

The Qur'ān in Islam

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Abstract

The Qur'ān is the heart of Islam, the world's youngest religion, which has already been present for more than fifteen centuries. However, the Qur'ān is not a book structured in a logical fashion like most books read by man, and instead contains many layers and structures. In this context, Muslims understand the Qur'ān as being the literal and eternal Word of God. If the Qur'ān had but one meaning, it would be 'only the Absolute' (God) is capable of being the one and only. The Qur'ān is not God, but His Word, i.e. the speaking of God or the eternal retelling of his Word.

The fundamental message contained in the Qur'ān is that man, like all other creatures, should be devoted / submitted to God. The Qur'ān regards the Islamic religion as being furthermore the yearning for a tight relationship between each creature and the Creator.

The Qur'ān is grounded on the concrete faith, Islam, which has been from the VII century onwards tightly anchored as an independent religion. The Qur'ān states that faith only has a meaning if it is achieved through man's free choice. However, despite calling for there to be no religious compulsion, the Qur'ān considers God to be not just a Muslim God, but the Universal God.

Much of the content of the Muslim faith comes from the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān can thus be regarded as not just a source of faith for Muslims, but also the content of their faith. It can indeed be said that Muslims became, in the same way as Christians and Jews, with the Qur'ān People of the Book or inheritors of the world.

Keywords: The Qur'ān, religion, the Arabic language, God (Allāh), holiness, symbolism, Muḥammad, Muslim, Islam, God's Word, Man, Creatures, Universe, the Creator, Christians, Jews, faith, culture, civilization, the Holy Book, interpretation of the Holy Book.

1. The Qur'ān: God's Word about God, God's Word about the Absolute

At the base of Islam, the youngest world religion, which has already been vividly present for fifteen centuries in world history and in world aspirations for eternity, is the Qur'ān (*al-Qur'ān*, Recitation, Reading).¹ The Qur'ān takes the form of a book written in the Arabic language which was spoken in Mecca and Arabia in the seventh century. It contains one hundred and fourteen chapters of varying length.² In terms of its subject matter, the Qur'ān

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1 For the Qur'an as God's word and other principal topics, see: Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, Bibliotheca Islamica, Minneapolis 1994.

2 For one of the most referred to, newest and most exhaustive works on the Qur'an in English, see: Jane Dammen McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Quran, I – VI*, Brill, Leiden / Boston 2001 – 2006.

is a book which contains many sections,³ speaking of God, man, the world, nature, life, good, evil, the final nature of things, the limited circumstances of all creatures; in short, it speaks of the great news of eternity and time.⁴ In the Qur'ān, God's attitude, God's perspective and God's outlook on the final destiny of the world and universe are predominantly conveyed. Of course, passing human thoughts and the short-lasting human perspective are sometimes also mentioned in the pages of the Qur'ān. God's word is directed to people, reminding them and correcting them.

The Qur'ān is not a lesson structured along the lines of the logical pattern best understood by man; i.e. it does not follow one story from the beginning to the end. On the contrary, the pages of the Qur'ān present its readers with many layers, levels and plans of God's text. Reading the Qur'ān alone is simultaneously an act of interpreting the holy book, a human reading of the Qur'ān can even be considered as an act of "systemizing" it. Up until now, interpretations of the Qur'ān have revealed and recognized its many expanses: theophanic, eschatological, cosmological, ethical, anthropological.⁵

But in Islam as a faith, culture and civilization, the Qur'ānic message's place together with the importance and significance of the *Qur'ānic I believe*, with its holiness and symbolism, are considered to be considerably more important than are considerably above the thematic content, exterior forms and bookish appearances of the Qur'ān. The Muslim people take the message of the Qur'ān as the literal and eternal Word of God (*Verbum Dei*), as the Absolute Call, which was passed on to mankind through Muḥammad,⁶ God's Messenger (570 – 632), with its dictation by the angel Ġibrīl (angel Gabriel or the Holy Spirit).

God – Qur'ān – Muḥammad (Man) is the delivered chain or sequence that the Muslim people discern as the vertical direction and the traveling of the coming / descending of God's Word or the Absolute Message from Eternity to the levels of time, to the realms of history.

