, informed
by the West’s traditional Judeo-Christian ethic. Just as the biblical “ten commandments” are still relevant, the Qur an still has much to say, although even some Muslims

would say that it needs to be understood anew within the changed circumstances of
modernity and postmodernity.

Final destination

Few other sacred texts depict the afterlife so vividly as the Qur an. Whether literal or
metaphorical, paradise is described as the abode of the righteous, dwelling in peace in
Edenic gardens inhabited by dark-eyed damsels that seem to represent higher passions
rather than lower ones. Conversely, the Qur an portrays hell in equally graphic

terms, as a pit of fire and brimstone, with a descriptive immediacy that the sermons of Jonathan Edwards can scarcely rival. Indeed, it is said that around a full one-third of the Qur an is eschatological, dealing with the afterlife in the next world and with the day of judgment here on earth at the end of time. As in Christianity, the day of resurrection plays a prominent role in the Qur an with a focus on inevitable moral accountability, both individual and collective in nature. Through promise and threat, the Qur an instills a healthy fear of God in the believer, who is constantly taught to respect divine authority and to expect the consequences of one's own actions.

Reading Revelation

The Qur an presents a number of challenges for interpreter and reader alike. Many Western readers have complained that the Qur an is dull and repetitive. If the Qur an were read as a novel from cover to cover, there might be some truth to this. But just as the Qur an was revealed in piecemeal fashion, so also should it be read. The final redaction of the Qur an obscures this fact. There are few obvious markers that will signal, to the untrained eye, the beginning and end of various discrete, revelatory sections known as pericopes. The best examples of a piece of revelation preserved in its entirety and discretely identifiable would be most of what are known as the early Meccan suras.

The Qur an was not intended to be read as a book in one or two sittings. The more that one reads, the more the reader will have the sense that the Qur an repeats itself. Some expressions recur like a refrain. They have a rhetorical purpose, in that they are repeated for stress. The reiterative nature of the Qur an notwithstanding, certain passages have achieved such renown that they have come to be known as what al-Ghazali (d. 505/1111) referred to as the "jewels of the Qur an." These include such celebrated passages as the "throne verse" (Q 2:255) and the "light verse" (Q 24:35).

Shifting from the mystical to the perplexing, some Qur anic passages defy

easy explanation. The most obvious examples are the so-called “mysterious letters of the Qur an,” which occur at the very beginning of twenty-nine chapters. Muslims themselves often have a mystical relationship with the Qur an that does not require that they understand the text, divine its enigmas or derive mystical meaning by probing its depths. In popular or “folk” Islam, instead of trying to divine its truths, Muslims may turn to the

Qur an as a source of divination. One common practice is to consult the Qur an as a kind of oracle. If a person wishes to know the solution to a personal problem, he or she can look to the Qur an for personal guidance by carefully meditating on the passage that first falls into view.

It is instructive enough simply to be able to see the different modes of discourse that give texture and vitality to the Qur an. Although the Qur an does not have a definite structure in any kind of systematic method, it has a complex of structures within it. These have been identified in various ways by Muslim and Western scholars alike. One way to discern the various shifts in revelatory content is to perform a genre analysis of a sura or part of a sura in question. The major genres, or the various styles of Qur anic revelations, are as follows.

Prophetic revelations

A narrative is simply a story. If the story is true, it qualifies as history. Some narratives have a purely edifying (instructive) function. Whether historically verifiable or not, all of the Qur anic narratives are morally true. Such a distinction will probably be lost on those pious Muslims who take the sacred text at its word (literally). Take for instance the story of Jesus as a young boy. The Qur an states that, as a child, Jesus would fashion birds out of mud, then breathe life into them, and the birds would fly away:

And He [Jesus] will teach him the book, the wisdom, the Torah, the Gospel, to be a messenger to the Children of Israel saying, “I have come to you with a sign from your Lord.

I will create for you out of clay as the likeness of a bird; then I will breathe into it, and it will be a bird, by the leave of God. I will also heal the blind and the leper, and bring to life the dead, by the leave of God." (Q 3:43)

Despite the abundance of miracle narratives in the four gospels, this particular prodigious ability of Jesus is unreported in the gospels found today in the New Testament.

Thus, as the Qur an itself states, some stories it relates may be traced back to previous scriptures, and some not. This is a case of one that is not.