According to the Islamic outlook on the world, God never reveals Himself as a person, an individual, form or image. God reveals Himself by sending His Word to mankind or through His innumerable creations of the eternal universe.

3 For traditional Muslim themes in the Qur'an, see: Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "*The Qur'an – the Word of God, the Source of Knowledge and Action*", published in Nasr's work: *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, The Islamic Texts Society, Cambridge 2001.

4 For another modern Muslim attempt of a thematic reading and commentary on the Qur'an, see: Shaykh Muhammad al-Ghazali, *A Thematic Commentary on the Qur'an*, International Institute of Islamic Thought, Herndon 2000.

5 There are numerous books that show how Islamic beliefs and values are derived from the Qur'an. One such work is: Sachico Murata / William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam*, Paragon House, St. Paul, Minnesota 1994.

6 For the life of Muhammad, God's Messenger, see: Martin Lings, *Muhammad, his life based on the earliest sources*, Islamic Texts Society, Cambridge 1991. (The Bosnian translation was published under the title: *Muhammad, Život vjervjesnika islama zasnovan na najranijim izvorima*, translated by Amra Sulejmanović-Hajdarević and Indira Ustavdić, Sarajevo 1996). Also see: Karen Armstrong, *Muhammad, A Biography of the Prophet*, Harper, San Francisco 1992. It is also worth consulting the work by Barnaby Rogerson, *The Prophet Muhammad, A Biography*, Abacus, London 2003. Also see: Tariq Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of The Prophet, Lessons from the Life of Muhammad*, Oxford University Press, Oxford / New York 2007.

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God (*Allāh*), His Unattainable and Magnificent Being, remains hidden and veiled in the depths of heavenly blueness, but is at the same time revealed in the universe, nature, the world and history, and is all the more present – as the Qur'ān says – in the beating of the heart, which man feels in the blood vessels of his neck! One of the strongest messages contained in the Qur'ān is that God is a transcendental (*al-Bāṭin*) and immanent (*aẓ-Zāhir*) reality,⁷ and that He is incessantly proclaimed and infinitely manifested in all worlds.

The Qur'ān itself affirms the two aspects of Proclaiming or Revelation (*wahy*), or the two aspects of the manifestation of God's eternal reality.

The first appearance of the Proclamation of God took place with the sending of God's Word to His creatures. God revealed / proclaimed His Word through His Prophets, for example Ibrāhīm (Abraham), Mūsa (Moses), Davūd (David), ʿĪsā (Jesus), Muḥammad. God always proclaims His Word in the language of the people to whom God's prophet belongs.

Actually, before the earthly appearance of the Qur'ān as God's Word, many of God's Books and Prophets had already been proclaimed (for example, the Torah or *Tawrāt*, the Psalms or *Zabūr*, the Gospels or *Inġīl*, etc.).

To be Muslim means to believe in the monotheistic continuity of God's Proclamation, to believe in all of God's Books and in all of God's Prophets and Messengers. In this sense, Islam is one great and powerful wave of spirituality that continuously and unbreakably reminds one of the existence of God and the meaning of faith in God for humanity.⁸ It is precisely the continuation of the monotheistic message that makes Islam open to Judaism and Christianity, as it considers itself not just an inheritor but also a fresh renewal of historical monotheism and the incomparable position that the infinite universe, the innumerable constellations and all worlds of the Earth and Heavens have a one and only Creator.⁹

If the Qur'ān has one overall message, it is the following: Only the Absolute (God) is capable of being the one and only.

Indeed, the Qur'ān constantly and forcefully reminds all of mankind in many pages and in different variations that God is – one God! There are no gods other than God!

In God's proclamation in the form of God's Word (i.e. in the books *Tawrāt*, *Zabūr*, *Inġīl* and the Qur'ān) the voice of the One God is above all other voices!

One God – this is the fundamental message, the first point around which all other subsidiary topics and tales from the religious books from the Semitic monotheistic circle, and in particular the Qur'ān, revolve. Islam regards itself as a glorious inheritor of this magnificent message.

7 For the transcendentalism and eminence of God in Islam, see: Ian Richard Netton, *Allah Transcendent, Studies in the Structure and Semiotics of Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Cosmology*, Routledge Curson 1989.

8 For a general overview of Islam, see: Seyyed Hossein Nasr (ed.), *Islamic Spirituality (Foundations) and Islamic Spirituality (Manifestations)*, The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York 1987.

9 Classical Islamic theology has always recognized the continuity of God's Proclamations / Revelations. See: Tim Winter (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2008.

According to the Qur'ān, the second type, or the second form of proclaiming the Magnificent Being of God should be investigated and considered in the infinite cosmos, universe, nature, soul, conscience.

In the Qur'ān, with the word *Āyatu-llāh* (God's signs), appear simultaneously:

- a) Qur'ānic sub-sections and verses, and
- b) phenomena in Nature and in the Universe.

Islamic mystics have expressed these two views of God's Signs with the expression, *The Qur'ān is nature that speaks, nature is the Qur'ān that is silent!*¹⁰

Here are the main reasons why Muslims have great respect for the Qur'ānic Word in its Arabic original, why its message is translated into numerous languages, why the Qur'ān's voice is carried from and into time and space, why they believe the Qur'ān is the living and eternal Word of God, the sacred speech of God, joyfully announcing the Absolute eternal voice.

The Qur'ān is not God, the Qur'ān is God's Word! This Islamic credo teaches Muslims that for them the Qur'ān is the strongest theophany, the unsurpassed and incomparable *speaking* of God, the eternal retelling of God's Word.¹¹ The reasons for the Qur'ān's central position in Islamic ritual, moral codices, theological teaching, artistic expression, etc. can also be found here.

2. Islam, devotion / submission to God, the Qur'ān's fundamental message

If the Qur'ān is God's Word, then what is *Islam*, and where is man's place in it? And why should *Islam* concern man?

The Qur'ān testifies to and reminds that alongside man there have always been (and are) many and other receivers and recipients of God's Word or God's Inspiration (for example, the earth, the Heavens, animals, spiritual worlds, etc.). However, according to the word of the Qur'ān, man is nevertheless the most important receiver / recipient of God's Proclamation / Revelation.

At this point it is necessary to mention *Islam* (the Arabic word meaning *the devotion of all creatures or man's devotion / submission to the Creator, the One and Only God!*)

The Qur'ān cannot be properly understood, nor can the word of the Qur'ān create proper communication without a full comprehension of the atmosphere and aroma of *Islam* contained in its pages. In short, according to the Qur'ān, *Islam* is the response of all creatures, *eo ipso* and man's response to God's summoning and call that echo from the pages of God's Word, God's books (*Tawrāt, Zabūr, Inġīl* and *Qur'ān*), and even from the ends and expanses of the Universe.

In infinite variations, the Qur'ān says that the All Merciful and the all-compassionate God wants His creatures to be devoted or submitted to Him. In fact, the Qur'ān declares that the Heavens and Earth are devoted to God, praise God, (LVII: 1) and are continuously below Him (XVI: 49). And from man the same is requested; *devotion* to God. These are

10 For mystical readings and interpretations of the Qur'an, see: Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, The University of North Carolina Press 1975. Also see: Annemarie Schimmel, *As Through a Veil, Mystical Poetry in Islam*, Oneworld, Oxford 2001.

11 For the concept of God's Word in Islam, see the work: Hans Küng, *Der Islam, Wesen und Geschichte*, Piper, München / Zürich 2007.

the central reasons why *Islam* in the Arabic language (and in Qur'ānic Speech) means *devotion or submission to God*.

But what does the Qur'ān speak of: about breath-taking heavenly constellations, about the moving of the sun and the moon, the looming clouds, the winds' blowing, grain sprouting up, the growing of precious flowers, bees gathering honey, the beauty of man, rain falling, rivers flowing, the variety of human languages and color... there is always word of *Islam* or manifestations of *Islam*.

Thus, we can say that *Islam* is one of God's sagas on the devotion or submission of all creatures to the One God, a saga retold in the pages of the Qur'ān.