Prophetic narratives are what they purport to be – stories of the prophets. The Qur an has many such narratives. Indeed, the Qur an speaks much more about past prophets than about the prophet Muh.ammad himself. These narratives, for the most part, are partial, even fragmentary. The only complete prophetic narrative in the Qur an is the sura of Joseph (Q 12). The nature of these narratives is referential and homiletic. They serve an edifying purpose.

Many of the Qur an's prophetic narratives will no doubt be familiar to readers who are conversant with the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament. However, in addition to the "new" material on Jesus just mentioned, the Qur an contains many other stories that are not to be found anywhere in the Bible. For many readers, this adds to the Qur an's mystique. Whether such stories are those of Moses and Khid. r (Q 18), the story of the Seven Sleepers (Q 18), or other nonbiblical narratives that add to the overall impression, the reader must not assume that these stories are untrue or merely

apocryphal. Whether they are or not is not the point. For Muslims, the Qur an confirms much material found in previous scriptures, and adds new material as well. Even if such stories may be found in Jewish lore or elsewhere, it is safe to say that the Qur an presents these as morally true and as paradigmatically important. The stories are authoritative and, by virtue of their status as revelation, are true for Muslims howsoever they may be nuanced or explained.

Edifying revelations

While the majority of narratives are stories of the prophets, other narratives have a purely edifying purpose. One example is the Qur an's use of parables. These function in quite the same way as the parables of Jesus. Maxims, aphorisms, and other wisdom sayings enrich the didactic dimension of the Qur an. This material regulates the lives of Muslims in ways that laws cannot. Laws may govern outward actions, and conform them to moral and religious standards. But the Qur anic wisdom literature is the heart of piety, which can take on mystical dimensions not contemplated by observant praxis alone.

Legal revelations

As stated earlier, the Qur an is one of the two major sources of Islamic law. The other is the h.adith literature, which is a body of traditions that report the extra-canonical sayings and actions of Muh.ammad. Together, the Qur an and h.adith make up the sunna, the way of the prophet, which, in turn, becomes the shari a, the code that Muslims should follow. If the Qur an is the revealed word of God, then the life and sayings of Muh.ammad represent the will of God. Muh.ammad is the perfect Muslim. Therefore, the pious Muslim will try to emulate the prophet in just about every way, beyond his singularly prophetic mission.

Given the harsh realities of the day, the Qur an can at times be uncompromising. Some of its corporeal punishments are objectionable and unacceptable in the modern world today. Some Muslim reformers advocate dispensing with the letter of certain Islamic laws yet preserving principles and social goals that stand behind them.

Liturgical revelations

The Qur an has liturgical value because it is used in private and public worship. Among the many and varied devotional uses of the Qur an, the first sura is used in daily obligatory prayer (s.alat). Qur anic recitation – that is, chanting the verses of the Qur an according to stylized canons of intonation and cadence – became an art-form

in itself,
just like Qur anic calligraphy. In a sense, Qur anic recitation re-enacts
those original,
revelatory moments of the spoken Qur an as they were first dictated by
Muh.ammad to
his scribes.

The Qur an loses much of its force on the barren printed page. Emotions
thrill to the
spirited invocation of Qur anic passages, as a whole religious culture comes
alive. One
does not have to know Arabic to be struck by the emotional depth that is
conveyed by
Qur anic recitation. The hearts of the pious are swept with awe and
fascination by the
measured accents of the text, as it is experienced in the depth of the soul.

Polemical revelations

To promote Islam is also to defend it. Secular as well as religious charges
were leveled
at the prophet of Islam. Muh.ammad was variously accused of being a crazed
poet,
soothsayer, or sorcerer, as well as a liar. In all of these cases, Qur anic
polemics are to
be seen as both actual and theoretical. They may be historical and localized,
or doctrinal and generalized. Sometimes the Qur an directly cites the charges
it refutes. The
important thing to remember is that the Qur an, despite its exalted claims to
revelation,
is personalized through the formative experience of Islam as a historical
movement.
Muh.ammad and the early Muslims faced challenges, debates, and outright
persecution.
Under these circumstances, polemics served an immediate purpose, yet had a
paradigmatic value as Islam spread to countries outside Arabia, where Islam was
just as new
then as before.
Another aspect of Qur anic polemics is apologetic in nature. Among the
detractors
of Islam were Jewish communities. This fact becomes problematic in the modern
context and has fueled charges of a latent Muslim anti-Semitism. The many
references
to Judaism, however, are for instructive purposes, and a much greater focus is
placed
on the prophethood of Moses, who is really a prototype of Muh.ammad himself.
The Qur an has a certain degree of affection for Christians. During times of