The Qur'ān affirms *Islam* (or *the overall devotion to the One and Only God*) in a completely clear and open way, as the fundamental relationship between God and His creatures. The *Islam* of the Qur'ān is explicitly the specific *modus operandi* of the existence of the universe, the world and all life. For, in the Qur'ān's world outlook, truly everything, every creature, every galaxy and every tiny ant, are on the path that leads, at the end of their journey, to the One and Only God.

In short, the Qur'ān regards *Islam* as the overall relationship, the general longing for a close bond between each creature and Creator!

3. *Islam* as the faith of Muslims, as the religion of Muslim mankind

But the pages of the Qur'ān do not only concern *cosmic Islam*, or *Islam of the universe*.

We also very clearly see in the pages of the Qur'ān the powerful motives of the Qur'ān which *Islam* demonstrates, offers and formulates as a concrete faith, the Muslim faith, i.e. the faith of Muslim mankind. In addition to the universal and cosmic *Islam*, the Qur'ān also contains one completely concrete or human *Islam*, that is, *Islam* of man who is *Muslim*. (The Arabic word *Muslim* means a person or creature devoted or submitted to God, to God's will!)

The Qur'ān appears in many pages as a book grounding or founding one concrete faith, *Islam*, a faith which has been from VII century onwards tightly anchored as a specific religious entity alongside Judaism, Christianity, star-worshipping, idolatry, fire-worshipping.

If universal or cosmic *Islam* (or the *overall devotion or submission* of all worlds to One God) is described in the Qur'ān as the response of all creatures and all worlds to God or the Creator, this other layer of the Qur'ān, or *Islam* as a specific faith of one segment of mankind, is directed to people who have accepted *Islam* as their faith, as their religion.

How should the Qur'ān be read in light of the presence of plurality of religions? It is obvious that the Qur'ān does not hide its affinity for Muslims, but at the same time the pages of the Qur'ān address the secret about why many faiths in God exist.

In many places the Qur'ān alludes to the fact that faith in God only has meaning if it is the result of man's free choice.¹² The Qur'ān says completely openly: "*Let there be no compulsion in religion!*" (II: 256). Also in Sura XI: 118, it says: "*If thy Lord had so willed, He could have made mankind One people: but they will not cease to dispute.*" Thus, God did not want to force people to be in one faith. For force would annul the act of

12 For the trends of Islamic theology supporting views of human freedom, see: Tilman Nagel, *Geschichte der islamischen Theologie von Muhammad bis zur Gegenwart*, Verlag C. H. Beck, München 1994.

human freedom and freedom of choice. Another subsection of the Qur'ān refers to a similar theme (X: 19): "Mankind was but one nation, but differed. Had it not been for a word that went forth before from thy Lord, their differences would have settled between them!" The words, "went forth from thy Lord" are truly God's testament to faith as the complete act of human freedom.

But these parts of the Qur'ān in which *Islam* is discussed as *the specific faith of Muslim mankind* are full of universal manifestations of God. The God of the Qur'ān is not the Muslim God, but the universal God, "The Creator and Lord of all worlds" (I: 1 – 3). That is best seen in the following passage:

"Those who believe [in the Qur'ān], and those who follow the Jewish [scriptures], And the Christians and the Sapians, any who believe in God, And the Last Day, and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear; nor shall they grieve." (II: 62).

On the one hand, the universal word of the Qur'ān about God results from the very nature of God's creation of mankind as a great mosaic of differences. In Sura XXX: 22, the fact that mankind is different is directly addressed. On the other hand, it is a fact that the Qur'ān is grounded in *Islam* as the faith and religion of Muslims as a special and specific segment of mankind.

These two sides of the Qur'ān should be considered as being in a dynamic relationship.