persecution in the early days of Islam, Christians tended to be the most sympathetic of onlookers. Muslims share a great deal in common with Christians. However, the Qur an brooks no tolerance for the Christian doctrine of the trinity. Although the Qur an affirms the virgin birth, it does not accord Jesus the status of the son of God (nor that of God, for that matter). The Qur an also views original sin as absolute injustice and complete predestination. Pure Christianity is pure Islam, since there is only one true religion. What would Jesus do if he met Muh.ammad? Muslims would say that Jesus would embrace the truth of Muh.ammad's revelation, considering the fact that the Qur an states that Jesus prophesied the advent of Muh.ammad.

Assessing the Qur>an

Is the Qur an a revelation sent down by God, as Muslims claim? This is clearly a theological question. If the answer were yes, Christians and others might feel compelled to become Muslims. The simplest solution is to recognize Islam for what it is – a system of salvation at the center of which is the Qur an, which is functionally and effectively the word of God, entirely independent of what non-Muslims have to say about its truth claims. The Qur an invites all humanity to respond to the call of God. It sees itself as

the latest and fullest testimony of God and the most direct expression of the divine purpose for humanity. This is a monumental truth-claim, and must be taken very seriously when studying the text. Readers will wish to keep this salient fact in mind because it goes far to explain the power of the Qur an to command allegiance and serve as the effective constitution of entire Islamic societies.

An understanding of the Qur an is analogous to music appreciation, although saying so is by no means meant to trivialize the purpose or process of gaining that understanding. Muslims have a coherent worldview, one that originates from the Qur an itself. To appreciate the Qur an is to develop a sensitivity to the operation of the divine in a culture removed for centuries from the Euro-American world but now increasingly an integral part of it. One can only gain from such an

understanding.
Indeed, one can only be enriched by it, but only if one's prejudices are first abandoned.
The Qur an is a world unto itself, a palatial architecture of meaning that is multidimensional and comprehends the totality of the human experience. On the moral and spiritual foundation of the Qur an, an entire history and civilization has been built. The West can continue to clash with Islam – which is the religion of the Qur an – or embrace it.
To acknowledge the beauty and depth of the Qur an is not to convert to Islam, but to converse with it and with Muslims who are enlivened by it. Yes, the Qur an is a text of monumental historical importance. But it may have an even greater contemporary relevance, for in an increasing number of Western nations the population of Muslims is beginning to surpass the number of Jews. Thus the religion of Islam is rapidly entrenching itself as a French religion, as part of UK society, as a feature of the Canadian mosaic, and as an essential element of the spiritual landscape of the United States.
To know the Qur an is to better prepare oneself for inevitable encounters with Muslims both in America and abroad – not as the exotic "other" somewhere in the distant Orient, but as the religion and way of life of our fellow compatriots at home – friends, neighbors and, through increasing religious intermarriage, that of our immediate and extended families. The events of September 11, 2001 have riveted world attention on Islam (albeit radical Islam). Sales of the Qur an and texts on Islam have skyrocketed.
For the non-Muslim, reading the Qur an is an act of moderation, a significant form of communication, an act of intellectual and perhaps spiritual empathy, and, for some, a religious moment without a religious commitment, and a gesture of understanding.
It is an act of humanity. Moreover, the Qur an is a text of world-historical proportions that institutions of higher learning can scarcely afford to ignore, because our

domestic life, as well as international affairs, will be increasingly informed by it. Discovering the Qur an on a personal basis can be rewarding for its own sake. Studying the Qur an will equip university students with a competence they are sure to find useful in an increasingly multicultural world, one-fifth of which is already under Islam's spiritual, political, and cultural authority – with an even greater part of the world affected by it.

The US courts have already weighed in on the University of North Carolina Qur an controversy. While reading the Qur an cannot be required, it is required reading for reli-

gious, political, cultural, and global literacy. In its own way, it is a democratic as well as academic enterprise.

Further reading

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