4. Islam as a faith, culture and civilization

Islam came from the pages of the Qur'ān into man's life, became a faith, and with time, became a culture and civilization.¹³

The Qur'ān plays an exceptionally large role in the faith of Muslims. Much of the content of the Muslim faith and the practicing of this faith stems from the pages of the Qur'ān. For example, the six foundations of Islam (1. Belief in God, 2. God's Angels, 3. God's Books, 4. God's Messengers, 5. Judgment Day, 6. Destiny) are taken directly from the pages of the Qur'ān. In addition, the general Muslim greeting, *as-Salāmu alaykum* (Peace be with you!), comes from the Qur'ān itself, as one of the main phrases in Muslim rituals in everyday worship and prayer. For example, a newly born Muslim arrives with the Qur'ānic Word and Muslims are buried with the recitation of the Qur'ān, just as the Word of the Qur'ān has become a participant in religious ceremonies, weddings, Islamic feasts. Thus, the Qur'ān has not only become *a source* of faith for Muslims, but also *the content* of their faith. Also, the text of the Qur'ān is received as a norm, as a source of law and rules in traditional Muslim societies.¹⁴

In one specific meaning of Muslim rituals, to be *Muslim* means above all to listen to God's will and intent with devotion. These are encompassed in the Word of God, the Qur'ān.

13 For an exceptional example of Islamic culture and civilization, see: Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam I – III*, The University of Chicago, Chicago 1974.

14 For the Qur'ān's place within classical Islamic law, see Wael B. Hallaq, *The Origins and Evolutions of Islamic Law*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge / New York 2005. Also see: Said Ramadan, *Das Islamische Recht*, Otto Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden 1980.

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Another important message of the Qur'ān is affirmed when Islam is regarded not just as a religious doctrine, but is also approached from the point of view of devotion or submission to God: that of *Tawhīd* or strict monotheism. The voice carrying the oneness of God is one of the strongest voices in the Qur'ān. *There is no other Godness than the One God (Lā ilāha illa-l-llāh!)*, that is the fundamental and founding position of the Qur'ān, that is the main thread which finds expression in Islamic and Muslim acts, approaches, rituals, culture, architecture, art.

As Islam has not institutionalized holy clergy, all Muslims, both men and women, are able to participate in *immediate rituals*. In ritual thought, Islam is the summons for each person to be his / her own personal savior! Thus, ritual Islam has become a symbolic treasure for all Muslims, all Muslim communities and peoples.

Throughout its history, Islam has made its own type of religious, societal, cultural and civilizational ambient of the Qur'ān, a shelter in which the Qur'ān has been protected, but the Qur'ān itself has always given freshness to this all-encompassing ambient. The traditional lands of Islam, from Morocco to Indonesia, from Sub-Saharan Africa to the southern edge of Siberia, are recognized by a specific Islamic culture and civilization, enriched by many regional characteristics and adaptations respecting racial, linguistic and cultural specificities.

Let's say at the end of our discourse that with the Qur'ān, Muslims also became the People of the Book or inheritors of the World (or *Ahl al-Kitāb*, which is the syntagm which the Qur'ān uses to address Jews and Christians in an honorable fashion).

With the arrival of the Qur'ān in time, from eternity to history, the Semitic circle or the cycle of monotheism was closed: Jews spread the glory of the Old Testament, Christians spread the glory of the Gospel (the New Testament), while Muslims announce the glory of the Qur'ān or the proclaiming of the Qur'ān along the world meridians and parallels.

The thematic connection of these three sacred books (which came into history as a triangle between Jerusalem, Mecca and Medina) are strongly echoed by the connection of the three monotheistic worlds: Jewish, Christian and Islamic, as in the past, and even more so today. In this context it is vitally important to stress that the universal aspect of these religious books should prompt dialogue and cooperation between all peoples. Muslims are responsible for this dialogue in the same way as Christians and Jews.¹⁵ In modern times the One God should not be a reason for conflict, irrespective of the quantity of different human views which look into the depths of the sky's blueness.

15 For modern studies of the Qur'an, in the context of the modern pluralistic world, see: Suha Taji-Farouki / Basheer M. Nafi (eds.), *Islamic Thought in the Twentieth Century*, I. B. Tauris, London / New York 2004. Also see: Suha Taji-Farouki (ed.), *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, Oxford University Press, The Institute of Ismaili Studies, London 2004.